

The Comparison Trap

You know those people who have more than you—money, acclaim, looks, whatever? The spike of envy they trigger is natural, and social media is primed to amp it up. But in a world where followers and likes can seem like rock-solid proof of a person's worth, you don't have to take the bait.

By Rebecca Webber, published on November 7, 2017 - last reviewed on November 8, 2017



Judging from her [Facebook](#) page, Lisa appears to lead a charmed life. A middle-aged [advertising](#) executive, she takes pictures while strolling through London on a European vacation and choosing fresh produce at a farmers market closer to home. Those who spend time with her in person might also think her fortunate. She

has a lovely, grown daughter and a devoted husband, and she lives in a handsome New York apartment. An artist at heart, she revels in the city's cultural offerings and recently had a personal essay published in *The New York Times*.

Yet Lisa's internal view of her life is much darker. "I have difficult feelings about how I don't have what I want," she confesses. "I feel as if I've made the wrong choices and fallen short." Her sense of inadequacy flares especially when she compares herself to friends, colleagues, and people from her past—many of whom linger in her awareness because of social media. There's the college buddy who achieved her dream of becoming a performer and lives in a gorgeous home in a tony suburb. There's the junior high rival, now a globetrotting public [health](#) specialist. "He'll post, 'Leaving today for Liberia to help with the Ebola crisis,' and get dozens of comments like 'You're the most amazing person I've ever met!'" Lisa says. Her own posts seldom garner such enthusiasm.

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These kinds of comparisons drive home Lisa's ambivalence about her life choices, especially those related to her [career](#). She came to New York in her 20s with a passion for the stage but switched to advertising when she realized that being in theater "meant being a waitress for the rest of my life," she says. While she's [grateful](#) to earn a reliable salary and benefits, she hates her commute and finds her work grueling at times. "I regret taking the path I did because of where I've ended up," she says. "It really gnaws at me." When she's confronted with a peer's accomplishments, her own perceived failings pop out in sharp relief.

Measuring the self against others is a modus operandi of the human mind, and in some ways, it can be helpful. The inspiration you feel about someone else's achievements can rev up the [motivation](#) to improve your own life. The recognition that your abilities are a notch above someone else's can deliver a boost to your [self-esteem](#). **But comparisons can be harmful when they leave you feeling chronically inferior or depressed.**

That was the case well before the advent of social media—a turbo-charged, precision instrument for social comparison unlike anything in human history. Part of its uniqueness, researchers point out, is that it paints a heavily skewed picture of one's social universe. People are most likely to share peak experiences and flattering news about themselves—what University of Houston psychologist Mai-Ly Nguyen Steers calls "everyone else's highlights reel"—and tech companies, furthermore, use algorithms to prioritize that very information in social media feeds. The narrow, distorted slice of reality that is displayed on social media is almost perfectly constructed to make viewers feel deficient and discouraged.

"It creates a tsunami of excess information at warp speed, which could intensify the effects," says Princeton University psychologist Susan Fiske, who coined the shorthand "[envy](#) up, scorn down" to summarize the feelings provoked when we weigh our worth next to others.



Since comparison is a fundamental human impulse, there's really no way of shutting it down completely. But if we understand its origins, mechanisms, and what to watch out for, we may be able to mitigate the negative effects and amplify the good—both online and off.

Comparison and Its Discontents

It's easy to see how social contrast has helped people survive and thrive. A hunter-gatherer might have realized he was especially good at tracking prey, making him an indispensable guide for hunting parties, even as he left the spearing to those with better aim. Nowadays, a teenager appraising herself might recognize that she's a math whiz and aim for an engineering degree, leaving novelwriting to her more verbally proficient peers.

Social comparison theory was first put forth in 1954 by psychologist Leon Festinger, who hypothesized that we make comparisons as a way of evaluating ourselves. At its root, the impulse is connected to the instant judgments we make of other people—a key element of the brain's social-cognition network that can be traced to the evolutionary need to protect oneself and assess threats.

