The Impact of Interpersonal Expectancies on Family Experiences During the COVID-19 Global Pandemic

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In the spring of 2020, the world experienced the onset of a global pandemic due to the COVID-19 coronavirus. Across the United States, families were suddenly mandated into some form of quarantine with orders to stay at home except when necessary. In the current study, rooted in the theoretical framework of expectancy violations theory, 214 participants reported their expectations about being quarantined with family members at the onset of the order. In addition, to ascertain family communication variables that impacted overall experience during quarantine, feelings of being understood by family members and family interaction satisfaction were also explored. Results indicated there is a moderate, positive relationship between quarantine expectancies and one's experience with family members during the quarantine. Additionally, quarantine expectancies and family interaction satisfaction during quarantine significantly predicted approximately 67% of the variance in one's quarantine experience. These results indicated that family members with positive expectancies related to extended family time during quarantine ultimately had a more positive overall experience, suggesting a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Keywords: expectancies, family interaction, quarantine, satisfaction, understanding

Introduction

Life was altered significantly in March 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic for most families. As governors across the United States mandated "stay-at-home" or "quarantine" orders, family dynamics were disrupted. As a result, many adults were directed to work from home, and schools moved to remote instruction across the country. For many, day-to-day routines were disturbed. Families who spent time away from one another on a day-to-day basis were forced to spend an inordinate amount of time together.

In many family units, the changes in family members' time spent together undoubtedly impacted both the frequency and quality of communication within the family; some positively and some negatively. Knowing that family dimensions may have changed during this period, it is safe to assume adult family members developed expectations about how family interactions might transcend. Thus, the primary purpose of this study was to explore the impact of expectations on family members' experiences during quarantine in the United States. We know from past research that expectations impact our communicative behavior (Burgoon, 1978). Thus, initial expectations about quarantine may have also affected ones' experience with family members during this time. Moreover, in addition to initial expectancies, communication variables among family members such as feeling understood by family members and perceived satisfaction with family interactions may have also impacted experiences during quarantine.

For some families, the extra time spent together during quarantine included long conversations, board games, and movie nights. For other families, the close quarters invited invasions of privacy, uncomfortable conversations, or worse scenarios such as domestic violence (Gosangi et al., 2020). Though worldwide quarantines for such long periods are infrequent, the effects of COVID-19 on family systems will be long-lasting. In addition, there are many life events (outside of pandemics) that cause families to engage in significantly more time together than their norm. Because families will inevitably face trying times in the future, it is prudent to study family members' communication behaviors during such periods of difficulty. Specifically, as communication scholars, we must use unique periods, such as

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the COVID-19 global pandemic, to investigate the role of expectations on family communication so that we may better equip families with the tools needed to navigate times of change.

Expectancy Violations Theory

Introduced by Burgoon in 1978, expectancy violations theory (EVT) is a lens through which we may examine the impact of expectancies on various communication behaviors. According to Burgoon and Walther (1990), expectancies are relatively stable perceptions about predicted behavior(s) of others that are created socially. Originally focused on proxemics, Burgoon (1978) developed EVT to explain reactions to the violation of expectations about personal space. Burgoon asserted that when these expectations are violated, the observer's attention is activated, and coping mechanisms are aroused. The observer then assigns valence to the violation based on their evaluation of the initiator and the degree of the violation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988).

In more recent research, the expectancy violations theory has served as a framework to investigate relational communication, including romantic and intercultural contexts (Cionea et al., 2019; Kelly, Miller-Ott, & Duran, 2017; Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2015). Additionally, family expectations have been studied in a plethora of contexts including family member suicide (Miller & Day, 2002), the impact of family expectancies on relationship commitment (Weigel & Weiser, 2014), as well as parent-child communication about tobacco and alcohol use (Ennett et al., 2001). Previous research points to the expectancy violations theory as a useful framework to examine family communication expectancies during the quarantine during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

The first assumption of expectancy violations theory is that communicators have an expectation about others' communication behaviors (Burgoon, 1978; Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Walther, 1990). It is logical to presume that people who live in the same home have expectations about living conditions, routines, and rituals among family members. These expectancies may have shifted as families spent extensive and unexpected time together during quarantine. Moreover, throughout the quarantine period, some expectancies may likely have been violated. Individuals may be aware of a violation but not be aware of why this violation occurred (Afifi & Burgoon, 2000). Nevertheless, expectancy violations impact communicative behaviors.

