



Still Needs Validation

Jessica is a licensed clinical social worker transitioning from working in corporate America to being an entrepreneur. But looking to others for approval and reassurance creates significant challenges. Stevon offers strategies for managing our need for outside validation.

Stevon Lewis: What's up, everybody? Welcome to the first episode of How to Talk to High Achievers About Anything. I'm Stevon Lewis, a licensed psychotherapist. In my private practice, I work with clients who have reached levels of excellence that often come with great personal and professional challenges. On this show, you'll meet people like them. People who are striving for something big, especially Black and brown folks who have risen by their own means and in spite of difficult circumstances. People facing obstacles, like we all do, from others or from within themselves. In each episode, you'll hear their stories in their own words, then I'll share feedback and offer strategies of how to navigate and overcome the roadblocks they face. We face. My goal is that along the way, together, we'll figure out how to achieve on our own terms.

Today, we welcome Jessica. Jessica is transitioning to being an entrepreneur. She's excited and motivated, but she finds herself constantly looking for external validation. This need for approval and reassurance is familiar to her, and is proving to be one of the biggest challenges in her professional journey. Let's get into it.

Jessica: My name is Jessica Gaddy Brown. I am a licensed independent clinical social worker based in Washington, DC and Virginia. I primarily serve Black women and women of color doing therapy, focusing on depression, trauma, and anxiety. I'm in a transition period. I'm going from being a full-time corporate America employee to now being an entrepreneur, and the transition into entrepreneurship was incredibly difficult, not because of understanding a business and running finances and being a team of one that does marketing, management, HR, all of that. The biggest barrier to me succeeding in my business was me.

I first started noticing this need for external validation probably the third or fourth grade in elementary school. I identify as biracial. My mother is Indonesian and my dad is Black American, and I am the youngest of three children. I would identify my mom as kind of being that tiger mom, where we had to play piano for 30 minutes a day. That was mandatory. We had to clean the house. We had very rigid rules. We

had to go to school, get good grades, we couldn't bring home anything less than a B. Me being the youngest, my siblings preceded me, and so I would come in with this expectation of, "Oh, you're a Gaddy, so we know you're going to get good grades. We know you're going to do well. We expect big things from you."

Jessica: But fourth grade was significant for me because that was the first time I had a Black teacher, and now I have this expectation to show up as the smart Black girl. So now I have the pressure from being the smart Asian, and now I have to be the smart Black girl who sets the tone and kind of represents that Black women are smart too. And that was such a heavy pressure to bear, but it was so normal for me because that was the culture of our household too. It was just always, "You are a high achiever. You're expected to do really great things. You're expected to get straight A's, you're expected to win. And we don't accept anything less."

There was a moment, growing up I loved to sing, kind of dance around the house and sing little songs, but I was always shamed for it. My mom would always shame me. She would say, "If you want to sing, then go sing in the church, but don't sing here." And so when I was maybe in the fourth or fifth grade, I tried out for the school choir. I made it to chamber choir, and I was incredibly excited about it, and the friends that I was with at the time, they didn't make it into chamber choir and so they kind of teased me for it. Like, "Oh, this nerd is going to be in chamber choir."

But then I also felt like I couldn't go home and be excited about it because I was already told that I can't sing in the home, and not only that, but I would get made fun of by my own siblings. Like, "You can't really sing. You're not good at this." And I had so much doubt in my own ability to sing. They're saying I don't have one, so I guess I don't have one, and why even try? The people around me that I love the most told me that I wasn't good, so I guess I'm not good. And I never did it. And I would say it's probably one of the biggest regrets that I have to this day, that I allowed external factors to influence me that much, that I didn't do something that I loved because of what other people said.

That belief now shows up everywhere for me. I go into situations feeling like if I'm not naturally good at this, I'm a high achiever, things are supposed to come easy for me, and if this is hard, then maybe it's not my lane. I don't give myself the opportunity to try. To make mistakes and to learn, because I was never allowed to make mistakes. So now transitioning and moving into a really big, scary place for me, just really magnified all of those insecurities I already had. Who am I to start a private practice in the middle of a pandemic? I'm not going to get any clients. Nobody knows about me. People don't believe in what I'm doing.

Jessica: I'm posting it on social media and I'm trying to generate all of this buzz and attention and people are not grabbing onto it, and I'm not getting views, I'm not getting subscriptions. I'm just telling myself, "Well, dang, maybe it really is wack. Maybe it does suck." And I lost all motivation. It wasn't until recently that I had to tell myself, "This is something that you love, you got to keep going, because this is for you. And regardless of not getting the likes, not getting the views, you have to stay in your lane because this is what's meaningful for you."

Lewis: Thank you so much, Jessica, for sharing your experience. There's a lot we can learn from what you're going through.