"Inevitably, we relate information about others to ourselves," says Thomas Mussweiler, a professor of organizational behavior at London Business School. "It's one of the most basic ways we develop an understanding of who we are, what we're good at, and what we're not so good at. It happens not only in a strategic manner, but also spontaneously and automatically whenever we are confronted with others. **Even when you're faced with a standard that's extreme, first you compare, then you correct for the outcomes.**"

So if you're walking down the street and a super fit 20-something jogs by, you might instantly assess that, by comparison, you're out of shape. Then you may note that you're at least two decades older than the jogger and juggling the care of twin toddlers with a full-time job. You recall that you don't have the same metabolism or time for exercise. It's apples to string beans. The negative comparison stings less than if you were looking at another working parent.

Our comparison-targets, as researchers refer to them, tend to be those we most closely identify with as well as those within our personal orbit. We don't usually fixate on how our lot in life corresponds to that of Elon Musk, or to that of the homeless man sprawled on the sidewalk, but rather to that of our family members, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. And the comparisons we feel most acutely relate to domains we value, such as appearance, relationships, wealth, professional achievement, or goals even more specific.

"An academic might learn that a colleague just got five journal articles accepted," says Steers. "To someone else, that's not a big deal. But the academic might think, I had only two accepted and got a bunch of rejections."



The effects of upward and downward comparisons depend on how we process the information. Self-improvement occurs when an upward comparison inspires us to try harder. Self-enhancement can take place when we note our similarities to someone superior (She and I went to the same college!) or play up our differences with someone inferior (He's not as dedicated to his

work as am I). **And the self is corroded when we compare upward only to note differences that feel insurmountable** (She's more beautiful than I'll ever be) or dwell on commonalities with someone we disdain (That loser is unemployed, too).

People aren't uniformly at risk of negative social comparison; unsurprisingly, **those with low self-esteem are more likely to feel that they don't stack up.** That sounds familiar to Lisa. "Self-esteem is a self-fulfilling prophecy," she says. "You project that lack of [confidence](#). I've always been overly self-critical—I think of myself as the hunchback of Madison Avenue."

The mental health of those prone to negative comparison can be seriously compromised as a result. "When we're reliant on others for our sense of self, only feeling good if we get positive feedback or markers of status, we're at risk for [depression](#)," says Mitch Prinstein, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina and the author of *Popular: The Power of Likeability in a Status-Obsessed World*.

But it's not all bad news. A 2015 study by researchers at the universities of Essex and Cambridge showed that the tendency to engage in comparison processes declines across the lifespan. One reason, they hypothesized, is that as we age, we're more likely to evaluate ourselves against the yardstick of our own past rather than the present state of others. Social comparison is generally most potent for the young.

"I always have a list of things I should do and be," says Samantha, a 24-year-old teacher in Oakland, California. "Where do these ideas come from? I've realized I spend the majority of my time comparing myself to my peers, colleagues, or family members, and that's where my expectations originate."

Samantha is already thriving in her career, with a master's degree and a [management](#) position, but nevertheless has doubts about her choices that often outweigh her pride in

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her accomplishments. "A lot of my peers have taken time off to travel or have done all different kinds of jobs or have lived in multiple places," she says. "I haven't done any of that. I got on this track, stayed very focused, and have been successful. But while doing that, I missed out on other opportunities."

What she sees on her friends' social media makes her feel lacking. "Heather spent a month traveling in Greece—I've never been further than Colorado. I have friends getting married and having babies. I'm stuck in between all of these people. I know I shouldn't compare myself. It's a sure way to be disappointed. But it's hard not to."

Lashed to Likes

Social media is like kerosene poured on the flame of social comparison, dramatically increasing the information about people that we're exposed to and forcing our minds to assess. In the past, we absorbed others' triumphs sporadically—the alumni bulletin would report a former classmate having made partner at the law firm or a neighbor would mention that his kid got into Harvard. Now such news is at our fingertips constantly, updating us about a greater range of people than we previously tracked, and we invite its sepia-filtered jolts of information into our commutes, our moments waiting in line for coffee, even our beds at 2 A.M.



The tendency to check social media in our downtime, when we're more likely to be self-reflective, can make for some ugly juxtapositions. You see someone tweet about his fabulous new job while you're eating another sad desk salad, or you gaze upon pictures of an acquaintance grinning beside her sexy boyfriend while you stew over a fight with your spouse. Moreover, social media seems to ascribe explicit valuations to people in ways that once seemed more vague. The number of Twitter followers, Instagram hearts, LinkedIn connections, or Facebook likes that another person garners compared to us can feel like rock-solid proof of position on some imagined ladder.

