

OVERCOMING APPROVAL ADDICTION

by Joyce Meyer

Many people today live a life of desperation—desperate to fit in, desperate to be accepted, and desperate to be approved of by others. They become addicted to approval. If you or someone you know has been addicted to approval, you are aware that it is a miserable way to live. You never know when someone is going to approve or disapprove of you, and just when you think you have figured out what they want, they change their mind.

WHAT IS APPROVAL ADDICTION?

First of all, an addiction is something that controls people—it is something they feel they cannot live without, or something they feel driven to do in order to relieve pressure, pain or discomfort of some kind. Someone addicted to drugs, for instance, will do whatever he needs to in order to get another “fix” when he begins to feel uncomfortable. Likewise, someone addicted to alcohol will feel compelled to have a drink when life’s problems begin to rise up and stare him in the face. The substance that people are addicted to helps relieve their pain momentarily, but then a damaging controlling cycle starts in their life.

Approval addiction is much the same, but instead of running to drugs, alcohol, gambling, eating or sex to heal the hurt, they seek people’s approval. When they feel unsure and shaky about themselves, they look for a “fix”—they seek out someone to comfort them and reassure them everything is all right and they are acceptable. For example, let’s say a friend invites “Sara” over for lunch after church, but because of a previous commitment, Sara turns the invitation down. When Sara is met with disapproval from her friend, she goes against what she knows in her heart she should do and changes her plans; she accepts the invitation just to gain her friend’s approval.

How can you tell if you may be addicted to approval? Stop and ask yourself a couple of simple questions: “What do I run to and what do I look for when I feel insecure?” “What is on my mind most of the time?” When a person is addicted to something, it is on their mind most of the time. The greater the addiction, the more that thing consumes their thoughts. Therefore, if someone is addicted to approval, he or she will have an abnormal concern and an excessive number of thoughts about what people think of them.

WHAT RESULTS FROM APPROVAL ADDICTION?

Whatever we are addicted to we are controlled by, and as a result, our addiction affects and influences many other areas of our lives. Approval addiction not only affects our personal relationships, but also our prayer life, how we spend our time, and ultimately whether or not we fulfill our destiny. It will certainly steal our peace, joy and contentment.

Many years ago, before I allowed the Lord to do a work in me, I wore many masks, trying to be accepted by everyone. Whatever I thought people wanted me to be is what I tried to be. But it became exhausting and very confusing. I remember one day I was so frustrated I cried out to God and said, “I don’t know who I am or how I am supposed to act!” I had tried to be so many things to so many people, I had lost sight of my true identity. Interestingly, in Peter Evans’ book, *The Mask Behind the Mask*, he says that actor Peter Sellers played so many different roles he forgot his own identity. In other words, he had played so many parts that he forgot who he was. That is similar to how I felt.

There were times I felt like a vending machine. Everybody that came by me pushed a different button, expecting a different thing. My husband, Dave, wanted a loving, submissive wife. My children wanted a caring and thoughtful mother. I had aging relatives who were dependent on me and desired my attention. The call on my life to teach required a lot of me, and the people I ministered to wanted me to be accessible to them whenever they needed me. Because I desperately wanted to be loved and approved of by everyone, I said yes to everything anyone asked of me.

Eventually, I became sick from the stress of it all, and I realized that if I did not learn to say no, I was in for serious health problems.

I, like many others, was addicted to approval, and I was at the point of burnout. This often results in feeling used up and pulled in every direction. Anger then begins to build up because we know deep down that what is happening is not right. Ironically, we become angry with those who are pressuring us, but in reality *we* are allowing ourselves to be pressured. It is true that people should not pressure us, but it is equally true that we should not allow ourselves to come under pressure.

To escape this trap of pressure from others and ourselves, we must take control of our lives and begin following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He will help us establish proper boundaries—when to say yes and when to say no. You and I cannot live without limits. Even Jesus rested; even He walked away from the demands of the crowds and made time for renewal. And the same Holy Spirit that led Him will lead us and help us find true security in the unchanging approval of the Father.

WHAT CAUSES APPROVAL ADDICTION?

