



People Pleasing

By Cindy Trevitt, Registered Professional Counsellor

Needing approval is tantamount to saying, "Your view of me is more important than my own opinion of myself."

- Dr. Wayne W. Dyer

Some people feel a powerful need to ensure that those around them are pleased and approving. They shower people with praise, offer unsolicited reassurances for projected insecurities, present unwanted or unsolicited services and favours, do and say whatever pleases others, always agree, and have banished the word "no," from their vocabulary. They are the classic door mats saying yes to the most unreasonable requests. From the extreme to the low-key, the people pleaser often lives a secret life of misery, hurt and resentment. They rarely, if ever, get their own needs met and regardless of their Good Samaritan efforts; feel steadily unappreciated and often resentful. They seldom ask for what they want and often gravitate towards people who are insensitive or demanding. A sense of unworthiness and guilt haunts their souls. They dread that their deeds and who they are will never be enough to elicit the love and approval they so desperately want and need.

"While you are trying to avoid the displeasure of others, you are in extreme displeasure yourself."

- Gary Zukav and Linda Francis

We all want approval - it feels very good and really there is nothing wrong with it. The problem happens when approval from others is the only way we feel we have worth.

The candid truth is that people-pleasers can be hard to be around. This behaviour interferes with relationships.

You don't know where you stand with them because they will never tell you a differing opinion. The people pleaser backs down from disagreements, trying to keep the peace, often fearing anger. You won't get to know them on a very personal level because they rarely volunteer information about themselves that isn't already endorsed by you. The people-pleaser conveys the message that they always want to be on the same page as you and this experience is entirely dissatisfying to say the least.

The holiday season might be a socially heightened experience for the people-pleaser...there are gifts to buy (so many); cookies to bake; parties to throw or attend (no matter how undesirable); oh so many cards to mail out; obligations to fulfill and (insert doomed foreshadowing music here) a whole family to try to please!

Our society provides a strong foundation for cultivating the people-pleaser. Most conventional schools themselves send the message: *give us the information we want to hear and we will reward you with an approving grade. Don't give us what we want and we will punish you with a low grade.* Not enough importance is placed on personal opinion or expression. Children are often told what to do instead of being taught how to problem-solve and consequently they look to others for answers instead of learning to determine what they want for themselves. Often times, the people-pleaser was raised in a home where their needs were not valued or they were expected to take care of others. They may have learned to remain silent or have been neglected or abused and so learned their own feelings aren't important.

Young children most definitely need approval - this is where they can learn to introject that sense of self-acceptance

by having it taught to them. But the approval should be unconditional - not conditional on performance or behaviour. The idea here is we want the child (and people) to have a sense of okay-ness about themselves to build on and that they need not do or be something to gain that.

I recall one grade 10 English Teacher, Mr. Hamilton. I knew how to play the game to get approval (in the guise of good grades) but Mr. Hamilton was one of the very rare few teachers who actually challenged my reports and opinions. Although it often stymied me, he would ask the question, "Are you saying what you're saying to please me (Mr. Hamilton) or because these opinions reflect your own views?" Like I said, he was the exception.

Mammoth marketing is an influential force in our lives swaying us to look, smell, and dress in such a way as to avoid any nasty disapproval. In some cases, if you move towards independence and self-approval, you might get messages from people telling you that you are selfish, uncaring, and inconsiderate. They want you to change back and stay dependent on them and others. Songs tell us we're nobody unless somebody loves us and that "without you, I am nothing." By the time we start approaching adulthood, we have been directed to do so many things in so many ways (study this, wear that, don't





do this, do that, eat this, don't eat that, say it this way, etc.) that when it comes to knowing what we want for our ourselves and our future we have no idea - we are utterly lost.

The people-pleaser (sadly) has little self-worth and what worth they do have, they place in the hands of others. They play the role of the ever-agreeable individual and then expect others to tell them what they are or aren't worth. They place the responsibility on others for their own miserable feelings and consequently don't realize that they have relinquished all power or accountability to change themselves. They don't have to take risks. Others are blamed as a scapegoat for their feelings.



"The paradox seems to be, as Socrates demonstrated long ago, that the truly free individual is free only to the extent of his own self-mastery. While those who will not govern themselves are condemned to find masters to govern over them."

- Steven Pressfield,
(from *The War of Art*)

It reinforces self-pity and stagnancy. The people-pleaser is fulfilling a kind of role where they will generally do what they think others want with minimal regard for their own needs or wants.



They believe (although not usually consciously) that if they fulfill this role, they will get all the love and approval they seek. Their worth and value

depends upon others.

Again, there's nothing wrong with approval, except if it's what gives you value. Kindness, generosity, and a giving spirit are admirable, desirable qualities to have - as long as you're extending them out of the same spirit and not to get approval or win someone over.

Here are some tips to help you break the people-pleasing habits:

- * Expect disapproval. When you see disapproval, remind yourself that it belongs to them, not you. Instead of changing your statement to meet with approval, catch yourself and remind yourself that you really believe what you said and you will deal with your own feelings about it. When someone disapproves, ask yourself, "If they agreed with me, would I be better off?"

- * Ask yourself if you're saying or doing what you are to gain approval.

- * Ask yourself what you're trying to gain by pleasing people.

- * Accept that people are different and many won't even understand you (or vice versa) and that is okay.

- * Trust yourself more. Stop verifying facts with others.

- * Stop over-apologizing.

- * Pause before you say "yes," and only say it when you really mean "yes."

- * Try giving yourself some extra time with phrases such as, "I need to think about it and get back to you," or "I need to check my schedule first."

- * Say "no," when you really mean "no."

- * Say, "I'm not sure about that - but I'll get back to you," when you're undecided.

- * Say "I apologize if this is disruptive for you, but after thinking about _____ I realize that that doesn't really work for me, so I won't be able to _____," if you've changed your mind about something (which you have the right to do!).

- * Ask yourself what you're truly afraid of. Losing people's approval and love? Are they worth hanging on to if you always have to please them? What will you lose if they go?

- * Look at where you learned how to be a people pleaser. Perhaps you learned as a child that the only way to get a positive response is to do what others want. Know that not everyone wants a pushover - a lot of people want an independent personality.

- * Stop basing your self worth on what you do for others. It's great to want to give but have limits. It is better to give out of kindness not guilt or fear.

- * Ask for what you want.

- * Become an expert in knowing what you need.

- * Do something for yourself.

- * Learn to compromise - be neither a pushover nor a bully.

- * Remind yourself, "My needs are just as important as yours."



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