

# Self-reflection theme: Modern life



## The Stress of Social Comparison and How to Limit Comparing Yourself to Others

By [Elizabeth Scott, PhD](#) Updated on August 11, 2023 Reviewed by [David Susman, PhD](#)

Comparing ourselves to each other is a natural human behavior that has evolved to help us live together as a cohesive group, to help us learn from one another, and to keep us from falling too far behind our potential.

It also helps us to define ourselves, to gauge how we're doing in various areas of life based on what appears to be possible, and can even seem to help us feel better about ourselves in many cases. It can also be stressful, however, and it can make us more competitive than we need to be.

### We Start Comparing Ourselves to Each Other From a Young Age

Social comparison is a common human dynamic that first rears its head when children are very small. Think of the toddlers who get upset or throw a tantrum whenever they see another kid with a new toy that they don't have.

Social comparison gains momentum in elementary school when kids follow fads. To be considered "cool" you have to be watching the latest tv show or wearing the best clothes.

Then, in high school, the world of brand names, popular music, cliques, and [FOMO](#) is when social comparison really takes hold, and it never quite goes away as people focus on getting into the best colleges, landing the best jobs, marrying someone their friends might envy, and building a picture-perfect life with them.

Adults face many of the same social comparison pressures as teens to one degree or another: comparing looks, social status, material items, and even relationships.

### There Are Two Types of Social Comparison

Researchers have identified [two types of social comparison](#):<sup>1</sup>

1. **Upward social comparison:** Here we look at people we feel are better off than we are in an attempt to become inspired and more hopeful. For instance, you might feel inspired by your boss. Maybe they've really excelled in their career and you admire their leadership style and their accomplishments. You compare yourself to try and make changes so that you can get on their level one day. You might even be envious or jealous of their success.
2. **Downward social comparison:** Here we look at people who we feel are worse off than we are, in an effort to feel better about ourselves and our situation. This sounds pretty mean, but everyone has done it at some point or another. Let's say you're tight on money for the weekend and you're upset that you won't be able to go see a live band with your friends. Then, if you happen to see someone who is homeless, you might begin to feel slightly better about your own financial situation because it allows you to put your life in a new perspective.

### Your Self-Esteem Level Influences How Well You Deal With Social Comparison

Some of the factors that affect whether social comparisons are helpful or harmful are our [self-esteem](#), the stressors we already have in our lives, and whether we're making upward or downward social comparisons.

People who have higher self-esteem and fewer stressors in their lives tend to fare better with social comparisons. They also might be less inclined to compare themselves to other people altogether.

Those with lower self-esteem, or who experience greater threats or stress in their lives, tend to use downward comparisons more often.<sup>2</sup> This can lift their mood, but not as much as it does in those who are already doing better in these areas.

Upward social comparisons—comparing ourselves to those who are better off as a way to get inspired can make us feel just that—inspired. People embarking on a particular career path might follow their favorite journalists on Instagram to stay motivated to achieve their own goals.

People with lower self-esteem or who have recently experienced a career setback can feel worse when they make upward social comparisons, experiencing both a drop in mood and often an increase in stress.

### **Comparisons Create So Much Stress**

Social comparison comes in many forms. Basically, whenever people gather, we have a tendency to compare ourselves and usually form some sort of hierarchy, formal or unspoken. Clubs have officers who are elected and awards that are given to those who excel, and most people are aware of the more influential members.

Moms' groups compare their babies' milestones and their relationships both in an effort to be sure their kids are progressing and to measure their own success as moms. From the high achievers to those looking for friends and fun, we tend to compare.

### **Both Social Comparison Types Can Lead to Stress**

These comparisons can stress us, however, as we may find ourselves lacking when we make upward social comparisons. We may come off as conceited or competitive when we make downward social comparisons, which can create stress in our relationships.

### **Social Media Plays a Major Role in Social Comparison**

Many people find that social media exacerbates social comparison in all the worst ways, making many of us feel worse about ourselves.