When expectations are violated, one assigns a violation valence or a perceived value placed on an expectation violation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Some violation valences are positive, while others are negative. Moreover, valence values range in impact from very small to large. The initial announcement of mandated quarantine for many, in and of itself, constituted an expectancy violation. For some, the anticipated time spent with family members (above and beyond the norm) may have been regarded positively, and for others negatively. The valence attached to said violations unquestionably affected family members' experience during quarantine. According to research conducted by Burgoon and Hale in 1988, positively perceived expectancy violations may increase relational evaluations. Therefore, it is possible that family members were able to capitalize on time spent together to evaluate and strengthen relationships during this period.

Finally, communicator reward valence is "the degree to which the other is seen as rewarding" (Kelly, et al., 2017, p. 621). After several weeks spent together in quarantine, it is possible that a series of positively valenced expectancy violations among family members resulted in an overall positive communicator reward valence. In contrast, it is also reasonable that enough negative violations surfaced and resulted in a negative communicator reward valence. Because many Americans have not lived through a global pandemic akin to COVID-19, it is unknown how expectancies about quarantine impacted the perceived experience. Thus, the following research question was advanced:

RQ1: What is the relationship between quarantine expectancies and one's experience as reported during quarantine?

Expectancies about family communication are certainly impacted by many variables. Specifically, feelings of understanding (or misunderstanding) by family members, as well as our satisfaction with family interactions may have influenced perceptions of the quarantine experience.

Feelings of Understanding (Misunderstanding)

In life, we often experience interactions in which we feel understood, but this is not always the case. Perceived understanding has been defined as the way a communicator assesses their success or failure during interactions with other people (Cahn, 1981). Most of us seek out understanding from family members. Past research tells us that certain communication behaviors, such as giving feedback and emotional support, help maintain close, meaningful relationships (Cahn & Shulman, 1984; McLaren & Pederson, 2014). Likely, these same behaviors may also positively impact understanding among family members.

Unfortunately, perceived understanding can be hindered by factors such as experiencing hurtful events (McLaren & Pederson, 2014). For many Americans, quarantine during the COVID-19 global pandemic was perceived as a hurtful event mentally, physically, and financially. In addition, considering the significant amount of time spent together as family units, hurtful communication behaviors may have been more noticeable than before quarantine. As the mandated quarantine extended past initial estimations of several weeks into several months, family members may have spent more time and energy focused on communication behaviors that affected feelings of understanding or misunderstanding. To explore the relationship between feelings of understanding (misunderstanding) and one's experience with family members during quarantine, the following research question was posed:

RQ2: What is the relationship between the feeling of understanding (misunderstanding) during quarantine and one's self-report of quarantine experience?

Family Interaction Satisfaction

Communication satisfaction has been defined as the pleasure felt after "successful and fulfilling interpersonal communication experiences" (Hecht & Sereno, 1985, p. 141). A significant portion of past research on family satisfaction has centered on marriage (Gilchrist-Petty & Reynolds, 2015; Worley & Shelton, 2020), sibling relationships (Dorrance Hall & Shebib, 2020; Myers, 1998; Schrodt & Phillips, 2016), and parenting satisfaction (Amaro, et al., 2019; Coyne, McDaniel, & Stockdale, 2017) specifically, as opposed to family interactions (as a system) generally. For instance, we know that sibling self-disclosure positively impacts satisfaction (Myers, 1988). Further, family satisfaction has been studied in perceptions of parent-child emotional labor (Schrodt & O'Mara, 2019) and father-daughter relationships (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008).

No matter the specific context, we have learned much about the impact of family interactions on satisfaction over the years. For instance, we know the type of family interactions and daily discussions influence feelings of satisfaction among family members (Schrodt, et al., 2008). In families across the nation, healthy family communication interactions include everyday talk, such as small talk, joking around, and reminiscing (Burns & Pearson 2011). Moreover, we know that the more expressive such interactions are perceived, the greater the satisfaction among family members (Schrodt, 2009).

