Solved Episode 09

Your Social Comparison Guide

Solved

with Mark Manson

Introduction

In the glittering halls of 18th-century Vienna, Antonio Salieri stood as a symbol of success. He was a celebrated composer, the imperial court's favorite, and a man whose music commanded respect from the cultural elite of Europe. His work had earned him prestige, wealth, and influence — everything a person of his time might have dreamed of. And yet, all of it frayed in one man's shadow.
That man was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Mozart was younger, wilder, and undeniably brilliant. His genius was raw and uncontainable, a kind of divine chaos that defied the careful order of Salieri's craft. As Mozart rose in fame and acclaim, Salieri was consumed in comparison. Despite his accomplishments, he could not stop measuring himself against this boy wonder who seemed to violate every rule Salieri had spent his life mastering.

In his despair, Salieri is said to have cried out, "Why has God chosen him over me?" And though we may never know exactly what he felt in those moments, the emotional logic is familiar to anyone who has ever looked at someone else's success and seen it as their own inadequacy. Salieri's story has nothing to do with personal failure or inadequacy. It is a story about how comparison can distort even the most meaningful lives.

This guide begins in the raw, uncomfortable reality that being human means constantly measuring ourselves against others. We compare our bodies, our salaries, our relationships, our children, our vacations, and our follower counts. Sometimes this inspires us. Often, it drains us. And increasingly, it defines us. But what if the problem is not that we compare, but how we compare?

Comparison is one of the most ancient and powerful features of the human mind. It is a tool forged in evolutionary history, a reflex wired deep into our social and emotional systems. It helps us make sense of who we are, what we value, and where we stand. But in the wrong

hands — or the wrong environments — it becomes a tyrant. One that warps our sense of self, distorts our perception of others, and turns admiration into self-doubt.

This guide explores comparison from every angle: biological, philosophical, psychological, technological, and practical. It unpacks why we compare, what it does to us, and how we can begin to do it differently. Each chapter addresses a different dimension of this deeply human impulse.

- **Chapter 1** traces the evolutionary roots of comparison and shows how it emerged as a survival mechanism, hardwired into the social brain.
- **Chapter 2** turns to the philosophers — from Confucius to Aristotle to Sartre — who grappled with comparison not as pathology, but as a moral and existential problem.
- **Chapter 3** dives into psychology, revealing how the mind processes comparison emotionally, cognitively, and even neurologically — and what makes it either motivational or destructive.
- **Chapter 4** examines how digital technology, especially social media, has hijacked and supercharged the comparison instinct, transforming our mental health in the process.
- **Chapter 5** offers practical, evidence-based strategies to reframe comparison as a force for clarity, growth, and alignment — with ourselves, not against others.

You'll find no false promises here — no suggestions to simply "stop comparing" or "detach from the opinions of others." Those instincts run far too deep for that. Instead, you'll learn how to recognize comparison when it strikes, how to understand the story it's telling you, and how to

change that story into something more honest, more humane, and more useful.

If you have ever felt like Salieri — successful but unsatisfied, seen but invisible, admired but aching — you are not alone. We all live with the shadows of other people's lives cast across our own. The work is not to escape those shadows. It's to learn how to stand beside them, not beneath them.

Comparison is not going away. But with the right perspective, it doesn't have to ruin you. It can reveal you.

This PDF is meant as a companion to the *Solved* podcast episode on Social Comparison, but if you want even more resources to help you figure out how to stop comparing yourself to others, you'll find them inside ***The Solved Membership*** — my membership where we turn each *Solved* topic into real-world progress.
When you join, you'll get access to our Social Comparison Action Guide, packed with practical tools you can try immediately to reframe comparison and stay grounded, as well as a 5-Day Comparison Reset Challenge, a short, self-guided process to quiet the noise and refocus your energy.

You can't stop comparison from happening, but you can train your mind to respond to it with clarity, confidence, and a grounded sense of self. And you can do that with the help of a supportive, like-minded community inside ***The Solved Membership***.

Learn more and join *The Solved Membership* here.

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Chapter 1: Evolutionary Roots of Comparison

To be human is to measure. We assess how we are doing — not just in relation to our own goals, but almost reflexively in comparison with others. It is often a quiet calculation, happening in the background as we scroll through social media, listen to colleagues at work, or catch up with old friends. This is not a product of modern technology, although digital life has certainly intensified it. Instead, this need to compare is ancient, embedded in our species' cognitive architecture. It evolved long before smartphones, job titles, or bank accounts — before language itself.

Understanding why comparison is so powerful requires a journey back into our evolutionary past — through primate social hierarchies, brain reward systems, and the emotions that regulate our place in the social order. What emerges is a portrait of comparison not as a character flaw, but as a functional adaptation that once helped us survive and now often leaves us conflicted.

The Primate Origins: Why Status Tracking Evolved

In the ancestral environments where our cognitive hardware evolved, the ability to track one's place in the social order was essential. Early human groups were small, highly interdependent, and structured by informal but powerful status hierarchies. In such settings, access to food, safety, reproductive partners, and social support was often influenced by one's rank or reputation.