Social media takes social comparison to a whole new level. We see who is doing what we're not, and we may become stressed wondering if we're doing enough, earning enough, and enjoying life enough. We compare our regular lives with other people's curated best memories.

We don't know whether they're just posting their highlights and the best photos out of dozens, or if they're really sharing casual and spontaneous events as they happen.

Either way, many people find that social media exacerbates social comparison in all the worst ways, making many of us feel worse about ourselves and lowering our self-esteem.<sup>3</sup>

While these feelings can sometimes be automatic, we don't need to let our instincts toward social comparison be an important part of who we are. We can minimize these tendencies and counteract them with a little effort so we feel [less stressed](#) by them. The first step, however, is being aware of social comparison in ourselves and in others.

Is Comparing Yourself to Other People Always a Bad Thing? Not Always.

While a little surprising, there *can* be a positive aspect to competitiveness and social comparison.

For instance, when our friends are doing well, they inspire us to be our best as well, which is the upside of upward social comparison. (This is particularly true if they share the secrets of their success).

We often do better if we're striving to keep up with a role model or successful friend, and we can make ourselves better by supporting others.

And when we compare ourselves to others who have it worse than us, we tend to appreciate what we have and show more gratitude and empathy. We often do better if we're striving to keep up with a role model or successful friend, and we can make ourselves better by supporting others.

### **Avoiding Embarrassment or Failure Can Motivate People**

Even the desire to avoid the embarrassment of failure can be a good motivator. The main difference between friendly competition and the competition of "frenemies" is the supportiveness factor. Frenemies seem to delight in one-upmanship and the failure of others. True friends, on the other hand, motivate you to succeed, delight in your successes, and help keep you going in tough times.

### **How to Free Yourself From Social Comparison**

If you find yourself in the trap of social comparison, feeling somewhat hooked on feelings of superiority from downward social comparison, or beating yourself up when you make upward social comparisons, it's important to get out of this mental trap.

**Here are some simple ways you can train your brain to care less about what others are doing or thinking.**

**Find Role Models:** If you're working to keep up with role models, you can gain the benefits of their success (personal motivation, seeing what works for them, etc.) without adding the element of competitiveness to your own relationships. So, it might be better to follow an influencer or celebrity rather than look to your closest friend as a role model as that could inadvertently put a strain on your relationship.

**Create a Support Circle:** To help avoid harmful comparisons, try building a [circle of supportive people](#) and focus on them. This can be a group of friends who share a common goal. You can start an exercise group or another group built around a goal that's either formal or informal.

If you're into [creative writing](#) or film, you can find a group of people who are also interested in the creative arts and get together from time to time and critique each other's work.

**Find an Accountability Partner:** You can also find an accountability partner to keep each other motivated. Rather than a group, you and your accountability partner can check in with each other on your goals, celebrate together, and help motivate one another to stick with the plan.

This is particularly helpful because it provides both of you with individualized moral support, a bit of added responsibility to stick with the plan (or you'll be letting your partner and yourself down), and it makes celebrating small victories a little more fun.

**Count Your Blessings:** When you find yourself making comparisons, try to "even the score" in your head. If you're feeling envious of someone else's victory, remind yourself of your own triumphs and strengths. If you're feeling judgmental, remind yourself of the strengths of the other person and the special things they bring to the table.

**Keep a Gratitude Journal:** It also helps to maintain an ongoing [gratitude journal](#) so you stay in the frame of mind of counting your blessings rather than what you lack. This also helps you to stay focused on your own life and not the lives of others.

**Cultivate Altruism:** There are many [benefits of altruism](#), so cultivating it as a habitual thought pattern can be even better for you than for those who benefit from your kindness. See what small things you can do for your friends and strangers. Practice [loving-kindness meditation](#). Be your best self and you won't feel as prone to compare.

