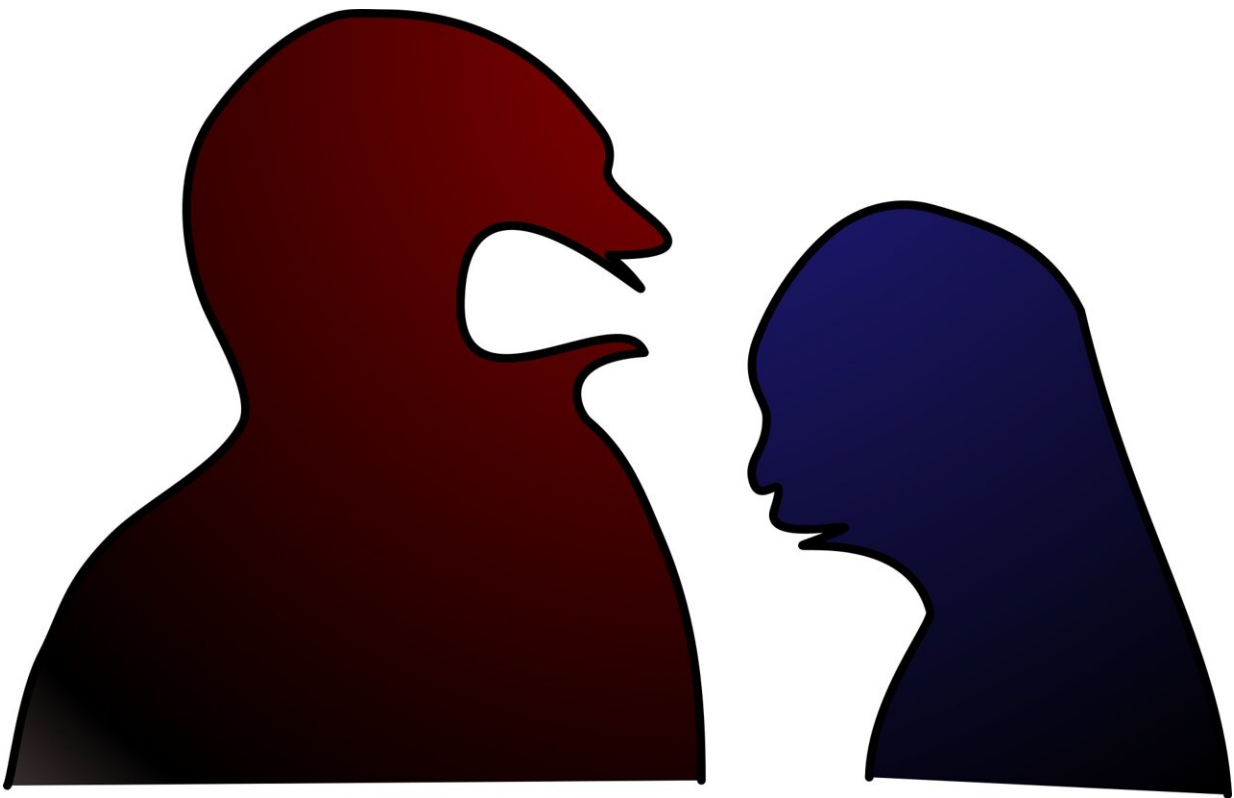


# Why do people crave the approval of an abusive or narcissistic parent? And what can they do about it?

April 17 2023, by Gery Karantzas

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In the phenomenally successful TV show "[Succession](#)," wealthy media magnate Logan Roy (played by Brian Cox) is frequently cruel to his

adult children. He insults them, pits them against each other and can be cold or menacing. Despite the years of torment, the Roy children clearly crave their father's approval.

The show highlights a struggle some [adult children](#) face: the need for approval from an abusive parent.

Some would suggest the solution is simple: cut ties with the parent, limit contact, rid your life of this difficult relationship. But this is often not realistic.

Research into relationships can help us understand why some people desire the approval of a parent who is abusive, insensitive or inconsistent in their love—or who rate high on what's known as "dark trait" tendencies (narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism).