Among primates, social hierarchies help organize group life. Higher-ranking individuals often have better access to resources, while those lower in status are more vulnerable to exclusion or aggression.

Evolutionary Roots of Comparison

For primates — and by extension, humans — status is not about abstract prestige. It has direct consequences for survival and reproduction. Studies of chimpanzees, baboons, and macaques show that individuals who understand and navigate social hierarchies effectively tend to live longer and produce more offspring.[1]

This evolutionary pressure favored the development of cognitive systems capable of monitoring social standing. These systems had to be subtle and dynamic, sensitive to changes in alliances, dominance behaviors, and shifts in group mood. The result was an internal "status tracker" — a network of psychological and neurobiological mechanisms attuned to cues of rank, reputation, and relational value.

The size of the human neocortex — the part of the brain associated with complex thought — correlates strongly with the size of our social groups, a pattern anthropologist Robin Dunbar called the social brain hypothesis. Human groups are uniquely complex. We track not only individual relationships but also the relationships between others. We infer intentions, model reputations, and anticipate reactions.[2] Comparison became one of the engines driving that system, helping us model others' behavior and assess our own by contrast.

Michael Chance's work in the 1960s described how primates, including humans, build "attention structures" — mental maps of who commands respect and who does not.[3]

Think of this as an internal organogram that updates in real time. When you walk into a meeting, you instinctively notice who speaks first, whose jokes get laughs, who gets interrupted, and who stays quiet. You're

[1] Sapolsky, R. M. (2005). The influence of social hierarchy on primate health. *Science*, 308(5722), 648–652.
[2] Dunbar R. I. (2009). The social brain hypothesis and its implications for social evolution. *Annals of human biology*, *36*(5), 562–572.
[3] Chance, M. R. A. (1967). Attention structure as the basis of primate rank orders. *Man*, 2(4), 503–518.

building an attention structure — mapping influence and calculating your own position within it.

These maps inform behavior: who we defer to, who we challenge, and who we align with. Getting these judgments right can mean the difference between safety and danger, inclusion and exile. In short, comparison evolved as a form of social navigation — a way to determine where we stand, what we can expect, and how we should behave.

The Brain's Sensitivity to Relative Outcomes

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence for the evolutionary roots of comparison lies in how the brain processes reward. It turns out that our brains do not evaluate outcomes in absolute terms. Instead, they evaluate them relatively.

A classic study by Fliessbach and colleagues demonstrated this effect using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).[4] Participants were given monetary rewards while being scanned. Crucially, they were told what others were receiving. When participants received the same amount of money, their brain activity differed depending on how much others received. Specifically, the ventral striatum — a key reward center — showed more activation when participants received *more* than others and less activation when they received *less*, even if the absolute amount was unchanged.

Imagine earning $50 for completing a task. You'd likely feel pleased — until you learn your colleague earned $100 for the same task. Suddenly, that $50 feels like an insult. Your bank account hasn't changed, but your satisfaction has plummeted.

[4] Fliessbach, K., Weber, B., Trautner, P., Dohmen, T., Sunde, U., Elger, C. E., & Falk, A. (2007). Social comparison affects reward-related brain activity in the human ventral striatum. *Science*, 318(5854), 1305–1308.

This suggests that the brain is wired not just for reward, but for *relative* reward. What matters is not how much we have, but how much we have compared to others. This sensitivity likely evolved to help us detect shifts in status and adjust behavior accordingly. But in modern life, it also explains why a promotion can feel hollow if a peer gets a bigger one, or why a successful career can feel inadequate when measured against a college friend's IPO.

Neuroscientific research reveals another layer of integration: areas of the brain involved in self-evaluation, such as the medial prefrontal cortex, are also active when we think about others.[5] The same neural real estate that helps us understand ourselves is used to compare ourselves to others. When you think "I'm good at public speaking," your medial prefrontal cortex lights up. When you think "but Sarah is better," the same region activates. This overlap suggests that social comparison is not an optional add-on to self-awareness — it is integral to it.

Emotions as Status Regulators

Comparison doesn't just influence cognition; it shapes emotion. Psychologist Paul Gilbert has argued that many human emotions evolved to help regulate social rank.[6]

Pride, for example, signals that we have gained status or approval. It motivates continued investment in behaviors that elevate social standing. Shame, on the other hand, functions as a warning: we have violated norms or fallen in rank. It prompts withdrawal, apology, or corrective action. Envy alerts us to desired traits in others, spurring either competition or imitation. Guilt motivates reparative action, preserving reputation and social bonds.

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[5] Denny, B. T., Kober, H., Wager, T. D., & Ochsner, K. N. (2012). A meta-analysis of functional neuroimaging studies of self and other judgments reveals a spatial gradient for mentalizing in mPFC. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience,* 24(8), 1742–1752.

[6] Gilbert, P. (2001). Evolution and social anxiety: The role of attraction, social competition, and social hierarchies. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America,* 24(4), 723–751.