### **Moment of gratitude: Social comparison**

The article mentions how social comparison can be positive in our lives, like when we find role models or supportive people in our lives. Think of one person in your life that helped you in that way, for example by inspiring

you or supporting you. It can even be someone at school or work that you do not know very well but who you find supportive and positive.

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### Moment of self-reflection: Social comparison

Overall, do you do more positive or negative social comparison? What impact do you think it has on your own well-being?

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## Harvard Business Review

### Advertising Makes Us Unhappy

by [Nicole Torres](#) From the Magazine (January–February 2020)

The University of Warwick’s Andrew Oswald and his team compared survey data on the life satisfaction of more than 900,000 citizens of 27 European countries from 1980 to 2011 with data on annual advertising spending in those nations over the same period. The researchers found an inverse connection between the two. The higher a country’s ad spend was in one year, the less satisfied its citizens were a year or two later. Their conclusion: Advertising makes us unhappy.

#### HBR: Professor Oswald, defend your research.

**Oswald:** We did find a significant negative relationship. When you look at changes in national happiness each year and changes in ad spending that year or a few years earlier—and you hold other factors like GDP and unemployment constant—there is a link. This suggests that when advertisers pour money into a country, the result is diminished well-being for the people living there.



**HBR: What prompted you to investigate this?**

Colleagues and I have been studying human happiness for 30 years now, and recently my focus turned to national happiness. What are the characteristics of a happy country? What are the forces that mold one? What explains the ups and downs? I'd never looked at advertising before, but I met a researcher who was collecting data on it for a different reason, and it seemed to me that we should combine forces. Like a lot of people in Western society, I can't help noticing the increasing amount of ads we're bombarded with. For me, it was natural to wonder whether it might create dissatisfaction in our culture: How is your happiness and mine shaped by what we see, hear, and read? I think it's rather intuitive that lots of ads would make us less happy. In a sense they're trying to generate dissatisfaction—stirring up your desires so that you spend more on goods and services to ease that feeling. I appreciate, of course, that the world's corporate advertisers and marketing firms won't like hearing me say that.

**Yeah, I don't think they'd agree that that is the goal of advertising.**

Their line is that advertising is trying to expose the public to new and exciting things to buy, and their task is to simply provide information, and in that way they raise human well-being. But the alternative argument, which goes back to Thorstein Veblen and others, is that exposing people to a lot of advertising raises their aspirations—and makes them feel that their own lives, achievements, belongings, and experiences are inadequate. This study supports the negative view, not the positive one.

**So ads make us want what we don't or can't have?**

The idea here is a very old one: Before I can decide how happy I am, I have to look over my shoulder, consciously or subconsciously, and see how other people are doing. Many of my feelings about my income, my car, and my house are molded by my next-door neighbor's income, car, and house. That's just part of being human: worrying about relative status. But we know from lots of research that making social comparisons can be harmful to us emotionally, and advertising prompts us to measure ourselves against others. If I see an ad for a fancy new car, it makes me think about my ordinary one, which might make me feel bad. If I see this \$10,000 watch and then look at my watch, which I probably paid about \$150 for, I might think, "Maybe there's something wrong with me." And of course nations are just agglomerations of individuals. Now, in this paper we don't prove that the dissatisfaction is coming from relative comparisons, but we suspect that's what happening.

**How do you know advertising is actually causing us to be unhappy? That this isn't correlational?**

First, we controlled for lots of other influences on happiness. Second, we looked at increases or drops in advertising in a given year and showed that they successfully predicted a rise or fall in national happiness in ensuing years. Third, we did lots of statistical checks to make sure the empirical linkages were strong. Fourth, people sometimes forget that causality always requires there to be a correlation somewhere. But your question is constantly in my mind as a researcher.

