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Needing Approval

By Brooke Loening

What does it feel like to have someone disapprove of you in some way? It can bring up strong emotions for us, and for many people it creates obsessive thoughts. “I don’t approve of them either.” “What is their problem?” “I didn’t do anything wrong.” The truth is that not everybody is going to approve of us and we are not going to approve of everybody else, so it is part of our life experience. Your level of awareness about approval may be directly linked to your ability to deal with it in the future.

We can all find that inner need for other people to like us, approve of us, and think we are “good.” If you take a close look at yourself, you may be able to observe how you change the way you present yourself to the world in order to meet this inner need. Let’s look at some examples of how this might manifest for some of you.

- Saying something that you think will impress someone, even when it is not what you really want to say
- Not saying anything because you are afraid that it will sound stupid and others will think less of you
- Cracking jokes to make people think you are funny, possibly as someone else’s expense
- Dressing in a way that you think others will like even if it does not feel quite right to you
- Name-dropping in order to make people think you are special
- Bragging, or building yourself up in a false way in order to make people think you are better

You get the idea...

As in all of my articles, the goal is to simply bring awareness to an issue so that the next time it comes up for you, you are not on automatic pilot. Instead you will be more aware of what you are doing and therefore be able to choose to take a different route. So, the question is, why do we all have this inner need for approval and how does that affect us and those around us?

On a general level, we all want to be connected to and loved by other people. It is a basic instinct for most human beings. Doing things, saying things, and behaving in ways that might make people uncomfortable creates the possibility of alienation and separation. Our natural state is not to push people away, but rather to bring them closer to us. Getting their approval, we believe, is a way we can share love and connection with those around us.

As children, many of us equated approval with love. As youngsters we were all naturally seeking love from our parents, friends, teachers etc. Approval usually went hand in hand

with that feeling of love. Disapproval felt like the rug had been pulled out from under us in the love department and felt hurtful. The fact is that this type of pattern ingrained in our early years of life stays with us through all our years on this planet unless we have awareness about it. In some people the need for approval is so strong that it turns into a 24/7 project.

On the spiritual level, our need for approval is one way we think we can receive fulfillment. This also applies to our thoughts about obtaining wealth, purchasing material possessions, acquiring power or fame, or even what we want from a partner. They are all things we reach for to make us feel fulfilled. The problem is that none of these things ever works for more than a short period of time. Getting someone's approval to fill that inner void may feel good for a while, but then what happens? Yes, you need it again and again and again. There is no end. The only place we can truly achieve that fulfillment is from within, not from something or someone.

If you don't approve of yourself, if you don't like yourself, you may need to get constant affirmation from others that you are OK. Ultimately, the only approval that really means anything at all is your own. In addition, disapproval of oneself is often manifested as disapproval of others, making it even more complicated. Self-approval can require true awareness to achieve, but this inner peace and acceptance is the first step to releasing the need for things from the outside to fill the void.

So what's the problem with getting other people's approval? Nothing, if it is not jeopardizing who you really are. Approval seeking is fear based and disempowers us from behaving in a way that is true to us. We have a unique self that needs expression in this world, and if we are constantly changing ourselves in order to manipulate other people's experience of us, then we are depriving them of that experience and creating a whole lot of extra work for ourselves. Many of my clients have reported to me that their approval seeking is exhausting. It takes time and energy to "be an actor"- all for the approval of others. And- it is impossible to control the way everyone else feels no matter how hard we try. They may even feel uncomfortable around us if we are putting on an act.

We all know someone who just says and does what seems totally natural to them without worrying about what other people think. These people are many times loved by many and secretly admired by them as well. This week, take a few moments to visualize how you might behave and present yourself to others if you had absolutely no need for approval. Then, as an experiment try being a little more yourself a few times where you might otherwise put on a show for others. See what it feels like to be yourself and notice what kind of response you get. Know that it is ok if someone else disapproves of you if you are being true to yourself.

An affirmation you might try is as follows: "I practice behaving in a way which is more true to myself, and that is healthier for me and those around me."

Brooke Loening is a life coach in Sharon who works with individuals, and runs weekly coaching groups on achieving growth in career, health and relationships. For more information and previous columns visit theloeningplan.com. Columns can also be found at textra.com