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'You like me!'

Americans have a deep-seated need for approval. They crave it, chase it and almost seem intoxicated by it. Experts say it's a very basic human instinct.

By Joann Klimkiewicz
The Hartford Courant

It is nothing short of a drug whose dizzying highs keep us coming back for more.

We crave it, chase it. When we get a taste, our insides go warm and tingly. All is right with the world. When we go too long without it, we feel empty and unsettled, scheming for our next dose.

This heady narcotic? Approval. (Its other known street names, acceptance and validation).

And in our conformist culture, we traffic in all of its many forms: thumbs-up and pay raises, backslaps and gold stars.

We seek it out, compete for it. We dispense it and snatch it back. It is The American Way.

As children, we yearn for report cards speckled with check marks and A-pluses. As adults, we strive for glowing work evaluations. We buy cars and appliances stamped with consumer-friendly seals of approval. We open mail from credit card companies inviting us into the flock with that enticing word: pre-approved.

And, no one being exempt from its influence, we bestow it on the highest of political leaders in the form of the numerical thumbs-up or thumbs-down that is the job-approval rating.

President Bush's poll numbers show only 32 percent of Americans approve of the job he's doing, according to a recent Associated Press-Ipsos poll.

But why do we put so much stock in this elusive, fleeting approval? Just who are we trying to please? And why would a guy like Bush, unconcerned with re-election in the midst of his second term, even fret about winning back the love of the electorate?

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## Seeking validation

Because he's like all Americans, trained since childhood to seek out validation, to steer our courses with it and gauge our worth by how much approval we've banked.

"It's a very basic human instinct to want validation, acceptance and approval from our peers," said Karen Steinberg, assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut Health Center.

And it's a very American instinct, she said. Our work-until-we-drop culture is more obsessed with approval than other societies.

"It's just so universal," Steinberg said. "So many people struggle with it, no matter how much they've accomplished. It's almost that the more people accomplish," the more their self-esteem hinges on external signs of approval.

So how did we get here?

Our society has roots in a clannish, herd-like ethos. We wandered in tribes, built towns and raised barns together.

"We are a social species that means we need to get along in groups," said Kerul Kassel, a Florida-based personal and business coach whose corporate clients include Sony and Hilton. "And when you're in a tribe or a clan, you have to modify some of your behaviors and desires in order to fit in.

"When you need each other to survive, you don't want to be ashamed or rejected."

## Reward system

That mentality is hardened during childhood, when parents, sometimes unwittingly, use approval and affection as a reward system.

A toddler spills milk or scribbles a crayon across the wall.

"And all of a sudden, the happy, loving face of your parents becomes disapproving, and it's overwhelming and threatening," Kassel said. "The love and affection and nurturing that was there is, at least for a time, gone. And through hundreds of thousands of these kinds of experiences as children, we learn to seek approval."

It becomes one of the most fundamental of human needs: to feel validated, to feel we're worth something, that somehow our existence in the tiny space we occupy in this world means something to someone.

And so the parental approval we crave as children morphs into the romantic attention we yearn for in adulthood from our partners and spouses. The quest for high test scores becomes the quest for complimentary performance reviews and merit bonuses.

It's not necessarily an unhealthy pursuit.

"Approval can be a good thing," Kassel said. "All these things are useful in measuring the goals we, or someone else, have set for ourselves. ... It can really be helpful until we let it become a prison by ... making it about whether we're worthy or not. We let it be a judgment on our person rather than on certain skills or behaviors."

## Every nook and cranny

The value we place on approval manifests itself in every nook and cranny of our society.

Teenagers fret over whether they're wearing the right jeans, listening to the right music, driving the right cars. Parents fret over whether they're pushing the trendiest strollers, getting their tots in the coveted play groups and, well, driving the right cars.

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We even seek approval before indulging in shopping trips, vacations or Friday nights on the town. We're more likely to snap up books bearing the Oprah Book Club logo, to stop in a place to eat bearing a restaurant guide's star-stamped approval and catch a movie that's gotten a critic's two thumbs up.

"There's a certain value and trust consumers place in seals," said Sara Rad, director of brand development at the Good Housekeeping Institute, which has bestowed its coveted seal on everything from beauty products to household appliances for nearly a century.

Rad said the institute's research shows that, all things being equal, shoppers are more inclined to buy a product when it carries its seal a mark of Good Housekeeping's strict evaluation of a manufacturer's claims and of the institute's limited product warranty.

"In many cases, the seal can be a tie-breaker," she said.

Nowhere is this quest for acceptance on better display than Hollywood, where red-carpet starlets fear the fashion barbs of Joan Rivers (of all people, Joan Rivers!) and where Sally Field blurted out, while famously clutching her Oscar, "I've wanted more than anything to have your respect ... and I can't deny the fact that you like me, right now, you like me!"

Comedian Dennis Miller once riffed on the subject: "Show business lures the people who didn't get enough love, attention or approval early in life and have grown up to become bottomless, gaping vessels of terrifying abject need. Please laugh."

While perhaps most prevalent in the world of celebrity, the next place this hunt for approval is most visible is on Capitol Hill and on the political campaign trails.

It's what prompts political strategists to agonize over polls, what had former New York City Mayor Ed Koch forever asking, "How'm I doing?"

Because in a politician's world, it's not just validation at stake but a job.

While Bush might not be fretting over re-election, he is concerned about making his mark in the history books and getting his public policy into place.

So this unending search for approval serves its positive purpose, psychologists say. Problems arise when we compromise our own standards, our own health for that promotion, for kudos on a job well done, and when we measure our own value by outside validation, when our healthy desire for approval becomes a relentless need.

We should continually check in with our own internal standards, Steinberg said.

"We need to be able to say, 'I would like to perform well; I would like to do my best, but I'm not willing to break my back for some elusive good grade and compromise other areas of my life,'" she said. "We need to keep it in perspective."



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