

Why do I care so much what other people think?

By Allison Sramek, MSc, MFT, MBACP Registered

Most of us care what other people think. It's part of being human. We all want to feel accepted, understood and like we belong.

But when worrying about other people's opinions begins to shape the way we live, it can leave us feeling anxious, exhausted and disconnected from ourselves.

You might replay conversations over and over, worrying you've offended someone. You may find yourself avoiding conflict, apologising even when you've done nothing wrong or struggling to speak up because you're afraid of how others might respond. Perhaps you feel you have to look a certain way, achieve more or be "good enough" before you feel accepted.

If this sounds familiar, you're certainly not alone.

Why does this happen?

There isn't one simple answer.

For some people, these feelings begin early in life. You may have grown up feeling compared to siblings, praised mainly for your achievements or learnt that making mistakes wasn't safe. Others may have experienced criticism, rejection or relationships where keeping the peace felt more important than expressing their own thoughts and feelings.

Over time, it can become easier to ask,

"What will everyone else think?"

than,

"What do I think?"

Somewhere along the way, your own voice can become much quieter than everyone else's.

How can it affect us?

When we become overly focused on other people's opinions, it can begin to influence many areas of our lives.

You might:

- replay conversations long after they've ended
- worry you've upset someone, even when there's little evidence you have
- struggle to say no because you don't want to disappoint others
- avoid conflict by agreeing to things you don't really want
- doubt your abilities despite positive feedback
- feel you need to look or behave a certain way to be accepted

- constantly compare yourself with other people.

Over time, this can become exhausting. It can leave you feeling disconnected from what you genuinely think, want and need.

Therapy isn't about telling you to stop caring

One of the biggest misconceptions is that therapy teaches people to stop caring what others think.

In reality, it isn't that simple.

Caring about other people is part of being human. Relationships matter and most of us naturally want to feel accepted by those around us. Instead, therapy offers the opportunity to become curious about **why** other people's opinions carry so much weight. Many of the people I work with know, logically, that they don't need everyone else's approval.

Yet emotionally, it still feels incredibly important. Understanding where those feelings come from often comes before meaningful change.

One thing I've noticed as a therapist

One thing I've noticed over the years is that self-compassion rarely happens overnight. Clients often tell me,

"I hear what you're saying... but I just can't believe it."

That's okay.

Hearing kindness and truly believing it are often two very different things. Rather than rushing to change those feelings, we often begin by becoming curious about them.

I might ask questions such as:

- *When do these feelings come up most strongly?*
- *What do you imagine would happen if you said how you really felt?*
- *Have you ever said these thoughts out loud before?*
- *How does it feel to talk about them today?*

Sometimes we explore situations together, gently reflecting on what happens emotionally and physically, and noticing how those experiences have shaped the way someone relates to themselves and others. Little by little, many people begin to discover that their worth isn't something they have to earn through other people's approval.

A gentle reminder

If you recognise yourself in any of this, it doesn't necessarily mean there's something wrong with you. It may simply mean you've spent a long time measuring your worth through other people's eyes. Therapy isn't about becoming someone different. It's about understanding yourself with greater compassion, reconnecting with your own voice and discovering that your value doesn't depend on always getting it right or always being accepted by everyone else.

Sometimes, understanding ourselves is where change begins.

 **Therapist's Reflection:** *One of the questions I find myself asking quite often in therapy is:*

"What do you think?"

At first, many people find that surprisingly difficult to answer. They're so used to wondering what everyone else needs, expects or approves of that they've stopped checking in with themselves.

There isn't anything "wrong" with that. Often, it has developed over many years and for very understandable reasons. One of the most rewarding parts of therapy is watching people slowly begin to trust their own voice again. Not because they stop caring about others... but because they begin caring about themselves too.

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