During quarantine, many families had significant amounts of time to engage in everyday talk, as many families spent far more time together than pre-quarantine. For many people, the increase in the everyday talk may have been perceived positively; for others, it may be regarded negatively. Thus, it is possible that one's degree of satisfaction with family member interactions affected the perceived quarantine experience. Therefore, the following research question was advanced:

RQ3: What is the relationship between family member interaction satisfaction and quarantine experience?

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 214 adults who experienced some form of quarantine in their home state during the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic. A total of 157 females, 44 males, and 13 others who prefer a term other than "male" or "female" completed the survey instrument. The large majority of participants identified as Caucasian/White (89.7%). Approximately 3.6% of participants identified as Hispanic/Latino, 3.1% identified as African American/Black, and the remainder did not indicate ethnicity. The ages of participants in this study ranged from 20-81 years. Out of the 214 total participants, 128 reported that they worked from home 100% of the time during quarantine, and 99 reported that their spouse/partner also worked from home 100% of the time during that period.

Procedure

Utilizing a convenience sample, participants were recruited via social media sites managed by the researchers. A call for participants was posted on social media sites in the summer of 2020 outlining the purpose of the study, the IRB protocol approval number, and a website to complete the online survey. Participation was voluntary, and participants were directed to a Qualtrics link that included demographic questions, as well as items intended to measure expectations at the start of quarantine, general feelings about family member understanding, family interaction satisfaction, and overall experience during quarantine. Participants were instructed to read the consent form on the first page of the survey and click "continue" to indicate their consent to participate. If they did not consent to participate in the study, they were instructed to close their browser. The survey remained open for participants for a period of two weeks.

Measurement

Participant expectancies about quarantine upon first learning of the orders were operationalized using a 6-item Likert scale created for this research study. Scale items were developed based on the work of Afifi and Metts (1998) in which they measured expectations about behavior, as well as violation valence. In the present study, items centered on expectations about perceptions of being quarantined with family members. Sample scale items included: "I expected to enjoy the time spent in quarantine with family members.", "I was excited to stay at home and quarantine with family members.", and "I felt time in quarantine would be beneficial to our family relationships." The scale employed a 5-point Likert response format ranging from *(1) strongly disagree* to *(5) strongly agree*. The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the quarantine expectancies was .809 in the present study ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 4.62$).

Feelings of understanding (misunderstanding) with family members were measured using Cahn and Shulman's (1984) Feelings of Understanding/Misunderstanding Scale. The Likert-type scale includes 24 items with response options ranging from *(1) very little* to *(5) very great*. Participants were asked to think about how they generally felt when interacting with family members that lived in the same home during quarantine. Some of the items on the scale include "annoyance", "satisfaction", "acceptance", "compassion", and "sadness". Prior research reported alpha reliability as .89 (Cahn & Shulman, 1984). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was .92 ($M = 16.16$, $SD = 4.78$).

Family interaction satisfaction was operationalized using a revised version of Hecht's (1978a) Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory. Scale items were slightly reworded to pertain to family relationships particularly. Moreover, three items were deleted as they were not relevant to the current research study. The resulting scale included 16 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale with response options that range from *(1) strongly disagree* to *(5) strongly agree*. Sample items on the revised scale include: "During quarantine, the people I lived with let me know that I was communicating effectively.", "I would like to have more conversations with my family as I did during quarantine.", and

"My family members that I lived with genuinely wanted to get to know more about me during quarantine." Previously reported reliability for this measure was .97 (Hecht, 1978a). In the current research study, the Cronbach's alpha reliability was .843 ($M = 11.77$, $SD = 3.09$).