**But doesn't this apply just to materialistic people? A lot of people understand that you can't buy happiness.**

Yes, some might see that watch ad and say, "Why are men buying \$10,000 watches when they carry a mobile phone with the time on it?" Or respond to a car ad by congratulating themselves for not buying a gas-guzzler that's expensive to service and destroys the environment. Our research shows that the really big influences on human happiness are things like health, intimate relationships, being employed, social safety nets, not being in midlife (there really is a crisis for many), and so on. Buying that watch or car can help make us feel slightly happier, but deep down it has a keeping-up-with-the-Joneses status effect. And when everybody buys the same thing the effect is nullified. That's partly why advertising hurts group happiness; there's only so much status to go around.

**This reminds me of how social media makes us miserable because we compare ourselves with influencers.**

Yes. There is research bubbling up through the journals about this. For example, one longitudinal [study](#) from 2017 found that using Facebook was associated with compromised well-being. My hunch is that over the next few decades this will become a really serious policy issue.

### **Has any other research linked advertising with reduced well-being?**

The short answer is no. Although there's some interesting literature on how children are affected by advertising in terms of their eating and health, there is surprisingly little on this topic. We don't know of a paper close to ours. Perhaps there is one, but nobody's written to us about it.

### **How did you measure national advertising and national happiness?**

The advertising metric is straightforward accounting. We have data on the amount spent in different countries on different forms of ads: newspaper, radio, TV, and so on. Measuring happiness or life satisfaction is more complicated, but we now know how to do so reliably. In this study we have a large sample, close to a million people, and we decided to choose one of the most long-standing simple measures of human well-being, which is the survey question "How satisfied are you with your life?" People used a scale to answer it, and then we aggregated those answers for each country.

### **And you're sure the lower life satisfaction isn't due to the other things that you just mentioned affect it, like age and marital status?**

Those are among the things we controlled for in addition to the unemployment rate and GDP. We also controlled for the underlying starting levels of happiness and advertising in countries, because we wanted to do a fair comparison with the same baseline. And year by year we controlled for what you might call shocks—think of oil-price shocks—that have a common set of consequences across the whole of Europe.

### **How big is the negative effect of ads?**

Our analysis shows that if you doubled advertising spending, it would result in a 3% drop in life satisfaction. That's about half the drop in life satisfaction you'd see in a person who had gotten divorced or about one-third the drop you'd see in someone who'd become unemployed. We have a lot of experience working out how people are affected by bad life events, and advertising has sizable consequences even when compared with them.

### **Is there anything we can do about this?**

It's worth wondering whether Western society has done the right thing by allowing large levels of advertising, almost unregulated, as though it were inevitable. Given these patterns, it seems like something we might want to think about. But we haven't got any political punch line in this paper. We don't recommend any policy.

### **What if everyone just downloaded ad blockers for the web and fast-forwarded through commercials on TV? Would that help?**

I try to be an evenhanded statistical researcher, but I can see how you might look at our study and think, "Maybe it's sensible for me to opt out of some of these ads."

## **Moment of self-reflection: Advertising**

If you could have a life free of advertising, would you prefer that? If so, what would you pay to be free from advertising? Do you currently take measures to reduce advertising in your life? Can you think of other measures you can take to do that? Do you think you should do them?

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## Part 2: Video (take notes of “important” sentences as needed)

Johann Hari on connection and what we’ve lost, with Matt D’Avella (0:00-12:30)



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### **Moment of gratitude: Connection**

You’ve heard Johann Hari mention some of the solutions to modern loneliness and depression. There was the city gardening story, for example. What is one thing in your life that has some elements of those positive solutions? One thing that shows meaning, or human connection, etc.?

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## Johann Hari on prof. Kasser and junk values, with Matt D'Avella (12:30-end)



### Journaling on modern life

Today, you learned about four dangers of modern life: comparison, advertising, isolation, and junk values. Imagine yourself in the future, fifteen years from now. You now have one or two kids. They're very young, and you want them to be happy. How do you think you will want to protect your children from the downsides of modern life? Will you do with your children exactly what you had growing up? Or will you try to guide them in a different direction? Based on that, do you think you should continue exactly as you do, or should you also make changes in your own current life?