



The Deep Idol Of Approval

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As we continue our series on the Deep Idols, please refer to the [November 2023 Toolkit](#) that explains what a deep idol is in the context of our unique approach to counseling, Gospel-centered Integrative Framework for Therapy (GIFT), as well as the System of Self Redemption.

The four deep idols are power, control, comfort, and approval. This toolkit focuses on the deep idol of approval.

How to Recognize an Approval Idol

The deep idol of approval is defined as an over-desire to please and to receive affirmation and acceptance through relationships. People who experience this excessive longing for approval provide services to others so that they will feel needed. They actively seek out situations where they will receive praise and positive feedback. They are susceptible to codependency. When the natural desire for approval becomes a demand to secure a sense of connection and affirmation, then it becomes someone's deep idol.

The approval idol has an others-focused orientation paired with an avoidance pattern. People who struggle with it seek to suppress a sense of worthlessness by appeasing and being affirmed by others.

	MASTERY PATTERNS	AVOIDANCE PATTERNS
OTHERS-FOCUSED PATTERNS	POWER	APPROVAL
SELF-FOCUSED PATTERNS	CONTROL	COMFORT

The dominant emotion of a heart ruled by any deep idol is fear. However, fear in the life of someone with an approval deep idol is particularly insidious because they fear the very object of their affection: others. As Ray mentioned earlier in our series, "People with a power idol are not afraid to compare themselves to others because they perceive themselves as better." Tina aptly described how people ruled by the desire to control "secure a sense of certainty, primarily by ... ensuring that everything in their environment is in order." Kate keenly observed that people with comfort idols have this "consistent drive toward compulsive or impulsive self-soothing behavior." With an approval deep idol, even though someone seeks connection with others to soothe their fears, they experience an implosion of fear stemming from the anticipation of rejection.

People who struggle with an approval deep idol are so afraid of rejection and displeasing others that they contort themselves into all sorts of shapes to be accepted. They often struggle with cowardice or they overpromise and under-deliver. They may say that they feel like a chameleon, constantly shifting themselves from one interaction to the next. They may

not even know their own likes or dislikes because they just go along with the preference of whoever they are with to avoid losing the other's favor. Their habits lead others to see them as warm, friendly, considerate, and nonaggressive, but they also prevent true intimacy in relationships. As a result, people do not really get to know them, which perpetuates their dominant emotions of loneliness, alienation, and insecurity.

Case Study for the Approval Idol

The first high priest of the children of Israel, Aaron, serves as our case study for the Approval Idol. At first glance, this might seem like a strange choice since Aaron served as Moses' voice before Pharaoh when Moses was afraid to speak. However, when we look at his story, we see how much of Aaron's choices were influenced by his fear of rejection by Moses as well as the children of Israel.

Aaron was born during Israel's enslavement in Egypt. He was a middle child and the oldest son. When he was a small child, a new Pharaoh feared that the Israelites would rise up against the Egyptians, so he ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill all of the Hebrew baby boys born (Exodus 1). Aaron's baby brother, Moses, was miraculously spared—the first in a long line of divine and dramatic experiences centered around Moses that Aaron witnessed. Growing up in a patriarchal society where birthright and blessing were passed to the firstborn son, we are mostly left to wonder how Aaron must have felt, living in the shadow of his more famous younger brother.

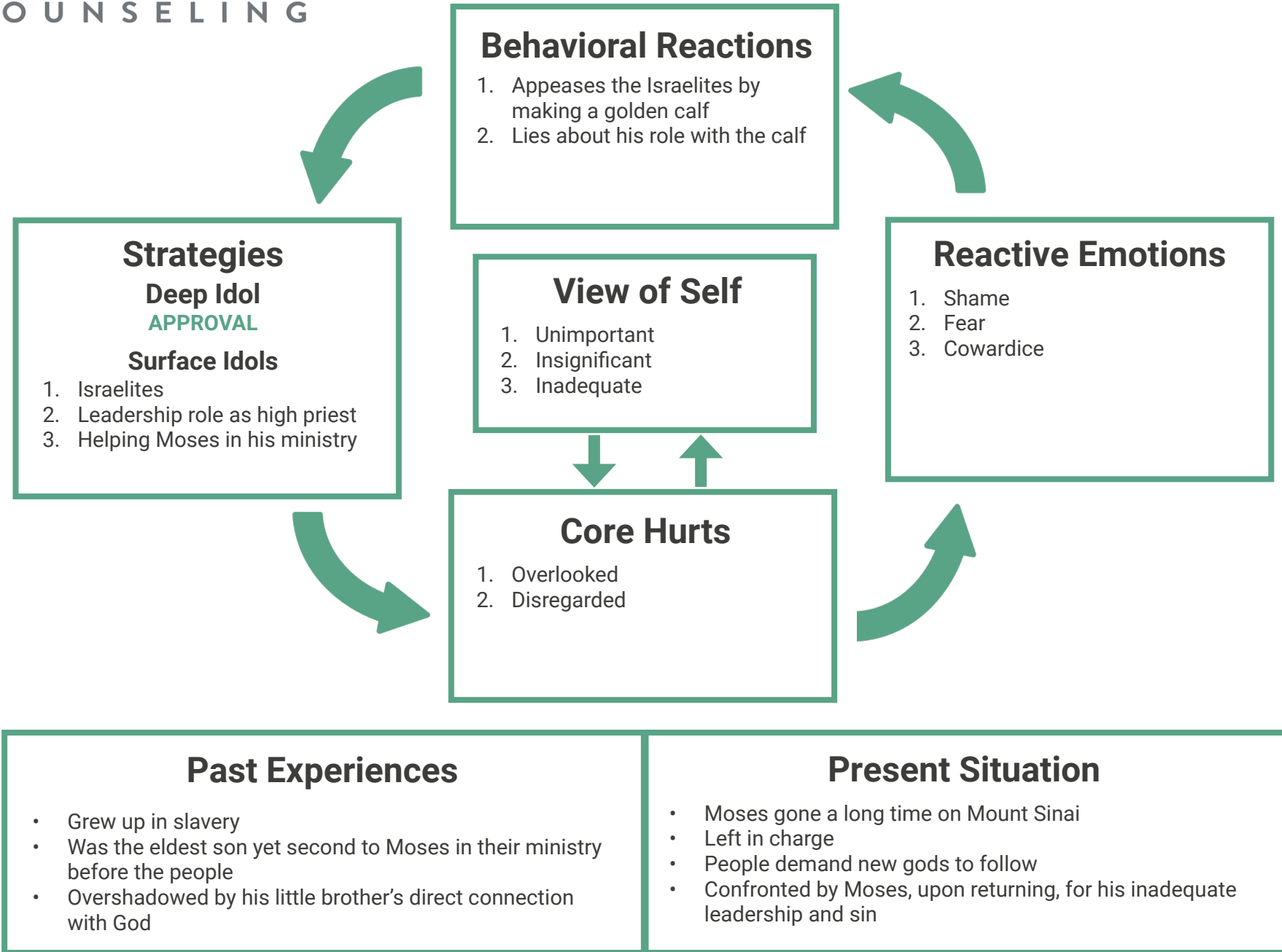
The most telling indicator of Aaron's life strategy is found in Exodus 32. Moses was on the top of Mount Sinai communing with God, while Aaron was left in charge of the Israelites at the mountain base. Moses took longer than they expected, so the people gathered around Aaron and asked him to make them some gods to lead them. In an attempt to please them, he collected gold and jewelry, made a golden calf, and built an altar for them to worship it. Aaron was so consumed by the desire to be affirmed in his leadership that he acquiesced to the people's demands and led them into idolatry.