These emotions are not just psychological. They are embodied. Shame can cause blushing, gaze aversion, or physical withdrawal. Pride can straighten posture and increase assertiveness. These physiological responses reinforce the social signals they are meant to send.

The case of envy deserves special attention because not all envy functions the same way.
Psychologists distinguish between two types:[7]

- **Malicious envy:** This emerges when we perceive someone's advantage as undeserved or when we feel powerless to achieve similar success. It's accompanied by hostility, resentment, and *"schadenfreude"* — pleasure at another's misfortune.
  - Research shows that malicious envy activates avoidance motivation: rather than striving to improve, we want to tear the other person down. We might gossip about them, dismiss their achievements as "luck," or secretly hope they fail. Malicious envy corrodes relationships and rarely leads to self-improvement.

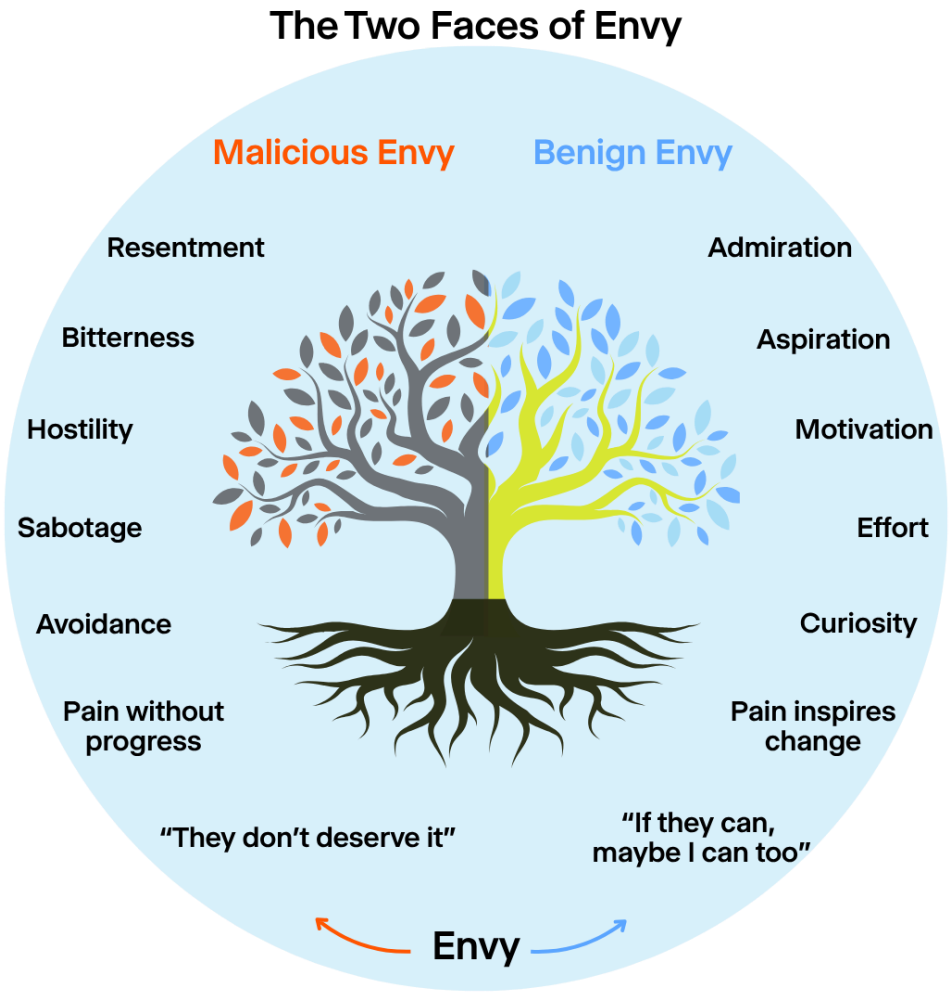
- **Benign envy:** This arises when we perceive someone's success as deserved and attainable. Rather than hostility, we feel admiration mixed with motivation. We think, "If they can do it, maybe I can too." Benign envy activates approach motivation — it makes us want to work harder, learn new skills, or seek mentorship.
  - Studies show that people experiencing benign envy are more likely to invest effort in self-improvement and less likely to engage in social sabotage. When we see a colleague give a brilliant presentation, benign envy might prompt us to practice more; malicious envy might prompt us to criticize their slides.

The difference matters because it reveals that comparison itself is not the problem — it's how we interpret and respond to it. The same

[7] Van de Ven, N., Zeelenberg, M., & Pieters, R. (2009). Leveling up and down: The experiences of benign and malicious envy. *Emotion*, 9(3), 419–429.

observation (“they have something I want”) can lead to growth or bitterness depending on our mindset and perceived agency.

This system is elegant — and ruthless. It promotes behaviors that maintain social cohesion but punishes those that risk exclusion. In ancestral environments, this made sense. Being excluded from a group could mean death. Today, however, it means that minor social slights or perceived inadequacies can trigger disproportionately intense emotional reactions.