Post-quarantine experience (when orders were lifted or relaxed) was measured using a 5-item Likert scale developed for this research study. Scale items centered on feelings about time spent with family members when the quarantine was over or relaxed. Sample scale items included: "I enjoyed the time spent in quarantine with family members.", "I was sad to see quarantine end.", and "Overall, quarantine was a positive experience for my family." The 5-point Likert scale included response options ranging from *(1) strongly disagree* to *(5) strongly agree*. The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the quarantine experience was .853 ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 4.42$).
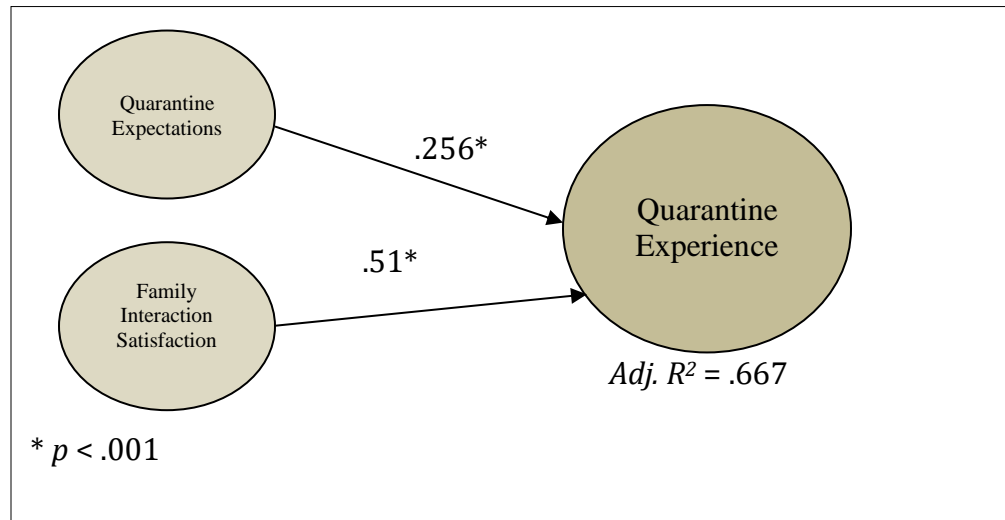
Results

The primary purpose of the current research study was to explore participant expectancies when quarantine orders were initially announced and the impact of those expectations on the overall quarantine experience. Thus, the first research question inquired about the relationship between quarantine expectancies and one's experience as reported at the end (or toward the end) of quarantine. Correlational analysis indicated a moderate, positive statistically significant relationship between quarantine expectancies and one's experience with family members during quarantine, $r(214) = .646$, $p < .001$.

The second research question centered on the correlation between feelings of understanding (misunderstanding) with family members during quarantine and one's self-report of quarantine experience (at the end of this period). Again, the correlational analysis indicated a strong, positive statistically significant relationship between the two variables, $r = .720$, $p < .001$. Since general family communication patterns could have impacted one's report of quarantine experience, the third research question asked about the relationship between family member interaction satisfaction and quarantine experience. A strong, positive statistically significant relationship resulted between family member satisfaction with interactions and experience in quarantine, $r = .745$, $p < .001$.

To more comprehensively investigate the impact of expectations about quarantine on one's experience, taking into account feelings of being understood by family members and perceptions of interactions with family members, regression analysis was employed. As indicated in the preceding results, examination of all bivariate correlations showed that expectancies, feelings of understanding (misunderstanding), and perceptions of family members' interactions all positively related to the quarantine experience. When entered into a multiple regression analysis, quarantine expectancies and family interaction satisfaction significantly predicted quarantine experience, $F (3, 118) = 81.86$, $p<.001$; *Adjusted R^2* =.667. Quarantine expectancies, $t = 3.749$, $p < .001$; $\beta =.256$, and family interaction satisfaction, $t = 6.112$, $p < .001$; $\beta =.519$ were statistically significant, while feelings of understanding (misunderstanding), $t = 1.652$ $p =.001$; $\beta =.101$ did not remain in the regression model (see Figure 1).

To more carefully investigate the regression analysis, control variables (gender, ethnicity) were entered into the regression model. Taken together, the results did not change substantially. Quarantine expectancies, and family interaction satisfaction significantly predicted quarantine experience, $F (5, 133) = 80.86$, $p <.001$; *Adjusted R^2* =.669. Quarantine expectancies, $t = 4.563$, $p < .001$; $\beta =.266$, and family interaction satisfaction, $t = 6.557$, $p < .001$; $\beta =.498$, were statistically significant, while feelings of understanding (misunderstanding), $t = 2.416$, $p =.13$; $\beta =.195$, gender, $t = .259$, $p = .796$; $\beta =.013$, and ethnicity, $t = -.207$, $p = .836$; $\beta = .010$ did not remain in the regression model.

