



HOW TO STOP COMPARING YOURSELF TO OTHERS



Introduction

Here's a little test for you:

- Are you up to scratch?
- Do you look as good as the next guy (or girl)?
- How much do you earn in comparison to others?
- Do you wear the right clothes?
- Is X (notice who you think of!) more interesting than you?
- Are they smarter than you?
- Do you worry about saying the wrong thing?
- Do you fit in?

Did you notice how you felt when considering those questions?

If you often compare yourself to others, you're not alone. More than two thousand years ago the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle were already writing about how people compare themselves to others. Looking to other people to get a sense of our own 'worth' has been going on a long time.

More recently, social scientist Leon Festinger developed a theory of 'social comparisons' which basically states that there is a natural drive within people to evaluate their own attributes (looks, wealth, capabilities) by looking to others. After all, how do you know if you're any good?

Am I any good or not?

Other people are the mirrors where we can see ourselves. I can only know if I'm good at high jump, say, if I can jump higher than lots of other people. If I never come into contact with other jumpers, I can't know whether jumping seven feet is good, bad or indifferent.

Festinger also hypothesized that people compare themselves either *upwardly* to people of greater status (however determined) or *downwardly* to people less well off than themselves.

That is, we tend to believe we are *more like* the people we consider above us, and *less like* the people we consider below us.

It's hardly an objective view, of course, but our view of how favourably (or unfavourably) we compare to others is often a contributory factor in our level of self-esteem.

Use comparison to help yourself not hurt yourself

Social comparison isn't always or unequivocally a 'bad thing'. After all, we are social creatures who have survived down the ages by banding together, and a safe way to do this is to look to see how the other fellow is reacting and react the same way. People who *never* look to others for cues as to how to go on tend not to integrate particularly well.

Social comparison has a developmental role for us too. Teenage years, in particular, are often a time of almost desperate self-comparison to other teenagers, in a quest to find personal identity through group identity.

So being *able* to compare yourself to others is a tool for managing your integration in society and your personal development. It can be useful to inwardly compare yourself to others sometimes.

However, when social comparison becomes a *dominant* mode of functioning you are more likely to harm yourself with it than help yourself.

Not good enough: whose side are you on?

Chronic 'comparing' starts to be detrimental when it leaves us constantly feeling that we lack what everybody else seems to have. This type of comparing ourselves with others is neither scientific, nor objective. It is strongly biased and highly emotional.

People with low self-esteem when it comes to comparisons are already biased *against* themselves. This can be made even worse by the type of things people choose to compare (we'll come on to that in a moment). And it's not just how biased we are when comparing others to ourselves, but also *how often* we engage in it that can be detrimental.

A one-way ticket to misery

So far so not very surprising; some people compare themselves relatively little to others and some people compare themselves almost continuously. But constant comparison really is a one-way ticket to misery. Why?

Because, if you're looking for something, you'll find it. When you look hard enough, there is *always* someone bigger, stronger, richer, more beautiful/handsome, cleverer, happier (*at least outwardly*) than you think you are.

How do you compare yourself?

What should you measure when you compare yourself to others? People regularly fall into the trap of trying to compare quite unquantifiable things. Beauty, for instance, is famously 'in the eye of the beholder'.

What that means, spelt out, is that it is the person who is *looking* who decides that someone is beautiful, not the person who is being *looked at*.

A person's true charm to others may be quite hidden from themselves. We can make absolute comparisons about height or weight, but not about charm, charisma, how funny someone is, or even how 'cool' people are.

Mixing up the quantifiable with the unquantifiable is a central mistake of many chronic self-comparers.

Making comparisons: going off the scale

In the past, when people compared themselves to others (which they did), these 'others' generally consisted of people within their own circle, their own lived experience. It wouldn't have occurred to anyone to compare themselves with an unknown person from the other side of the world.

Modern mass media and the rise of the 'celebrity culture' means that we are now regularly bombarded with stories and images of people who seem to have it all.

We can now compare ourselves with people we are unlikely to ever meet. We have the social elite of the whole world to compare ourselves to. But chronic self-comparers go even further than that.

People who feel inferior to others (because of the way they compare themselves) don't limit their comparisons to supermodels, the super-rich, or Nobel Prize-winning scientists; they compare themselves unfavourably to *everybody*.

They over-estimate the attributes of others while *under*-estimating their own talents, looks, likability, you name it. People who have compared the confidence and self-esteem out of themselves in relation to others also often tend to carry what I call a 'negative inner phantom' which aggravates the situation.