The Hierarchy Trap in a Flattened World

One of the paradoxes of modern life is that while we live in ostensibly egalitarian societies, we are more obsessed with status than ever. This isn't a contradiction, but a consequence. As Paul Bloom has noted, even societies that strive for equality remain deeply preoccupied with social rank (as cited in Manson, 2024).[8] In fact, attempts to flatten hierarchies often result in more intense surveillance of status signals.[9]

Egalitarian hunter-gatherer groups, for example, are known to punish individuals who appear to be getting "too big." They enforce humility not by eliminating comparison but by sharpening it. In modern contexts, this manifests in subtle forms of social policing: criticizing someone for "humblebragging" on social media, questioning whether someone's success is "authentic," mocking displays of ambition as "cringe," or dismissing achievements with "must be nice." We've replaced overt hierarchies with covert ones, where status is constantly negotiated through micro-judgments about authenticity, taste, and moral virtue. The drive to equalize status does not eliminate hierarchy — it changes its currency.

What's more, digital technology has globalized the comparison field. In the past, we compared ourselves to neighbors, colleagues, or community members. Today, we compare ourselves to influencers, celebrities, and distant peers whose lives are curated for admiration. This expands the reference group to an unmanageable scale and makes the hierarchy feel infinite. No matter how successful we are, someone is always doing better — at least online.

[8] Manson, M. (Host). (2024). *6 Things to Stop Doing in 2024 for a Better Life*. [Youtube Video]. In SOLVED with Mark Manson.
[9] Bloom, P. (2013). *Just babies: The origins of good and evil*. Crown.

When the System Backfires

The evolutionary logic of comparison is clear: it helps us track status, avoid risk, and pursue opportunity. But like many adaptations, it becomes maladaptive when the environment changes faster than biology can keep up.

Chronic exposure to upward comparison creates physiological stress. Research by Robert Sapolsky shows that being consistently low in a social hierarchy is associated with higher levels of cortisol, inflammation, and stress-related illness.[10] In primates, low-status individuals are more vulnerable to disease and early death. In humans, the same pattern holds: people who feel consistently "one-down" show increased risk for depression, anxiety, and physical illness.

Moreover, comparison-driven emotions can become self-reinforcing. A person who feels shame may withdraw socially, leading to isolation, and exacerbating feelings of inferiority. Envy, if unregulated, can corrode relationships and sabotage collaboration. Pride, when detached from real achievement, can lead to narcissism or fragile self-worth. The same system that once promoted group cohesion can now generate fragmentation and distress.

From Threat to Tool: Reinterpreting Comparison

Despite its pitfalls, comparison remains a tool — a mechanism that can be used well or poorly. The comparison instinct is here to stay. The question is not whether we will compare — but whether we will do so with wisdom.

[10] Sapolsky, R. M. (2005). The influence of social hierarchy on primate health. *Science*, 308(5722), 648–652.

Evolutionary Roots of Comparison

At its best, comparison can inspire. When we see someone else succeed, and we interpret that success as attainable, it motivates us to try harder, learn more, or persist through difficulty.

Psychologists call this the role model effect: exposure to successful peers can raise our sense of what's possible, especially when we perceive meaningful similarity between ourselves and them.[11]

A first-generation college student seeing another first-generation student graduate with honors experiences benign envy — a fusion of admiration and motivation that says "this path is real." Similarly, comparison can clarify values. If we find ourselves repeatedly comparing ourselves in a particular domain — looks, money, influence — it may reveal what we truly care about or where we feel most insecure. This self-knowledge can inform growth, therapy, or shifts in life priorities.

Rather than suppress the comparison instinct, we can use it to ask better questions:

- Why does this matter to me?
- What am I really seeking?
- Is this comparison aligned with my values?

The challenge today is not to eliminate comparison but to manage it. To understand when it is serving us and when it is not. To develop awareness of its triggers, reframe its meanings, and redirect its energy toward constructive ends. Social comparison is not a bug in the system — it is one of the oldest programs running in the human brain, a reflex honed over millennia to help us navigate group life. With awareness, it can become less of a trap and more of a compass.

[11] Lockwood, P., Sadler, P., Fyman, K., & Tuck, S. (2005). To do or not to do: Using positive and negative role models to harness motivation. *Social Cognition*, *23*(4), 422–448.

The instinct to compare isn't a flaw. It's a feature, and it is one of the oldest ones wired into the human brain.

The truth is, we can't help but measure ourselves against others. Yet often that measurement can turn toxic.

It's not just about envy or insecurity. Comparison evolved to help us navigate complex social hierarchies and track our standing in the group. But in today's world, where our "group" includes millions of strangers online, that ancient wiring can backfire hard.

That's why it's crucial to understand the biology, psychology, and emotional patterns behind comparison, and learn practical tools so you can stop spiraling, break the envy/shame cycle, and turn comparison into motivation rather than misery.

