

Approval:

The need for approval is one of the most powerful psychological pre-occupations that affect adults today. Equally so is our dread of disapproval. One would be inclined to think that concern about approval is quite an immature attribute and hardly the most important concern in our lives. However, we would be wrong. Loath though we are to admit it, the approval or disapproval of others, is a psychological obsession that shapes our psychological development. In many ways one's entire personality is shaped around the need for it and the fear of not getting it.

Approval is so essential to us because, right through our psychological formation, it has been the currency through which we measure and experience our self-esteem and self-worth. We like to think that the mature personality is someone who does not rely on others approval for their sense of self-worth. However, it is too late to create such a being because their maturity has developed as a consequence of the kind of approval they have accrued throughout life. Much of our psychological development centers on how we gain and secure others approval and how we avoid disapproval.

Approval is the recognition and validation that we got from parents or other caring figures as we grew through childhood. When we grow up in an environment where we get little approval we tend to withdraw into ourselves. Instead of building our life around the approval we have secured, we build our life around avoiding the disapproval that they expect. When people get enough approval their concern recedes somewhat into the background of adult life. However, it is never far from the surface.

In fact, many people who appear very 'together' and self-confident are what we call active independents. They have actively developed their independence from others in order to keep disapproval at arms length. Many such people avoid close relationships and are terrified of being dependent on another because of their deeply held dread of disapproval or rejection. Many highly successful people are driven by an obsessive pre-occupation with a fear of failure and its associated disapproval. The drive to succeed is often born out of the experience of harsh rejection.

There is also the other type of person, the passive-dependent, who behaves in the opposite way to the active-independent. The passive-dependent is very needy of others approval and has found, through childhood, that the best way to secure this is to accommodate to others and to secure approval by tending to submit or be agreeable. This is not itself a bad trait - in fact people who are accommodating are good company and well-liked. However, their inner emotional life can be flooded with anxiety and the need to check for others approval at every possible turn. In fact the fear of disapproval can be so strong in such people that they will even choose death, imprisonment, or emotional self-destruction rather than face the disapproval of others. The reflex to avoid disapproval can be a motive that determines a person's destiny. .

People stay in destructive relationships, jobs, families, vocations, or life-trajectories rather than face the *imagined* annihilation of disapproval. (It is many a priest or doctor who had surrendered their life to a particular vocation because they had inherited a family expectation and its associated approval that this is what they must do. The invisible fear of choosing a different life is often unthinkable because of the levels of emotional self-rejection that would ensure.) People sometimes stay in bad jobs,

relationships, families, vocations, or situations because the felt dread of rejection and disapproval is so viscerally powerful that they cannot come close to mustering the strength to face it. The tsunami of guilt and self-loathing that would follow such a bold step is anticipated as being of such a magnitude as to almost cause psychological death. Believe me, I do not exaggerate. People will rather die psychologically than face the disapproval that might ensue if they choose freedom over captivity. My heart has broken so many times witnessing the almost saintly self-surrender of many women to the cancer and control of an alcoholic and abusive husband. The legacy of emotional loyalty to one's family is a great burden indeed.

Sure' even on an every-day basis notice how the temperature reading of your self-esteem fluctuates around approval.

It is many an engaged couple I have sat with where I could see that the emotional electricity that sustained the relationship was her addiction to his approval and her dread of his disapproval. I was with a couple recently where her naïve fear of him, and her vulnerable dependency on his approval, felt to her *as if it were love*. In addition, his distance and independence from her, and his confidence in her weak inability to disapprove of him *felt to him like it was love*. Oh, but is so hard to untangle the emotional threads of love to find its true colours. Fear is often camouflaged as love. Attachment to someone who gives you approval can feel like love. What is even more disturbing, being emotionally attached to someone whose disapproval you fear, *can also feel like love*. Tragically, for some people all they know are abusive attachments. It has the intensity of love but the character of violence.

Our need for approval is a constant never ending psychological preoccupation. In every moment of every day we scan our world to compute our emotional safety through the currency of approval. It is so automatic, and so much part of our inner emotional life, that it is impossible to distinguish it from the moment-to-moment rush of sensations, thoughts, feelings, intentions, that are the stuff of life and living.