As I listened to Jessica, what stood out for me was that she was kind of put under a lot of pressure at an early age to really perform at a high level. Her siblings, who kind of preceded her, set a standard of excellence that she was expected to follow and mirror, and at home, there wasn't really any opportunity for her to just be. In my work with high achievers, I've come to find that they've had parents who were pretty critical of them, very corrective in their parenting, so that what they got was not a lot of praise for doing really well, but a lot of, I guess, feedback when they weren't performing very highly. So they've internalized that stuff to suggest that if I'm not being perfect or if I'm not really doing things at a very, very high level, then I must be failing.

I would suggest that maybe if you're having a feeling of self-doubt and you're getting pretty good outcomes, that maybe you should just look at why that exists. Why is it that I would feel anxious about how I'm performing if my performances are really, really good? When you ask yourself these sorts of probing questions, or we call in the field Socratic questioning, to really get to the bottom of why we are doing things, the metacognition of it, the thinking about our thinking, what you'll start to notice is the answers are you'll start to see that you are making connections between when this stuff started for you. Oftentimes, people didn't always think like this, and there's a pivotal moment of when they started to believe that maybe they don't have what it takes, or that they have to be really great or achieve at a really high level to be able to call themselves good.

So I'd get people to look at their language, really pay attention to that stuff. It's important. People will substitute the word perfection for good. And so they'll say, "Oh, I want to do a good job," and then when you ask them about that stuff, what they describe is doing a perfect job. And that's really a set up for failure actually, because what you've done is really made it very narrow for you to be successful and made it really easy for you to categorize whatever you do as unsuccessful or as a failure. The way I like to think about things, because I don't really like to live in places where things are so black and white, where they're absolutes, that there is some appropriateness to use some external validation. We can use that stuff for

confirmation that what we're doing is good, that if I'm trying to do a good job, then it would be helpful to have some level of outside objectivity to support that I did a good job.

Lewis: It's no different from being in school. I worked really hard, I studied, I took the test, and when I got my test back, it was an A. That's external validation, that supports that what I did or tried to do was a really good job. I think it's important for us to be aware that we can't only use, and I think that's the key, only use external validation in terms of determining our worth. It is a piece of information more than anything else. And so that we should be taking in evidence from various other places as well. Like I should be able to tell myself I feel good about the job I did. So if you're like Jessica, and you find yourself looking to external validation more than you think you ought to, or more than you would like to, I think it would be important for you to monitor how much you're comparing yourself. And let me be more specific, negatively comparing yourself to others or to the world around you.

Comparison is an okay thing. It lets us know how we're performing, where I am in comparison to others. That's not a terrible thing. What's bad is when we start to look at where others are performing, and when we judge ourselves more negatively to only focus on where we aren't mirroring or behaving in the same way as they are. The other thing would be to evaluate the evidence. Oftentimes, people ignore what they're getting in terms of their own results if they don't look like, or if they aren't celebrated in the same manner as maybe what other people are. So by that, I mean, if you are happy with the job you're doing, and the job that you're doing is keeping you moving forward in life, accomplishing things at a rate that you like, or that is okay or decent, then I don't know that you need to be so concerned about the speed at which it's going for you compared to others, or that nobody recognized it.

You should be able to look at your performance or take in evidence that I'm getting good outcomes, and say that, "I must be doing a good job as well. I don't need someone to tell me I did a good job." Usually, we look at people who are doing amazing things and we tell ourselves that they're pretty confident. Like, "They're so talented, how could they not recognize that? How would they ever doubt themselves?" I guess the biggest surprise to me is how frequently and often they do that, and I think we're often surprised, or at least I am when I hear someone is doing something amazing and I'm blown away by it, and they really aren't sure if it's that good. And it's like, this is amazing. Say you were on Oprah or something like that. Oprah doesn't let anybody on our show. The fact that you were on there says that you're doing something amazing. And they're like, "Ah, well, I don't know." That's that always kind of trips me out.

Lewis: I think that it's really important. Sometimes we often feel isolated and feel embarrassed that I'm doing good things and people are telling me I'm doing good things, but sometimes I don't know that myself. That's kind of normal for people that continue to do amazing things. If you think about it, high achievers are constantly looking to the next goal. There's a lot of restarting or starting over for them. If that's your pattern of behavior, you would expect to kind of feel like you don't know what you're doing more than the average person, because you're doing so many new and amazing things. Don't beat yourself up over that, and allow yourself the opportunity to say, "Hey, I'm constantly growing and it's expected, and some of that is normal," but also looking at the past of what you've accomplished and that evidence, and telling yourself that, "I got this too."

And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything. We have really big plans for our show and we want you to be a part of it. We want to hear about your successes and challenges, your sacrifices, the ways you've celebrated, and what's ahead as you grow. Send our producer, Virginia, an email, and we'll get your story on the show. She's at virginia@lwcstudios.com.

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