Inside ***The Solved Membership***, we take this even further. You'll get additional resources and tools to help you reset your "status tracker," reflect on what actually matters to you, and build an identity rooted in your values — not in someone else's highlight reel.

"Delving through all this stuff at 51 years of age is cathartic and I'm sad that I wasn't exposed to much of this material at a younger age." – Brid

Learn more about *The Solved Membership* and how you can join here.

Chapter 2: Philosophy and Social Comparison

Comparison may feel like a modern affliction, sharpened by social media and market economies, but our struggle with it is far older than Instagram. Long before psychology emerged as a scientific discipline, philosophers were already wrestling with the human impulse to measure ourselves against others. They recognized comparison not just as a psychological quirk or a social strategy, but as a central concern of ethics, identity, and even metaphysics.

The philosophical tradition does not offer a singular answer to the problem of comparison. Instead, it provides a range of responses, often depending on the tradition's view of human nature and the good life. In some philosophies, comparison is seen as a moral hazard, a distraction from the pursuit of virtue or truth. In others, it is embraced as a tool for learning and refinement. Still others view it as an inescapable existential condition — something we cannot avoid, but which we can choose to reinterpret.

This chapter explores five philosophical traditions — Confucianism, Buddhism, Aristotelian ethics, Stoicism, and existentialism — that have deeply considered the nature of social comparison. Though vastly different in historical and cultural context, each provides insight into how we might engage with comparison more deliberately, more constructively, and more compassionately.

The Confucian Moral Apprenticeship

Confucius lived during a time of political upheaval and moral uncertainty in ancient China, around the 6th century BCE. His central concern was how individuals could cultivate moral character in a fragmented world. For Confucius, comparison was not something to

eliminate or escape, but something to harness — a process of self-refinement through observation of others.

In *The Analects*, Confucius writes, "When I walk with two others, there is always something to learn: I choose what is good in them and follow it, and what is not good and change it in myself".[12] We improve ourselves by seeing both virtue and vice in others. Their strengths illuminate our deficiencies; their flaws sharpen our discernment.

This model reframes comparison from a zero-sum game to a relational process. Rather than feeling diminished by others' excellence, we are called to be attentive — to borrow their strengths and avoid their mistakes. In Confucian ethics, this is part of the lifelong journey of *self-cultivation*, or *xiū shēn*, which views the individual not as an isolated entity but as fundamentally embedded in a network of relationships. One becomes human *with* others, not in spite of them.

Unlike modern meritocracies, which often reward competitive comparison, Confucianism emphasizes reciprocal learning. Comparison is not used to establish superiority, but to harmonize with others and align oneself with moral ideals. In this sense, it is not a threat to dignity but a path to it.

The Buddhist Craving and Compassion

The Buddha, a contemporary of Confucius, approached the problem of comparison from a very different angle. In the Buddhist framework, the suffering caused by comparison is a symptom of a deeper problem: *tanha*, or craving. We crave not only pleasure and permanence, but also validation, status, and superiority. Comparison is one of the mind's many strategies for securing a stable, preferable self-image. But because all things are impermanent, this strategy is doomed to fail.

[12] Confucius. (1998). *The analects* (D. C. Lau, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 497 B.C.E.)

The Buddha's insight was that the more we chase positive evaluations from others — or dwell on the success of those around us — the more we become entangled in *dukkha*, or suffering. This is not because others are better or more fortunate, but because the very act of comparison fuels desire, attachment, and aversion. Even favorable comparisons are fragile; they depend on others remaining below us.

Yet Buddhism does not advocate apathy or detachment from human connection. Instead, it introduces a counterforce to envy and craving: *mudita*, or sympathetic joy. Mudita is the practice of rejoicing in others' happiness and success, without feeling threatened or diminished by it. Instead of thinking, "Why not me?" the practitioner of mudita thinks, "I'm glad it's you."[13]

This may sound like wishful thinking, but neuroscience supports its efficacy. Compassion practices, including loving-kindness meditation, have been shown to activate reward centers in the brain while reducing activity in areas associated with social pain and envy.[14] In one study, participants who trained in compassion for just a few weeks showed increased positive affect and reduced hostility toward others, even in competitive contexts.

In the Buddhist model, then, comparison is not denied — it is acknowledged as a habitual tendency of the mind. But the practitioner is trained to observe this tendency without clinging to it. Over time, through meditation and ethical discipline, comparison becomes less a source of suffering and more a prompt for compassion, humility, and interconnectedness.

Aristotle's Aspiration and Emulation

[13] Bodhi, B. (2005). *In the Buddha's words: An anthology of discourses from the Pali Canon*. Wisdom Publications.
[14] Klimecki, O. M., Leiberg, S., Lamm, C., & Singer, T. (2013). Functional neural plasticity and associated changes in positive affect after compassion training. *Cerebral Cortex*, 24(7), 1664–1671.