Figure 1

Quarantine Experience Regression Model

*** p < .001*

<center>**Discussion**</center>

The primary purpose of this research study was to examine the impact of expectations about being quarantined with family members on perceived experiences reported during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Results indicated that there is a moderate, positive correlation between quarantine expectancies and one's experience with family members during that period. This finding supports the belief that expectations matter. To some extent, what we expect when we enter into a new situation will impact the outcome. Although not specifically researched in the present study, this finding suggests family members' expectancies may have resulted in a self-fulfilling prophecy during the quarantine.

Self-fulfilling prophecies in family units may influence family members to communicate in ways (purposefully or not) that eventually result in the outcome expected. This certainly could have been the case for many family members during quarantine. Those family members who imagined extra time spent with loved ones positively behaved in ways that resulted in a quality experience. Similarly, those with negative expectations created such an experience via communication with family members. Thus, a significant implication of the current study is that expectations of family interactions impact perceived experiences with family members. Although the current study focused on expectations surrounding quarantine, this finding may easily be generalized to countless family experiences, no matter how big or small. The correlation between expectancies and expectations is not only information needed by individual family members, but professionals such as family counselors and therapists may also find this result helpful. When advising family members on communicative and behavioral issues, addressing the role of expectations in family experiences may be helpful.

The second research question inquired about the relationship between feelings of understanding (misunderstanding) among family members and experience during quarantine. A strong correlation was found between the two variables. Therefore, as family members felt they were understood by others in the family unit, their perceived experience during quarantine was also positive. This finding speaks to the importance of taking the time to ensure that family members feel as if they are understood and confirmed in their communication. As asserted by Cahn and Shulman (1984), the more a communicator assesses an interaction as successful, the more they feel understood by family members. Although the original research was created to examine new relationships, feelings of understanding are important in well-developed family relationships. Being understood, or perceived as being understood by family members,

is important to overall reflections of family interactions. Practically speaking, family members should "check in" with one another to ensure they feel as if they are understood. To engage in effective family communication, it is not enough to assume others feel they are understood but to engage in metacommunication consistently.

In addition, the results of the third research question indicate that the more satisfying the family interactions, the more participants reported a positive quarantine experience. Hecht (1978b) argued that when expectancies are upheld, communication satisfaction results. The findings of the current study support past research. When family members' expectations aligned with their experience during quarantine, they reported a positive experience during this time. This is not to say that quarantine was positive every single day, or that every interaction with family members was constructive. However, when expectations are fulfilled, one may feel satisfied. Overall, however, the results of the current study showed that when family members entered the quarantine with positive expectations, a positive experience was reported.

Taken together, one's expectancies about the quarantine, as well as satisfaction with interactions among family members during quarantine, predicted nearly 67% of the variance in quarantine experience. Of the two variables that remained statistically significant in the regression analysis, family interaction satisfaction predicted the greatest amount of variance in quarantine experience. Therefore, we can see from these results that not only do our expectancies impact the resulting experience, but the communication that takes place among family members significantly predicts the experience reported. This should come as no surprise to communication scholars and only further adds to the existing body of literature that supports the importance of communication among family members. It is quite possible that one's expectations impacted the quality of the communication that resulted among family members, which, in turn, affected the quarantine experience.

Although it is outside the scope of this study to suggest such a claim, it is logical to assume that expectations about quarantine, to some degree, impacted communication among family members during this time. There is certainly a host of additional variables that impacted one's experience during the COVID-19 global pandemic quarantine. Considering the amount of influence and time spent with family members, however, it can be argued that family interactions played one of the largest roles in the experience of many Americans during quarantine.

Interestingly, feelings of understanding with family members did not significantly predict quarantine experience. Based on the strong correlation between the two variables, we know that feeling understood by family members is important, but possibly not significant to this particular experience. Perhaps feelings of being understood by family members are important generally, but considering the unique nature of the quarantine experience, family members assumed others felt similarly; thus, diminishing the need to attempt to make themselves understood by others. Put differently, if one believed their family members shared the same feelings about quarantine, there was less effort needed to gain understanding.

Many COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted or relaxed for people across the United States. However, the far-reaching and long-lasting results of the COVID-19 global pandemic are nowhere close to a distant memory. For some families, the experience was positive and strengthened family relationships. For others, the experience was negative and created more struggles than before the quarantine.