The inner phantom

It's common to compare yourself to an inner idealized version of what you 'should' be. This phantom image is a blend of what *you feel society expects of you* and what *you feel you should have attained and achieved*.

Holding a vision of a 'better self' in your mind can serve a highly positive purpose, if it encourages you to behave in ways that will actually practically improve you. If my inner 'perfect me' is reasonably hardworking, honest, decent and so forth, then it could lead me somewhere useful.

An inner phantom which is the '*perfectionist me*' is something else again. It's more like an inner tyrant. A bully that will demand only absolute (*and often quite unattainable*) perfection.

When this inner bully is tolerated, you are always going to fall short when comparing yourself to a phantom like that. But how can you tell whether your personal inner phantom is a positive inspiration or a bullying tyrant?

How disappointed are you?

One way to start checking out the real nature of your own inner phantom is to consider how you feel about where you are in life.

I often hear people say things like: "I thought I'd be married by now, with children!" or: "At my time of life, I ought to be settled in a proper career!"

People somehow set themselves 'deadlines' for what they think they *should* have attained in life, and at what point. This is one reason why big birthdays (*usually with a zero on the end*) can seem so significant. But where do such notions come from?

Well, partly from society and partly perhaps from how we ourselves imagine adulthood when we are children. If, as a child, you strongly expected to be a parent or a movie star when you reached adulthood, then these expectations, if not realized, can hang around at the back of your mind for decades, causing a vague but pervasive sense of disappointment or personal failing. They may not even have been *conscious* expectations.

Live your life as you.

Life seldom turns out as expected, of course, so we clearly need to be able to adapt to what actually happens. Real confidence comes from being able to do this well. If we're unconsciously clinging to old expectations, it's that much harder to adapt.

To be flexible you may need to update some of those expectations. It's not that we *shouldn't* have expectations, but sometimes we just need to re-examine them a little.

And in a way, a life which always turned out as expected would be rather dull would it not? No surprises!

So, you can look into whether your inner phantom is giving you a hard time because you haven't fulfilled some hypothetical expectation or other.

Or maybe it's giving you grief because you *have* reached some goal, but your efforts are *not perfect, not up to scratch*. These are signs that you're under the sway of a tyrant.

Getting away from it all

Whether you're constantly comparing yourself with others (to your detriment), or constantly comparing yourself to a negative inner phantom (to your detriment), you can't have helped noticing how very exhausting and draining all this constant comparison is.

So, imagine, for a moment, what it would be like to spend one whole week living freely. A whole week of not comparing yourself to anyone, not even your inner phantom. Letting other people compare themselves to you if they so choose, but not caring about it one bit.

Imagine that... because therein - at least in part - lies your path towards much greater confidence in yourself. And how's this for an idea: comparing yourself less to others may actually help make for a better society, may even help the world.

Dare to be different

Dare to be different - or don't even dare that, just start thinking about 'fitting in' a lot less than the rest of us do! Looking for self-confidence by trying to be like others is like looking for your lost key *inside* your house when you lost it *outside*- on the grounds that there's more light to see by inside!

When you spend less energy and time on worrying about whether you 'match up' to others you become free to find *real* fulfilment in your life. Improved communication has many benefits for mankind, of course, but one drawback may be a serious decline in the number of people who are truly original.

The philosopher and politician, John Stuart Mill, already noted this threat as far back as 1869: "That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of our time."

So, if you want to cut down on self-comparisons and free yourself to be the individual you were meant to be, here's some suggestions for you.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Remember social comparison is just a tool. Useful <i>sometimes</i>. Watch yourself and be aware when you're doing it.• Also remember that we all have a duty to be ourselves in life. The day you stop finding differences between yourself and others is the day you stop being unique.• Limit the amount of time you are exposed to 'groupthink' situations such as watching TV or reading magazines or newspapers. We can all be brainwashed through exposure to stereotypes.• Be wary of perfectionism. High standards are great, but you may have constructed an inner perfectionist phantom. Constantly comparing yourself to this perfect inner construct will always leave you feeling wanting. You are human, thank goodness! | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Distinguish between quantifiable attributes such as height, wealth, weight, and so on and vaguer, less quantifiable ones such as charm, humour and even beauty.• Notice times in your day when you relax and find it easier to just be yourself. Remember this feeling and rehearse having this feeling more often. Strongly and repeatedly imagine being freer for more of your time.• Lastly, remember you owe it to the world to be your individual self. It's a waste of time and energy to attempt to live what is essentially someone else's life. |
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If you have questions about panic attacks or are seeking solutions, please contact me via email: steve@iotherapy.net