Aristotle, writing in 4th-century BCE Greece, did not propose a theory of comparison per se. But his moral psychology is suffused with it. For Aristotle, human beings are not born virtuous. We become virtuous by observing and emulating virtuous people. In this sense, comparison is foundational to moral development.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes that a friend is "another self".[15] In observing the actions and character of a friend, we see our own virtues or vices reflected back to us. This relational mirroring is not only useful — it is necessary for becoming a person of practical wisdom, or *phronesis*. We come to understand courage, temperance, or generosity not through abstraction, but by witnessing how others embody these traits.

Perhaps Aristotle's clearest engagement with comparison comes in his discussion of *phthonos* (envy) and *zēlos* (emulation) in the *Rhetoric*. He distinguishes between the pain of seeing someone else succeed and the admiration that motivates us to rise to their level. Envy, he writes, is a vice — it seeks to deprive others of their good. Emulation, by contrast, is a kind of moral discomfort that spurs improvement. It acknowledges others' excellence and seeks to imitate it.

Aristotle's ideal person, the *megalopsychos*, or great-souled individual, values honor but is not dependent on it. They are aware of their worth and accept recognition when it is deserved, but do not chase it for its own sake. For such a person, comparison serves as calibration, not competition. It refines character without dominating it.

What distinguishes Aristotle's view is his faith in the educability of emotion. He does not assume that comparison inevitably leads to envy. With the right upbringing, habits, and community, it can become a tool

[15] Aristotle. (1984). *The complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation* (J. Barnes, Ed.). Princeton University Press.

for ethical aspiration. We can feel pain at another's success — and still choose to be inspired by it.

Stoicism and the Rejection of Externals

If Aristotle saw comparison as a potentially virtuous force, the Stoics were far more wary. For them, comparison with others was one of the surest paths to anxiety and moral failure — not because others were unworthy of emulation, but because most comparisons focus on externals: wealth, fame, beauty, and social approval.

The Stoics, particularly Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, argued that only virtue is truly within our control. Everything else — health, reputation, possessions — is contingent on fortune, not character. Therefore, to measure ourselves by external benchmarks is to enslave ourselves to things we cannot govern.

Epictetus called envy "a disease of the soul" and warned his students against seeking validation from others. In his *Discourses*, he wrote: "If you want to be free, do not wish for anything that depends on others".[16] Seneca, writing from the heart of imperial Rome, confessed that even he, a seasoned philosopher, felt envy toward those who lived with fewer obligations. He saw this as a sign of weakness, a moment of forgetting that true contentment comes from self-rule, not social standing.[17]

Marcus Aurelius, in his *Meditations*, repeatedly reminds himself to ignore what others think and to focus instead on living according to nature and reason. He urges himself to "waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one".[18]

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[16] Epictetus. (2008). *Discourses and selected writings* (R. Dobbin, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published ca. 108 C.E.)
[17] Seneca, L. A. (1969). *Letters from a Stoic (R. Campbell, Trans.)*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published ca. 65 C.E.)
[18] Aurelius, M. (2003). *Meditations* (G. Hays, Trans.). Modern Library. (Original work published ca. 170-180 C.E.)

The Stoic strategy is not to suppress comparison but to change the standard of measurement. Instead of asking, "How do I rank compared to others?" the Stoic asks, "Am I living in accordance with my values?" This shift transforms comparison from a status game into a discipline of integrity.

The Existential Gaze on the Politics of Comparison

Jean-Paul Sartre, writing in postwar France, offered perhaps the most unsettling view of comparison. For Sartre, the act of being looked at by another person is not neutral — it is existentially threatening. In *Being and Nothingness*, he describes "the Look" (*le regard*) as the moment we become aware of ourselves as an object in someone else's consciousness.[19] We are no longer just living; we are *being seen*.

This encounter introduces a rupture in selfhood. We begin to see ourselves as the other sees us. Our identity is no longer our own but filtered through their expectations, judgments, and desires. Comparison, then, is not just something we do — it is something that is *done to us*. And it is inescapable.

Simone de Beauvoir, building on Sartre's ideas, argued that women have historically been forced into the position of "the Other" in a male-dominated world. In *The Second Sex*, she wrote that "he is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other".[20] This means that women are conditioned to see themselves through the male gaze, to evaluate their worth based on how they appear to others. Comparison, in this context, is not merely personal — it is political.

Yet existentialism does not end in despair. It insists on freedom. While we cannot escape the gaze of others, we can choose how to respond to

[19] Sartre, J.-P. (1992). *Being and Nothingness* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Washington Square Press. (Original work published 1943)
[20] Beauvoir, S. de. (2011). *The Second Sex* (C. Borde & S. Malovany-Chevallier, Trans.). Vintage. (Original work published 1949)

it. Sartre argued that we are condemned to be free — we cannot avoid making choices, even in the face of objectification. De Beauvoir extended this into a feminist ethics: the task is not to abolish comparison but to reclaim authorship over one's life.

In existential thought, comparison becomes a crucible. It confronts us with the tension between subject and object, between authenticity and conformity. But it also reveals the possibility of resistance — of defining ourselves not by how others see us, but by how we choose to be.