Families struggling with events that occurred at home during quarantine may choose to think back to what they expected at the onset of the quarantine order. Were expectancies positive? Were they negative? Based on those expectations, family members can analyze the communication behaviors which may have impacted the overall quarantine experience. Although we cannot go back and alter previous expectations, nor take back communication behaviors that may have been hurtful, analyzing these variables could be useful in learning how to move forward as a family unit in a positive direction.

Further, based on the current research study, we know that expectations about family interactions positively impact family member experiences. Consequently, we can take that information and work to optimistically impact the long-lasting results of the quarantine. Families can create new expectations, or

revise expectancies in such a manner that encourages communication needed to develop fulfilling family experiences. Once we can generalize the results of the current study to other family situations, we can create healthy family communication patterns that will only help us to strengthen family relationships.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study provides empirical evidence that expectancies among family members impact experiences, the current research study is not without limitations. To begin, the sample utilized in this research study is not representative of every family impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. The large majority of participants in this study were Caucasian/White which may reflect a different experience than that of other ethnic groups. Moreover, the data was collected cross-sectionally and not longitudinally throughout the entire quarantine period.

In addition, several different variables may have impacted family communication patterns during quarantine. For instance, the number of people living in the household, the ages of family members living together, the amount of space provided for each family member, as well as the responsibilities of each family member may have impacted the overall quarantine experience. As an example, a family in which two parents were both trying to work remotely from home while helping children complete schoolwork at home may have provided a very different situation than a single parent working remotely from home while caring for an infant. Due to the nature of the current research study, variables such as these were not adequately controlled and may have impacted the results of the study.

Finally, the current study did not inquire about health issues that may impact family communication during quarantine. Family units with members coping with a positive COVID-19 diagnosis may have interacted differently, ultimately influencing one's overall experience. Moreover, if family members have underlying health issues that would exacerbate the symptoms of the virus, a positive diagnosis may impact every variable investigated in the current study including the overall quarantine experience.

Quality research often leads to more questions. In this study the primary result indicated that expectations about family interactions at the start of a mandated quarantine impacted reports of experience during that period. Essentially, it is inferred from the results of this study that self-fulfilling prophecies occurred within family units during quarantine. Therefore, future research should investigate the role of self-fulfilling prophecies in communication interactions among family members. Although we are hopeful that we will not face a similar quarantine anytime soon, the results are general enough to indicate that expectations impact family experiences. Hence, understanding the role of self-fulfilling prophecies in family interactions is important to the study of interpersonal family communication.

Due to the significance of the COVID-19 global pandemic and quarantine in the lives of so many people, future research should include the study of the long-lasting effects of time spent together with family members. For instance, how did the experience during quarantine impact relationships once mandated orders were lifted or relaxed? It is possible that some family relationships were strengthened while others deteriorated. Therefore, the communication patterns during quarantine that may have impacted the outcome of said relationships should be studied systematically. This may lend insight into the already existing body of research on communication messages that help or hinder family relationships.

Empirical research is often evaluated by the degree of practical utility. The results of the current research study offer practical and social implications. If families are experiencing conflict and seeking counseling, a counselor may draw on the results of the current research study to provide practical advice for family members. Counselors can explain how expectations impact communication, which ultimately affects perceptions of a positive or negative experience. Counselors can use this information to help family members understand the importance of the expectancies, and such an explanation may shed light on family members experiencing conflict.

Moreover, if family members were experiencing conflict before quarantine, this may have impacted expectancies once the quarantine orders were announced. In turn, these expectancies may have impacted one's overall experience during quarantine. It is prudent that anyone in the advisory role help family members recognize their communication interactions to see how this impacts overall family satisfaction.

Family members must communicate their expectations with one another. For instance, when preparing for an upcoming family event, it may be helpful for family members to communicate their expectations about the event beforehand. If we are aware of our family members' expectations, as a unit we may be able to better manage those expectations and communicate in such a way that creates a positive experience for all. Many times, we have expectations about how things may occur, and we assume that others' expectations are similar to ours, but in reality, they are different. Knowing the expectations of others might positively impact the overall experience.

For many people, family relationships play a significant role in our lives. More importantly, whether the relationships among family members are positive or negative, we know that family relationships affect many other parts of our lives. As a result, the more we can study the impact of this time spent together in quarantine with our families, the more we can learn about behaviors that will ultimately lead to healthy and happy family units.

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