When Moses returns, sees the idol and is furious, Aaron shapeshifts to avoid his brother's anger. To appear less culpable, he lies, saying he simply threw the gold the people gave him "into the fire—and out came this calf!" (Exodus 32:24)

We can organize Aaron's story and understand his System of Self-Redemption through the statement below and the diagram on the following page.

Aaron internalized a **view of self** that he is unimportant and insignificant, having experienced being overlooked and disregarded, despite being the firstborn son. To redeem this, he developed a **deep idol** of approval, seeking significance through helping his brother's ministry and his own leadership role as high priest. In Moses' absence, when the people clamored for a false god, Aaron gave into their desires and led the people into sin. When confronted by Moses and faced with his sin, Aaron's **core hurts** of being disregarded, and overlooked were triggered. Aaron felt ashamed and afraid of Moses' rejection, so he blamed the people and lied to minimize his responsibility and failure in leadership.

Aaron's System of Self-Redemption



Transformation of the Approval Idol and Goals in Counseling

Later on, as Aaron continues in his role of high priest, his people-pleasing tendencies appear to transform. In Leviticus 10:12-20, when Moses confronts him about a situation where he and two of his sons did not complete God's directives to the letter, instead of blaming or lying, Aaron explains his honest reasons, which were grounded in pleasing God rather than others. In this instance, "when Moses heard this, he was satisfied." (Leviticus 10:20) We can help those in our care on a similar transformational journey. Below are a few examples of helpful goals and exercises.

- 1. Relationship with God Goal Examples:** God can seem less accessible than other people, which can perpetuate their grab for human attention. We want to help them have personal encounters with God. 1) Learn to express your true feelings and thoughts to God without the fear of rejection. Recognize that God's acceptance is not based on your works or appearance. God sees all of you, nothing can be hidden from God and nothing needs to be. 2) Repent to God for overpromising, hiding yourself, and self-deprecating. 3) Progressively experience God's delight over you. Practice spiritual disciplines not to avoid rejection, but for greater connection with God.
- 2. Personal Goal Examples:** 1) Recognize your tendency to appease others to avoid being rejected. List a few times you over-promised because you were afraid of someone's reaction. As you think through the consequences, identify personal limitations and become more aware of your capacity. 2) Recall instances where you felt rejected or overlooked. How did it impact you? Grieve the wounds of rejection. 3) Identify and take ownership of your likes and dislikes. Start by making a list of pleasant food, interests, and activities. Over several weeks, participate in them one at a time and ask: do I actually like these things? What did I enjoy? Not enjoy?
- 3. Relational Goal Examples:** People who struggle with an approval idol may find the "ugly parts" of their story scary to name for themselves and experience with others. We want them to get exposure to sharing their true selves in relationship. 1) Take opportunities to share thoughts and feelings honestly with those you trust. 2) Exercise your assertive muscles by sharing your preferences. For example, commit to choosing and expressing your preference for a dinner spot or food once a week. 3) Seek feedback and practice accepting it. Work through feelings of rejection and victimization to decrease their impact over time. 4) Practice saying no.

In counseling, approval clients present as agreeable, but often lack follow through. They appear preoccupied with what the counselor feels about the things they share in the session. They frequently ask what they should do. They apologize often and seek empathy by being self-deprecating. As a result, we may experience the client as smothering and feel drained or cautious when interacting with them. While we want to give unconditional acceptance, we do not want to enable their self-redemptive cycle by becoming their new source of approval.

We need to help people who struggle with approval turn to God as their true source of lasting security, peace, love, and affirmation. We can also help them learn to be confident in their own skin, despite what we or others think. Like Aaron, they will grow as they change their focus from pleasing others to pleasing God.