

Oranges from an Apple Tree

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“Why can’t she just say ‘Thank You’ for once! I’m up there or running errands for her all time. Why can’t she just be nice?!?”

My client was exhausted and frustrated. She worked full-time and was managing a household with kids of her own, but she made time to help out her elderly mom anytime she could. She brought her food, got people to repair her house, spent time with her. But no matter how much she did, her mom always seemed unsatisfied and demanded more.

As we talked more about her relationship with her mom, it became clear that her mom always had a sharp edge. My client thought that her mother had gotten angrier as her health had declined, but she remembered her mom generally as being very particular, often critical, and sometimes even mean. And yet, my client was still hoping for some kindness, maybe even gratitude, from her mom.

When we hope or expect behavior from someone that they have never displayed before, it’s like we’re shaking an apple tree hoping an orange will fall.

All of us have needs and desires in all kinds of relationships. We need at least basic levels of safety, interest, and affection. We may desire lots of things – quality time, gratitude, help, or gifts. However, just because we want something doesn’t mean the other person in the relationship can or will deliver. Past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior, so if you’re in a relationship with someone who has never done something, they are not likely to start doing it. No matter how hard we shake that apple tree, oranges are never going to fall.

Over time, my client was able to stop being surprised when her mother couldn’t be pleased with her efforts. Sometimes she would catch herself hoping her mother would behave differently, and she would say, “Oops! I’m trying to get oranges again!” This helped her be more relaxed when she was with her mom, and less stressed out when she wasn’t. It also freed up space for her to think more realistically about what she could successfully manage, so she started talking to her mom about getting other help besides my client.

So, what apple trees are you shaking hoping for oranges?