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There's a reason that teenagers in particular are prone to the feverish pursuit of valuation via social media. Prinstein says it's because the wide variety of regions in the brain that seek and deliver social rewards, including the part of the striatum called the nucleus accumbens, become supercharged at the adolescent transition. "Social rewards are basically activation of [dopamine](#) within the brain when we feel we're getting attention or positive feedback from peers," Prinstein says. "It can also come from comparing yourself to others, especially highly valued others, and seeing that you agree with them, they agree with you, or that you're similar to them. **It activates parts of the brain not unlike the way a drug does, which may be why adolescents become truly addicted to social media.**"

Most adults who grew up prior to the age of social media can recall having experienced the same innate drive for peer attention as teenagers. It's part of a natural process of reflected appraisal, wherein we develop a sense of who we are from how others view us. "That hypervigilance about how others see you is supposed to go away in adulthood," says Prinstein. "But social media has created this lifelong [adolescence](#). It makes it too easy to keep making comparisons in a very adolescent way."

Nikki, a 41-year-old who works in customer service, joined Facebook in 2009 at the urging of her sister and cousin. "They said, 'C'mon, get on board, you'll really like it!'" she recalls. At first, she did enjoy reconnecting with old friends, including a high school pal with whom she'd long ago lost touch. She spent an hour or so each night scrolling through the site to see what people were up to. Since many were, like herself, in their 30s, that was basically one thing: "Kids, kids, kids!" Nikki remembers. It's not that she doesn't like children—quite the opposite. "I'm the one going down the slide with them, playing hopscotch, rolling in the dirt," she says. But at the time, she and her husband were trying to conceive without success.

Nikki eventually discovered that her infertility was caused by endometriosis, which led to a hysterectomy. She would never give birth herself—a bitter reality that social media continued to throw in her face whenever she logged on. "Holidays were the worst—seeing everyone's kids with their new scooters and Hatchimals," she says. "I wanted to be able to give gifts to the kids I didn't have."

For Nikki, it's children. For others it's their ballooning belly, shaky finances, or stalled career. Crystal, a 37-year-old mother of four, takes extended breaks from social media to avoid the onslaught of picture-perfect homes and crafty creations. "When I go online, I feel like the worst mom ever," she says. "My kids' rooms don't look like that. I don't make cupcakes like that. I feel 10 times worse about myself and ruminate for hours."

Ironically, social media manages to kick us in our Achilles heel not by targeting it deliberately, but by being largely oblivious to it. Our online social networks tend to be

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broad and impersonal, with people posting information to wide swaths of viewers without necessarily thinking about who's watching. And because of the tendency to post only a carefully edited, cropped, and filtered account of our lives, Mussweiler says, "Facebook profiles paint very rosy pictures. If you still interacted with those people from high school, you would know about both the bright and dark sides."

Furthermore, social media can skew our preferred comparison domains, making us think we care about some things more than we really do. We weren't always concerned with how acquaintances decorated their kids' birthday cakes or the exotic locales where they vacationed. But when these social media cliches meet our self-reflective moments, over and over again, we suddenly start to consider our own inability to pipe a perfect rose or wonder why we haven't been to the Galapagos.

In the era before social media, Stephen, a 51-year-old academic librarian, might have been a contented homebody. While he took many solo trips in his 20s and 30s, he doesn't travel as much now that he's divorced and his daughter is grown. "It's very lonely to travel by yourself," he says. But vacation photos on social media make him doubt his rootedness. "Maybe I should be more [experiential](#), like that person who just went to Iceland," he says. On one level, the perception of others' lives could catalyze him. In reality, though, "It puts me in this questioning place. I'm reminded that I'm not living life to its fullest."



