



Parkinson Association of Orange County

Freedom from Manipulation

People are susceptible to being manipulated to the exact degree that they feel a need to gain the approval, sympathy, and praise of others. The idea of not seeking approval may seem like a strange idea to some of us. Haven't we been taught since childhood to try to gain the approval of parents, teachers, relatives and friends? If you stop teaching children to seek approval, how will they know what is right or wrong? Consider for a moment basing all your behavior on one criterion alone. Try weighing the choices open to you on any aspect of your life based only on how much that choice will increase your ability to obtain the highest possible level of survival for yourself and others.

The need for approval leaves us totally vulnerable to manipulation by those who withhold approval or grant it only if we cooperate with their desires. The patterns are set from earliest childhood. Mom smiles and obviously approves if we kiss Great Aunt Minnie. She frowns and withholds approval if we express a desire not to be kissed by Aunt Minnie. Dad expresses great affection and approval if Junior shows an interest in Dad's favorite sport—football. Dad gets cold and disapproving if his son passes up football in favor of painting watercolors. It can be a frightening experience to be disapproved of by that person who so obviously has control over many aspects of our survival.

Here are some obvious examples of a real need for approval.

- Wearing clothes or hairstyles considered fashionable and acceptable for a certain group, at the sacrifice of personal taste, comfort, convenience, or budget.
- Sacrificing yourself for others and then being upset because the action wasn't appreciated enough.
- Buying a car or house or boat or jewelry so that one might be envied by others.
- Withholding true feelings because they might not be acceptable to others.

Because this need for approval is so firmly ingrained in our society, there are whole industries built to take advantage of people's vulnerability. Look at the commercials that appear on television in the course of an hour and you will begin to get a concept of how open to manipulation this need makes us. In an average two-minute station break, we're told that buying *Miller Beer* will gain us acceptance to the fraternity of drinking buddies; reading the *Wall Street Journal* will gain us admittance to the hallowed halls of financiers; and chewing *Certs* will guarantee that very attractive people are going to be standing in line to kiss us. In short, we'll get tons of admiration, acceptance, and approval if we just buy the right products.

The bottom line is this: why do we develop such a craving for approval? The answer often lies very early in life. It has its roots in decisions we've made about ourselves, decisions that say we're not acceptable, that being ourselves isn't enough, or that we can't win. A person who approves of himself/herself doesn't hunger for the approval, sympathy, or admiration of another. Before we try to root out an unworkable pattern of behavior, it's a good idea to have a more workable one to replace it. Here is an example that shows the contrast between two different methods of handling a situation. Three small children, six or seven years old, work hard at school for weeks learning to write their own names. Finally they bring home a paper that shows the results of their labor and hand it to their mothers.

The first child's mother says the following: "Oh, Charles! You're such a smart little boy. You did a wonderful job and I'm so proud of you." She beams at him with approval and gives him a big hug. Charles breathes a sign of relief. He has succeeded in making her proud this time. He's a little apprehensive about whether he'll be as successful next time, but he's content to bask in the temporary glow. His attention is focused on how good it felt to be hugged and approved of, and he resolves to learn to write more things so he can make his mom proud again and again.

Andrew has a harder time with eye/hand coordination, and his name isn't printed quite so well. His mother has this reaction: "Is that supposed to be your name? I can barely make it out. Your sister did a better job than that when she was your age. You just don't try hard enough." Mom's air of disappointment is quite obvious to Andrew, who realizes he has failed once again, and he decides he might as well not try. He's never going to succeed so why bother with this handwriting business anyway. It's quite a burden having to be responsible for his mother's unhappiness and disappointment.

Little Kathy's paper is neat and clean and she presents it to her mother for examination. "My," says her mom. "I can see you've put quite a bit of work into doing this, haven't you?" Kathy nods, pleased to have her efforts acknowledged. "It's



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going to be very nice now that you can write your own name,” her mother continues. “We’ll be able to get you a library card, and when we send Christmas cards to Grandpa and Grandma, you can sign them yourself. It’s a very useful thing to be able to write.” Kathy walks away thinking about all the ways her new skill will benefit her and resolves to get even better at it. She has none of Charlie’s feeling of unease at the effusiveness of the praise she has received.

If, as a child, you had been led to view your efforts in the light of whether or not they would aid you in obtaining optimum survival rather than whether they would bring you approval or disapproval, you would find it much easier to make constructive decisions today. If you handle your own children by resisting the temptation to manipulate their behavior with approval or disapproval, and direct their attention to the pro-survival or non-survival aspects of their efforts instead, they will have a stable foundation for the many choices that await them in life.

When children fail too often to get the approval they seek, they may become apathetic about the possibility of ever doing so and flip into a reverse form of behavior where they purposely do things that will cause them to be disapproved of by all. This is part and parcel of the same phenomena, and that person is just as easy to manipulate.

Would you like to invest a little time in trying to improve your ability to be free from the manipulation of others? If so, take a look at the questions below and the instructions for answering them.

Instructions: Ask yourself question 1 to 5 in order and then begin again with #1. Talk to yourself about each question aloud and then write down a brief summary of your answer in a journal. Continue asking the questions and writing down the answers until all possible answers have been viewed or until a major realization occurs and you have no more interest in the questions. If you have a friend who would like to do this exercise too, you may enjoy doing it together and talking about the results.

1. Have you ever been shown, by word or by example, that you should seek the approval of others? If yes, talk about it out loud and consider when you received the idea and where it came from. Picture the exact moment when you accepted the idea and talk about that time.
2. Have you ever encouraged anyone to seek approval from others? If yes, talk about it and consider the effect your advice had on the other person.
3. Have you observed people in the past who really needed the approval of others? If yes, talk about it and consider whether you made any decisions when you observed their behavior.
4. Have you observed people in the past who based decisions on what was the most pro-survival thing to do rather than on what would gain approval? If yes, talk about it and observe how it affected their lives.
5. Recall a situation where you made a decision based on the need for approval, admiration, or appreciation. If yes, write briefly in your journal about it. Visualize how the situation might have turned out if you’d based your decision on doing the most pro-survival thing.

Follow up

For the next week, every time you make a decision, even about something as minor as what you will wear that day or what you’ll have for lunch, take a moment to check whether you’ve made that choice because it is the most pro-survival thing to do, or because it would bring you approval, admiration, or appreciation. A habit is not hard to break if you follow that procedure for at least a week. If you find you’ve made the decision for the right reason, acknowledge yourself for the constructiveness of your choice. If you find you made the decision for the wrong reason, gently correct yourself and remake the decision based on what would be most pro-survival.

If you question yet whether you have been infected by the need for approval, ask yourself these questions.

- Have I ever tried to impress someone?
- Do I behave differently around one group of people than I do around another?
- Do I sometimes put on an act instead of being myself?
- Have I quit doing something I enjoyed because I was afraid of being laughed at or belittled?
- Do I sometimes sacrifice my own needs or pleasure in hopes of getting appreciation?
- Do I ever try to make my accomplishments sound better than they actually are?