

THE TWO UNDERLYING CAUSES OF STRESS

1. OUR NEED FOR APPROVAL

WE NEED TO BE LIKED

We spend a lot of our time and use a lot of our energy doing things that we believe will lead others to like us. This is very different from *respect*. It is possible for other people to respect us without liking us. In fact, if we do things that will earn respect, that often comes at the expense of approval. For example, people might not *like* us if we say 'no' in order to maintain professional boundaries, but they will *respect* us. We say 'yes' because it's their *approval* we seek.

This need for approval is rooted in early childhood, which is why it's such a powerful driver. In infancy we needed food and shelter to survive. But, more than this, we also needed love. So, as infants, in order to survive we used strategies to bring adult carers close to us. Gradually as we grew up, we learnt that the best way to achieve this was to be the person they wanted us to be; to 'be nice'; to say 'yes'; to smile. And, we're still doing it. We're still smiling and saying 'yes' in order to be loved. And, we do this even though what we're doing may take us away from the things that we value ourselves and may even be damaging to us. We seek other people's approval *as if we couldn't live without it*.

This is why things like maintaining boundaries, managing time and workloads, achieving a balance between work and outside life, balancing needs of different family members and so on are stressful. It's because all of these require us to say 'no' sometimes. But, if we say 'no' to someone then they might be upset with us and not like us and we want *everyone* to like us. So, we pay hairdressers even though they've made a mess of our haircut; we apologise to people after they've walked into us; we drive faster than we'd like because someone else has driven right up to our back bumper and is looking irritated; we spend time and energy justifying our ways of working to people who raise their eyebrows at us and question us even though it's not their area of work and none of their business; we tolerate bullying and harassment rather than act because we don't want to be seen as a troublemaker.

But, how many people do you actually need to like you?

It would be great if the answer to that question could be just 'myself'. You've cracked it if you get to that point and can really live by that.

However, the truth for most us is that we find it very difficult to maintain confidence in ourselves without some signs that other people like us. If you think about it though, we really only need the love and approval of the very few people who are closest to us – maybe only one or two people. In order to tackle stress effectively you need to be able to let go of your need for approval from *everyone*. Focus on the people who are really important in your life. Focus on the people whose approval or lack of it significantly affects your life. And even then remember that, while your life could be very difficult or painful if those people were to withdraw their approval, *you would still survive*.

2. OUR NEED FOR CONTROL

I WE WANT TO BE RIGHT

Think about the last few arguments that you've had with other people recently. What were they about? Did you win the argument? Was it worth it? Sometimes we have arguments with people about things that really matter. If we're honest though, most of the time our arguments are about trivial things that won't matter a week, or even a day later. These arguments that we have with people are all about *control*. We want them to do things the way we want them to because we're right. We want them to think the way we do because we're right. We want them to see that we're right and admit that we're right and agree with us and we'll keep on arguing until they do. And who are 'they'? Everyone. We need to be in control of *everyone*.

Some issues are important and worth the fight. There are some people, in some situations that you need to agree with you. But, you can choose the people you need to agree with you and *let go of your need to be in control of everyone else*. Before you get involved in a tiring discussion or argument ask, '*if this person thinks I'm wrong, how will that affect my life.....really.....?*'.

II WE NEED TO BE PERFECT

We are bombarded with images of perfection; the perfect face, the perfect skin, the perfect body, the perfect clothes, the perfect house, the perfectly successful executive who seems to have all of the above too. At one level we know that these are illusions and that it isn't really possible to be perfect in any, let alone all, of these areas. But at another level we seem to believe that perfection is possible, and that because it's possible, we must be failures if we don't achieve it.

Can you be in control of some things? Yes. You just need to accept that if you have control in one area of your life, then something has to give somewhere else. If you put home and family first then it isn't possible to put work first too. If you put work first, then you won't be able to have a perfectly tidy home all the time. Something has to come second, third and so on. If you are trying to be perfect in all areas, you will burn-out eventually because this is just not possible. If work is important to you then you will want to be professional. Being professional means that *you do not allow yourself to burn out*.

III WE NEED TO KNOW

We need to be able to *understand, explain and predict everything* when most of the time *we just don't know*. Often this leads us to explain why something has happened or decide what is going to happen on the basis of little or no evidence for what we believe. We find it uncomfortable to be in a state of 'not knowing'. When we don't know, we make it up, and then we believe what we make up. The problem with this is that *what you believe affects the way you feel and what you do*. This can lead to unnecessary pain and grief and, let's face it, there's enough real difficulty in life without adding imaginary pain.

Managing stress is often about letting go of our need to know. It's about realising that we can't read minds, we can't predict the future, and when we're not present in a situation we can't know what is happening or why. It can be a great relief to be able to say 'I don't know. When I know, I'll deal with it'.