Screw the Scoreboard

When social media stirs up feelings of inadequacy, there are some obvious ways to tamp them back down. You can go for broke and delete apps or even deactivate accounts. You can ruthlessly prune your lists of friends, if only to avoid seeing posts and pictures from those who routinely make you feel bad. Or **you can use programs like Moment or StayFocused that tally how much time you're spending on certain sites and encourage or force you to log off.**

But it's ultimately how we use social media, not how much time we spend on it, that has the greatest bearing on how it makes us

feel. **"When we use social media just to passively view others' posts, our**

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happiness decreases," says Emma Seppaelae, science director of the Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education at Stanford University and the author of *The Happiness Track: How to Apply the Science of Happiness to Accelerate Your Success*. "We compare ourselves to others, get lost in their idealized lives, and forget to enjoy our own. But contributing, sharing, and interacting can have the opposite effect. Facebook presents countless opportunities to check in with loved ones and friends and be there for them if something seems off. Similarly, **social media is a place where you can express the need for support.**"

Even if you practice healthy social media behavior, comparison is unavoidable in life, and it's important to remember that it's not necessarily a bad thing. Even if it feels disappointing at the time, Mussweiler says, "the realization that you're not particularly good at something can be a helpful lesson." Accepting that you'll never be an astrophysicist, for instance, could encourage you to focus on talents that are more squarely within your reach.

Alternately, he says, "if others are better in a valued dimension, it could be inspiration for you to work on that thing." Fiske likes to refer to the Dutch term for benign envy, *benijden*, which means the motivation one reaps from another person's impressive example. "Some evidence suggests that positive social contagion is possible with social comparison," she says. "Other people's good news can make us feel good, too."

Ultimately, the greatest protection against falling into the comparison trap—and the best way to pull yourself out of it—is to develop and maintain a stable sense of self. That means cultivating your identity and self-esteem, nourishing relationships with people who see the real you, and staying attuned to your truest beliefs. "There's a tug of war," says Prinstein. "Do you seek to feel good about yourself through social rewards, or do you rely on more stable ways of recognizing who you are? A stable sense of self comes from thinking about who you are absent any feedback. What are your values and preferences in the absence of anybody knowing about them? Can you be proud of the person you are who isn't publicly posted?"

Nikki eventually decided to open up about her infertility online as well as in real life, which led to deepened friendships. She also looked beyond others' babies and realized that people she knew were undergoing different struggles, such as a cancer diagnosis, a foreclosed home, or the unexpected loss of a spouse. Grateful for her own good health, stable finances, and happy marriage, she realized that comparison can work both ways.

"I got through the 'feeling sorry for myself' phase, and now I have a healthier perspective," she says. "Everyone's life is different and no one's is perfect. I'm grateful for what I have."

You Do You: A How-To

1. Seek Connection, Not Comparison

"Limit time on social media, but more important is how that time is used," says Mitch Prinstein, a psychologist at the University of North Carolina. Instead of passive scrolling, send private messages, talk about shared experiences, seek genuine emotional connection, and use social media in general to "foster the kind of relationships known to be valuable offline."

2. Look Up, Just a Little

Decades of research suggest that upward comparison can provoke motivation and effort; children who compare themselves to peers who slightly outperform them have produced higher grades, for instance. Seeing that the path to improvement is attainable is key—you're better off comparing yourself to someone a rung or two above you than to someone at the very top of the ladder.

3. Count Your Blessings

If you focus on the good things in your life, you're less likely to obsess about what you lack. Loretta Breuning, the author of *Habits of a Happy Brain*, recommends engaging in "conscious downward comparison." For instance, Breuning says, compare yourself to your ancestors. "You don't have to drink water full of microbes. You don't have to tolerate violence on a daily basis. It'll remind you that despite some frustrations, you have a fabulous life."

4. Compare Yourself to...Yourself

Like the tendency among older people to measure themselves against their own past, Sonja Lyubormirsky, a psychologist at the University of California, Riverside and the author of *The How of Happiness* notes that "people who are happy use themselves for internal evaluation." It's not that they don't notice upward comparisons, she says, but they don't let that affect their self-esteem, and they stay focused on their own improvement. "A happy runner compares himself to his last run, not to others who are faster."

5. Pursue Upward-Joy

Based on his own Buddhist practice, San Francisco psychiatrist Ravi Chandra recommends using the social comparison impulse as a springboard for true self-growth. He recounts his own effort to do so in a new book, *Facebuddha: Transcendence in the Age of Social Networks!* "Instead of generating envy, which is a form of hostility, explore

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what you admire and appreciate about other people and cultivate joy for their success," Chandra says. "It can be a catalyst for personal growth."

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