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You Should Probably Compare Yourself To Others More, Not Less

Comparing yourself to others is frowned upon because it leads to envy, but even that can be productive.



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BY DAVID MAYER

Your colleague just won a big award. At a meeting your manager praises your coworker for making yet another huge sale. Your friend posts a photo on Facebook with her photogenic spouse, gorgeous kids, and happy dog in a moment of beachside bliss. Ugh, how annoying

You know what you *should* do: Send a congratulatory email. Smile and clap. Hit the “like” button. But you don’t. Because if you’re honest with yourself, sometimes others’ successes make you feel terrible.

The good news is that this is a normal ([just ask Morrissey](#))—so much so that, according to psychologist [Josh Gressel](#), there’s a word for “envy” in every language. The emotion even [has an evolutionary basis](#).

The bad news is that social convention—from the Tenth Commandment through Teddy Roosevelt (“Comparison is the thief of joy”) [—frowns on measuring ourselves against others’ gains](#). But according to a growing body of research, it may not be such a bad thing. In fact, you should probably be doing more of it. Here’s why.

HOW OTHERS’ WINS CAN HELP YOU

Recognizing feelings of envy helps us learn what’s important to us.

To be sure, some research suggests that making social comparisons to others who seem better off (referred to as [“upward social comparisons”](#)) is associated with negative emotions. University of Michigan psychologist [Ethan Kross](#) and colleagues have linked Facebook to decreases in well-being for this reason, and positive psychologist [Michelle Gielan](#) likewise calls this “the downside of social media.”

But envy—of either the digital or analog varieties—isn’t all bad. In fact, it can be instructive. Recognizing feelings of envy [helps us learn what’s important to us](#); it can be a useful source of growth and even provide clarity about our future goals

[Research demonstrates](#) that “benign envy” (to want what someone else has) can lead to increases in motivation, learning, and performance. Adam Grant, most recently the author of [Originals](#) has noted (riffing on Roosevelt) “that comparing ourselves to others may be the thief of joy, but it can be a powerful motivator.”

What’s more, the social expectation known as the [“norm of reciprocity”](#) suggests that celebrating others’ accomplishments makes it more likely that others will rejoice in your successes. This can be a virtuous circle with concrete upsides to your career. Mutually reveling in one another’s good news can help your reputation and improve your personal relationships, both important ingredients in moving ahead professionally.

Celebrating others’ good news matters *a lot* to *them*. [Research by Shelly Gable and Harry Reis](#) demonstrates that the responses people receive to good news have important implications on their emotions and well-being. Those

responses must be both constructive *and* emphatic for sharing to be of value—a “good job” offered in passing may not cut it. But these findings extend beyond the workplace to include [sharing good news our personal lives](#), too.

To some extent this is old news, with scientists only now clueing in to much older traditions. According to Buddhist teaching, the emotion of *mudita*, the pleasure that comes from delighting in other people’s well-being, has important benefits for one’s *own* peace and happiness. The Dalai Lama refers to this as “enlightened self-interest,” the idea that celebrating others also benefits ourselves.

HOW TO MAKE SOCIAL COMPARISON WORK FOR YOU

Given the value of social comparisons, it’s probably better to embrace than avoid them. Here are a few research-backed ways to do that while taking advantage of *mudita* without indulging in the most destructive kind of envy.

1. Acknowledge your emotion. It may be uncomfortable to admit to yourself that someone else’s success makes you feel bad, psychologist Raj Raghunathan argues that [acceptance of jealousy](#) is the first step to overcoming it. You can’t pretend you don’t feel it.

2. Affirm your own values and worth. A [review of research](#) by Geoff Cohen and David Sherman demonstrates the power of thinking and writing about the things you most deeply care about. Research by Tanya Menon and Leigh Thompson found in a [study of benign envy at work](#) that affirming one’s values led to more learning and less perceived threat. This isn’t something most of us do—it might sound like [a Stuart Smalley bit](#) from an earlier era of *Saturday Night Live*—there’s a large body of research showing that simply affirming your best aspects can lead to less self-protective defenses and more personal growth.

Remind yourself that others’ performance often doesn’t have any direct, tangible impact on your own future success.

3. Remember success isn’t a zero-sum game. [Avishalom Tor and Steve Garcia find](#) that we don’t respond competitively to social comparison when others’ successes have no bearing on our own relative ranking. Similarly, [Abraham Tesser’s “Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model”](#) shows that people can bask in others’ glory as long as the dimension of success is less relevant to them personally. So it’s useful to remind yourself that others’

performance often doesn't have any direct, tangible impact on your own future success, especially if it's in a different domain.

4. Treat it as a challenge, not a threat. [Research by Jim Blascovich and colleagues](#) suggests that people tend to see a difficult situation as either a challenge or a threat. Challenges lead to growth and future success; threats don't. So instead of feeling fear and anxiety, think of it as an opportunity to learn and be inspired.

5. Fake it 'til you make it. Even if your initial reaction is envy, *act* as if you're brimming with joy. There are ample models in social psychology, from [self-fulfilling prophecy](#)– to [self-perception](#) theory, that suggest taking the moral high ground can help you embrace it in reality and begin acting more in line with your values.

6. Get perspective. Remind yourself that someone else's good news doesn't detract from the good in *your* life. As Robert Emmons writes in his book [Thanks!](#), [expressing gratitude](#) for the good things helps you become more resilient and prosocial to others.

So yes, comparing ourselves to others does lead to envy. But that can still be productive. The [Dalai Lama may know better](#) than Morrissey on this one: "The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater is our own sense of well-being."

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