I believe insecurity is one of the greatest causes for approval addiction. People who are insecure want and need the approval of others so much that they will do just about anything to get it. A sense of security is something everybody needs and wants. Security enables us to enjoy healthy thinking and living, allowing us to feel safe, accepted and approved of. When we are secure, we approve of ourselves, we have confidence, and we accept and love ourselves in a healthy, balanced way. When we are insecure, we disapprove of ourselves, we lack confidence, and we tend to reject ourselves.

I came from an abusive background that left me with deep wounds even after I became a Christian. The atmosphere of the home I grew up in was extremely unstable and supercharged with fear, which left me very insecure. My father was not only abusive but also impossible to please. What he approved of one day, which was rare, I would get in trouble for another day. I tried my best to do what I thought he wanted, but his desires were constantly changing and unpredictable. Experiencing this over and over and over again turned me into an “approval addict”—I so desperately wanted to avoid the pain of disapproval from others that I became willing to do almost anything to get people’s approval.

Insecurity left me frustrated and absent of real peace and joy because I had a poor self-image and felt like nobody liked me. The strange thing is that I *acted* as though I didn’t need anyone and that I didn’t care how people felt about me. However, deep down inside I really **did** care, and I tried very hard to be what I thought others wanted me to be.

What changed my thinking? I began studying the Word of God and learning who I am in Christ. I learned to see myself the way God sees me—as the righteousness of His Son Jesus (see 2 Corinthians 5:21). I meditated on scriptures that showed me how much God loved me and approved of me...even *before* I was born (see Romans 5:8; Jeremiah 1:5). I learned that part of our inheritance as Christians is a deep sense of security (see Isaiah 54:17). I learned that we are not supposed to go around constantly focused on our flaws and weaknesses, feeling wrong about ourselves from daylight till dark. I learned that freedom from insecurity comes when you and I choose to look away from all that distracts us and look to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith (see Hebrews 12:2). God’s truth set me free, and for the first time I began to feel secure in Him.

HOW CAN YOU HAVE A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP?

Relationships are a very valuable part of our lives, and God desires for us to have healthy, enjoyable ones. I believe the way we begin a relationship is vital to its health. What you and I allow in our relationships in the beginning should be what we will be happy with permanently. That’s wisdom—choosing now what we will be happy with later on. Let people know by your actions that even though you would like their approval, you can live without it if you need to. Give others respect, and let them know that you expect them to show you respect.

Any relationship where one person is in control while the other struggles to gain approval is not healthy. We should not buy friends by letting them control us. If we do, whatever we did to get them we will have to continue doing. You and I should never sin against our own consciences, doing

something that we know and feel in our hearts is wrong, in order to have someone's approval. This is not right, and it is not God's will.

There will be times in our relationships when confrontation is needed. In other words, we will have to say no to something even when the other person wants to hear yes. It means we may have to choose to do something the other party doesn't agree with or approve of, but we know in our heart it is the right choice for us. If you have not been confronting and now find yourself being controlled and manipulated, making this change will take time. I encourage you to begin praying about it, asking God to give you courage to speak the truth in love and help the other person be willing to accept your decision and change.

Remember, breaking any addiction will cause suffering, but it leads to victory. At first you may feel very uncomfortable with the thought of someone not being happy with you, but keep in mind that your only other choice is spending your life being unhappy. You and I can either suffer on our way to victory, or we can suffer in an endless cycle of addiction. I strongly suggest that you don't waste your pain—suffer for what is going to produce something good in your life and the lives of others.

WILL YOU ACCEPT THE CHALLENGE?

I challenge you to trust God to bring you friends. Sometimes we want to be in relationship with a person who looks good on the outside, but then the relationship turns out to be a nightmare. On the other hand, someone may not be appealing on the surface, but as you get to know them, they may become the best friend you ever had. So instead of working yourself silly trying to build relationships with the people *you* think would make a good friend, give your relationships to God. Ask Him to give you "divine connections." He may surprise you by connecting you with people you would have never chosen to be in relationship with but feel closer to you than your own family.

I also encourage you to pray for favor. Psalm 5:12 tells us that the Lord blesses the righteous and surrounds him with a shield of favor. Begin confessing that you have favor with both God and man. When God gives us favor, He gives us things that we don't deserve in the natural, including quality relationships. Don't seek to be a people pleaser...don't compromise what you know is right in your heart to gain the approval of others. The only approval you need is the Father's, and you already have that. As you make it your aim to please God, any addiction to approval will break under the power of His love...it's only a matter of time.