## **Attachment anxiety**

Studies into [parent-child relationships](#) based in [attachment theory](#) (a widely researched theory of human bonding) suggest the need for approval is a feature of people who experience an insecure attachment style known as attachment anxiety.

People experiencing [attachment anxiety](#) tend to crave relationship closeness, which includes obsessing over a parent or [romantic partner](#), and can hold strong fears of being rejected or abandoned.

According to [attachment theory](#), attachment anxiety can develop when the care provided by parents or guardians early in life is inept or inconsistent.

## **Inept or inconsistent care**

Inept care is when a parent provides some type of help, but the care provided does not meet the needs of the child.

For example, a child may need encouragement in achieving a challenging task. Instead, the parent provides sympathy and says the task is too hard for the child. The parent may even try to do the task for the child, which can make them feel helpless or even incompetent.

Inconsistent care is when the parent *sometimes* provides care that meets the child's needs, triggering happiness or relief in the child. They feel seen, validated, and understood.

On other occasions, however, the parent may respond in ways that do not meet the child's needs.

The parent may withdraw, avoid, or neglect the child in their time of need. On other occasions, the parent may blame the child for asking for help—or make them feel guilty by framing their request for help as a burden that affects the parent's own well-being.

## Parenting and the dark traits

Some believe these responses by parents are methods to manipulate their children to behave or feel a certain way. [Research](#) into the dark traits suggests those who score high on these qualities lack emotional warmth, act in hostile ways, and exert control over their [children](#).

People with these tendencies have been [shown](#) to dehumanize others, even those closest to them. This can involve treating family and romantic partners as if they have no feelings, as if they are irrational, stupid, rigid like a robot, or as a means to an end.

Our own [work](#) has shown people can act this way because their own

parents were hostile towards them some 20 years prior.

## **Intergenerational transmission**

For some parents, however, engaging in inept and inconsistent care is not driven by conscious motivations to manipulate and hurt their children.

Rather, they may not know how to parent differently. It may be that they too had parents who provided inept or inconsistent care.

Many of these parents have difficulties controlling their own distress when parenting their children. For some, their own worries and concerns become so intense they end up focusing on their own worries over those of their children.

This is an example of [intergenerational transmission](#), where patterns of attachment and parenting can be passed from one generation to the next.

## **A 'partial reinforcement schedule'**

Irrespective of the reason, the fallout of inept or inconsistent caregiving is that children are placed on what's known as a [partial reinforcement schedule](#).

This is where the child's cries for help are *sometimes* attended to. They *sometimes* receive the love and support they require. But other times, the child experiences invalidation, neglect, or gets the message they are not understood or are harming their parent.

Because of this partial reinforcement schedule, [children](#) work harder to gain the attention and love of their parents. The child might think: "If I try that little harder to get their attention and approval, they'll see what I

really need, and they'll provide me with the love, comfort, acknowledgement I desire".

## How can we break the spell?

The need for approval is powerful for good reason, rooted in a long relationship history with our caregivers. Addressing this need often requires psychological intervention.

Therapies with a strong [relational focus](#) can be especially useful in working through issues such as a chronic need for approval. Such therapies include [interpersonal therapy](#) and [schema therapy](#).

[Schema therapy](#) aims to help people understand why they have such a strong need for approval.

It uses cognitive, behavioral and emotion-focused strategies to help increase a person's tolerance of disapproval. It might involve helping someone develop a better sense of their own identity, or use imagery techniques and affirmations to help clients validate themselves rather than seeking approval from an insensitive parent.

For people facing these struggles with a parent, try to identify when your need for approval is triggered, the emotions you feel, and what approval-seeking behaviors you engage in. It can help to write a pros and cons list about how the need for approval affects your life. Self-awareness can help lead to behavior change.

It can also help to celebrate your own successes and identify your own skills and achievements. Doing so can provide you with evidence that challenges your need for approval from others. Developing [self-compassion](#) can also help.

Finally, positive affirmations can help challenge your own negative self-beliefs and increase your tendency to be self-approving. This can be as simple as writing down a series of truthful positive statements about yourself. You can refer to these statements when self-doubt creeps in, or when the need for approval of others becomes loud in your mind.

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