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life advice

The Difference Between Approval and Love

Don't confuse approval with the love in your marriage. Dr. Nelson explains the difference and how that understanding will improve your marriage.

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Couples can disapprove of something and still love their spouse—don't confuse the two.

When you start out in your new marriage, you're vibrating with the delicious thought that "this is the one." You want this marriage is to last forever, and that you'll find love, happiness and fulfillment each and every day.

In general, you do. But then something happens, something goes wrong and either your spouse doesn't turn out to be who you thought they were or you don't feel loved the way you thought you would. Among all the reasons things can go wrong in a relationship, one of the most prevalent and least recognized is our tendency to confuse approval with love.

Approval is when someone is pleased with something you've said or done. You like your hamburgers medium well, so the waiter brings you a hamburger medium well and you approve of it. You tell your dog to "sit" and "stay," he does, you pat him on the head and you approve. Approval is a feedback mechanism that lets us and others know how we're doing.

In the beginning of your marriage, you need feedback to let you know how you and your new mate are going to get along. The problem is that instead of using whatever feedback you get as information regarding the potential for happiness in this relationship, we often want love so badly that you force the feedback to be favorable by seeking approval. You deliberately do things you figure your new spouse will like, and sure enough you get approval. It feels great and you think things are going fine.

Then you do something your beloved doesn't approve of, and rather than stop and think, "What does this disapproval tell me about how we can best harmonize as a couple?" you panic and think, "He/she's not going to love me any more," and you quickly drop or hide the disapproved behavior. All too often, you end up dropping or hiding more and more behaviors until you are no longer yourself. You soon become angry, bitter and resentful, which leads to un-necessary marital misery.

Approval isn't love! Just because your spouse approves of who and what you are/do doesn't mean they love you. Nor does their disapproval of some of what you are or do mean that they don't love you. Love is much more complex than that. Love is caring about the other person as they are, valuing them as they are and seeking to know and understand them as they are, and finding ways to be yourself harmoniously with them as their true selves.

You can't find out who a person is, nor can you allow them to know and understand you if you keep falsifying your behavior. Be true to yourself. Be who you are and trust that your new spouse wants to love you as you are, if only you will give them the chance.

Use your mate's approval and disapproval not as the guidelines for how you should behave, but as food for discussion, as opportunities to explore and appreciate your differences as well as your similarities. A healthy couple is made up of two individuals who expand one other, not of two individuals who clone one other.

Let approval be a useful servant to you in its feedback role, and help you grow the love you so richly deserve.

Noelle C. Nelson, Ph.D., is a relationship expert, popular speaker in the U.S. and abroad, and author of nine best-selling books, including her most recent, "[Your Man is Wonderful](#)" and "[Dangerous Relationships](#)." Dr. Nelson focuses on how we can all enjoy happy, fulfilling lives while accomplishing great things in love, at home and at work, as we appreciate ourselves, our world and all others. For more, visit www.drnoellenelson.com and www.yourmaniswonderful.com/blog.