

Do You Ever Feel Anxious?

Part 2: Anxiety and the Need for Approval

By Lynette Sykora

Supporting Text: *The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook 3rd ed.* By Edmund J. Bourne

It often starts with something like this, Jerry says, “Lynette, I’d like to talk with you.” (Sorry for you using you, Jerry!) It’s a simple statement, right? Never mind that Jerry is very kind and encouraging towards me. Even so, this statement can make my stomach turn. I start to think, “Did I do something wrong?” or “Is he upset with me?” Jerry is, you see, my boss, someone I respect and someone whose approval is very important to me.

I used to work at Rite Aid Pharmacy when we lived in Kentucky. I worked 8 hour shifts (pharmacists worked 12) with no lunch break; it was really busy. We worked hard and we wanted to help our customers as we knew many of them were sick and hurting. But no matter how hard we tried, we usually made about a third of our customers angry with us! Someone had to wait too long; someone’s insurance didn’t cover their medicine, we ran out of the medicine; there were many reasons. It would drive me crazy because I was trying so hard and still I couldn’t please them! One instance in particular was with a man who had chronic pain and he called for his pain medicine refills. I took the call and said it would be ready in an hour. However, after I hung up I found out we were out of that medicine. I tried to call him back but didn’t get him. He came to the store and when he found out he couldn’t get his pills he was furious *with me*. I apologized, but he just kept yelling. I ended up in tears in the back room of the store and for two days I kept replaying what happened. I know this job taught me more about the people-pleasing part of my personality.

Everyone needs approval-its part of living in society and in community with one another. But for many people with anxiety the need for approval can be excessive. What does it mean to have an excessive need for approval? Psychologist Edmund Bourne defines it as seeking validation from others and believing we are unacceptable the way we are. We try to be pleasing in general, to everyone, to the point of ignoring our own needs and feelings. We have difficulty setting boundaries in our lives. The long term consequence of pleasing others constantly is withheld frustration and resentment over not having taken care of one’s own basic needs. *And this withheld frustration and resentment form the basis for chronic anxiety and tension!*

Those who are overly concerned with the approval of others are usually dealing with an inner sense of being flawed or unworthy (Bourne, 241). We probably all agree that we are flawed, however, perhaps Bourne is looking deeper, to someone who is carrying around a sense of being inferior, always wanting to defer to others because she is not good enough to get her own way and her way wouldn’t be the right way anyway! Whatever the OTHER person wants, THAT would be better.

Here are three suggestions about coping with this approval seeking tendency.

A. Be Realistic About the Approval of Others

One of the suggestions Bourne offers those of us who struggle with this need for approval is to try to be realistic about other people’s approval. When people don’t express approval or are even critical towards you, how do you receive it? Do you take it personally, as evidence of your inadequacy? As we did in the last issue, let’s take a look at helpful and unhelpful thoughts that can affect our anxiety.

Unhelpful

1a) “If someone isn’t friendly with me, it’s because I did something wrong.”

Helpful

1b) The man who was angry with me at Rite Aid is dealing with chronic pain. It’s not because I am a bad person or bad pharmacy tech that he was angry, he was just having a difficult day.

Unhelpful

2a) “Others’ criticism only serves to underscore the fact that I really am unworthy.”

Helpful

2b) When Jerry was telling me something I could improve; it was because he wanted me to do better and because he cares about me as a person. Maybe I have some insecurity about how I am doing in my job, but a criticism isn’t proof that I am inadequate. It merely shows I have one thing I can do better on and that can be a hopeful thing.

Unhelpful

3a) “Others’ approval of me is very important.”

Helpful

3b) I wanted the customers at Rite Aid to be satisfied with my work, but it was impossible to please all of them. I know that I did my best and that was all I could do. If they were unhappy, I could learn from my mistakes, apologize for them, and do better next time.

B. Be Objective As You Deal With Criticism

Bourne says we should try to be objective in how we deal with criticism. All criticism isn’t bad. In fact, criticism can be a way for you to grow and to learn something about yourself. That’s called constructive criticism. Hopefully you can recognize it. It is usually given by someone who cares about you and wants to see you do better. It doesn’t attack you as a person, and it is specific, dealing with something you said or did, not a global statement like, “That was a terrible job you did.” They would actually know enough to say what they didn’t like, “Your MSA projection of one million dollars for 2009 isn’t realistic.” So if you find you receive a global criticism, ask the person for details.

And if you are socked with criticism, another suggestion is “consider the source.” Is this person qualified to criticize you? Perhaps you are receiving criticism from someone you have a highly emotional relationship with. Are they able to be objective? Check if this criticism has validity. If there is truth to it, it may carry more of a sting. But let me make that part clear, that the criticism should only be something that speaks to a piece of you, your actions, your words, it should not be something that defines you as a person. You are not invalidated because someone criticized you. You are not unworthy because you didn’t get approval. It’s not logical to think that and it is not possible to get everyone’s approval.

C. There Might Be Co-Dependency at the Root of This

Try out a few of these statements. Do they reflect your beliefs?

- If someone important to me expects me to do something, I should do it.
- I should not be irritable or unpleasant.
- I should keep people I love happy.
- Most of my self-esteem seems to come from helping other people solve their problems.
- I tend to overextend myself in taking care of others.
- If necessary, I'll put my own needs aside, or even my values, in order to preserve my relationship with others.
- Fear of someone else's anger has a lot of influence on what I say or do.

If you agreed with three or more of these, then you are probably dealing with co-dependency. That might be a scary word; it is for me. It means you usually put others' needs ahead of your own and your self-esteem is based on how well you please others, or take care of others or solve others' problems. Does this sound like you? Well, if so, first comes stress, then comes fatigue, then comes sickness in the baby carriage! (Sorry, flashback there.)

I really had a sense with this situation with the man at Rite Aid that I was not alright, that because I had made this man so angry, there was something really wrong with me and I couldn't stand it. I replayed what he said, what I said, what went wrong. I would torture myself with it, wishing I could make it better and I was unable to let it go. "I made him angry. I messed up. It's my fault." There seemed to be a real fear connected with this, that displeasing that man at Rite-Aid was scary to me, at a core level. I'm still exploring that, to be honest, but remember that verse from Timothy? That God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, of love and of self-discipline? I will make people unhappy, but I can't live in fear of that. I CANNOT please everyone! There actually are some people in the world who don't like me! The bible tells us that we are to be trying to please God, not man. I have to have a fundamental belief that I am a child of God, that I am living to please Him, and that I am wonderfully made. I am OK! What I have to say, or contribute is worthy. Even if other people don't approve in the moment, I will live to fight another day! So what? So they didn't like it. I tried! So they wanted me to help and I couldn't, so what? They will survive and they will figure it out. I am not their savior. That job is taken.

If any of you see that you might have some issues with co-dependency, may I suggest some books: *Co-Dependent No More* by Melody Beattie and *Facing Co-Dependence* by Pia Melody. The *Boundaries* book is also a great resource on this subject.

Thanks so much for reading and if you have any thoughts, comments or reflections on this, I'd love to hear them.

-Lynette