Wisdom as the Right Use of Comparison

Each of these traditions offers a different orientation to comparison. Confucius sees it as a path to mutual moral growth. The Buddha views it as a source of craving and suffering to be transformed through compassion. Aristotle recognizes its motivational power and channels it into the pursuit of virtue. The Stoics reject it as a distraction from what truly matters. And the existentialists see it as a structural feature of human consciousness — inescapable, but open to reinterpretation.

What they share is a refusal to treat comparison as trivial. They understand that the desire to measure ourselves against others is not just a social reflex — it is a window into our values, vulnerabilities, and aspirations. Comparison can corrode or refine, diminish or elevate. The difference lies in how we use it.

We cannot live without mirrors. But we can choose which ones we stand in front of. And we can learn to look not with envy or fear, but with honesty, curiosity, and the courage to become what we most admire.

Chapter 3: The Psychology of Comparison

Why is it that the same accomplishment can feel either triumphant or hollow, depending on who else is in the room? A raise, a promotion, even personal milestones can feel diminished if someone nearby achieves something grander. At other times, simply seeing someone else fail or struggle can offer a strange sense of comfort — even if our own situation hasn't changed at all. These emotional fluctuations are not irrational; they are part of a deeply embedded psychological system. Social comparison is not just something we do; it is something our minds are structured to do.

Building on the evolutionary foundation described earlier, psychology helps us understand how social comparison operates not only as a survival mechanism but as a deeply felt emotional experience, one that shapes self-esteem, identity, motivation, and even neural processing. This chapter explores how psychologists have studied social comparison over the last century, revealing its dynamics, consequences, and the tools we can use to work with it more skillfully.

The Birth of Social Comparison Theory

The modern psychological study of comparison begins with the work of Leon Festinger, whose 1954 theory of social comparison provided the first systematic framework for understanding why people measure themselves against others. According to Festinger, individuals have a basic drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities, but in many domains — like intelligence, morality, or creativity — objective standards are hard to come by. So people turn to each other as reference points.[21]

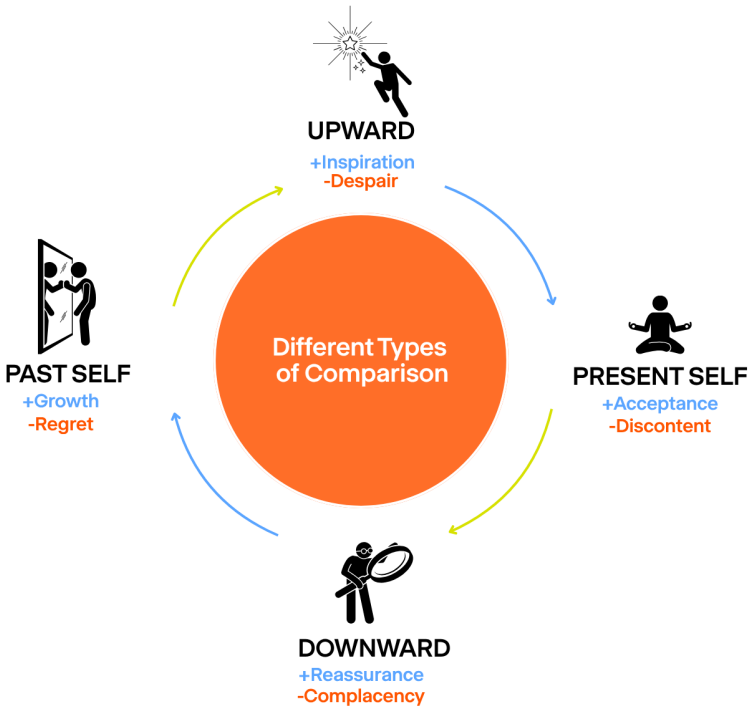
Festinger proposed that social comparison serves two main functions: **self-evaluation and self-enhancement.** We compare ourselves to

[21] Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2), 117–140.

assess our accuracy and competence, especially when we lack clear internal benchmarks. We also compare ourselves to feel better — or worse — depending on the direction of the comparison.

- **Upward comparisons**, where we evaluate ourselves against those who seem better off, can inspire growth but also provoke envy or despair.

- **Downward comparisons**, where we look at those worse off than us, can provide reassurance or self-protection, but may also promote complacency.



Importantly, Festinger emphasized that comparison is a normal, even necessary, part of how people navigate the social world. He did not treat it as inherently negative. But his framework opened the door to a wide range of research that would explore when and how comparison helps — or hurts.

From Information to Identity

Subsequent psychological theories built on Festinger's foundation by showing that comparison is not only about assessing skills or traits. It is also about constructing and protecting the self. Abraham Tesser's self-evaluation maintenance model offered one of the most influential refinements. According to Tesser, our reactions to others' successes are shaped by two key factors: how close we are to the person, and how relevant the domain of comparison is to our self-concept.[22]

If someone we are close to excels in a domain that is important to us — such as intelligence, attractiveness, or creativity — we are likely to feel threatened. Their success challenges our self-definition. But if they excel in an area we don't care about, we may feel genuine pride or joy for them. Conversely, we may feel superior when someone close fails at something that's central to their identity but irrelevant to ours.

This model helps explain why sibling rivalry, peer competition, and professional envy can feel so emotionally charged. These are not just assessments of skill — they are judgments about worth and identity. They raise difficult questions: Who am I if someone else is better at something I've built my identity around? What happens to my sense of self when a friend becomes more attractive, successful, or admired?

Admiration and the Emotional Fork

In Chapter 1, we explored how benign and malicious envy emerge from our evolutionary status-tracking systems. But what determines which path we take at the moment? Recent psychological research reveals that the fork in the road isn't random — it's shaped by specific cognitive appraisals that happen in milliseconds.

[22] Tesser, A. (1988). Toward a self-evaluation maintenance model of social behavior. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 21, 181–227.

Not all upward comparison leads to envy. **The critical variable is perceived attainability.** When people believe that they, too, could achieve similar outcomes with effort or opportunity, upward comparison is more likely to produce admiration or benign envy — what we might call "aspirational comparison." When the success seems unachievable (due to factors like innate talent, luck, or structural advantages we lack) the same comparison triggers malicious envy.[23] We experience the other person's success not as a roadmap but as evidence of our own inadequacy.

Admiration — though it arises from the same upward focus — is generally positive. It implies appreciation of others' qualities without the sense of threat. But admiration is fragile; if we become fixated on the gap between ourselves and the admired other, it can quickly revert to envy.

This instability explains why we might celebrate a friend's promotion one moment and feel bitter about it the next — not because our values changed, but because our attention shifted from their qualities ("they really earned this") to our relative position ("why not me?").

Psychological studies have confirmed that the emotional outcome of comparison depends not just on the person being compared to, but on the internal narrative we attach to the comparison.[24]

Do we see their success as a ceiling or a proof of concept? As a judgment on our worth or as data about what's possible? The comparison itself is neutral — the story we tell about it determines whether it inspires or corrodes.

[23] Van de Ven, N., Zeelenberg, M., & Pieters, R. (2009). Leveling up and down: The experiences of benign and malicious envy. *Emotion*, 9(3), 419–429.
[24] Smith, R. H. (2000). Assimilative and contrastive emotional reactions to upward and downward social comparisons. In J. Suls & L. Wheeler (Eds.), *Handbook of social comparison: Theory and research* (pp. 173–200). Springer.

The Neuroscience of Comparison

In recent years, neuroscientific research has offered compelling evidence that social comparison is not only a psychological process but a biological one. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies show that the brain's reward circuitry — especially the ventral striatum — is sensitive to relative outcomes. A person may receive a reward, but the brain responds more positively when that reward is better than what others received, and less positively when it is worse.[25]

Moreover, the anterior cingulate cortex and the insula — regions associated with emotional pain, threat detection, and social exclusion — are activated during upward social comparisons that make individuals feel inferior.[26,27] In other words, social comparison can trigger the same brain regions as physical pain.

This convergence of reward and threat circuits helps explain why comparison is such a potent emotional experience. It offers both the potential for pleasure and the risk of pain, depending on where we perceive ourselves to land in the social hierarchy. It also suggests why comparison can be addictive: it engages systems of anticipation, reward, and evaluation that drive attention and behavior.

The Role of Self-Esteem

A crucial moderating factor in how people experience comparison is self-esteem. Individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to interpret upward comparison as informative rather than threatening.

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[25] Fliessbach, K., Weber, B., Trautner, P., Dohmen, T., Sunde, U., Elger, C. E., & Falk, A. (2007). Social comparison affects reward-related brain activity in the human ventral striatum. *Science (New York, N.Y.)*, *318*(5854), 1305–1308.
[26] Takahashi, H., Kato, M., Matsuura, M., Mobbs, D., Suhara, T., & Okubo, Y. (2009). When your gain is my pain and your pain is my gain: Neural correlates of envy and schadenfreude. *Science*, 323(5916), 937–939.
[27] Dvash, J., Gilam, G., Ben-Ze'ev, A., Hendler, T., & Shamay-Tsoory, S. G. (2010). The envious brain: The neural basis of social comparison. *Human Brain Mapping*, 31(11), 1741–1750.

They are more resilient in the face of others' success and more likely to believe they can improve. In contrast, people with low self-esteem are more prone to interpret comparison as judgment, reinforcing negative self-views and triggering feelings of inadequacy.[28]

This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing loop. People who already doubt their worth are more vulnerable to upward comparison, which intensifies those doubts. Those with a secure sense of self are more likely to use comparison as a learning tool. The same external stimulus — a colleague's achievement, a peer's attractiveness, a friend's popularity — can have radically different effects depending on internal stability.

Self-esteem also influences how people choose their comparison targets. Research has found that individuals often engage in "selective comparison," seeking out those who confirm their existing beliefs about themselves. This can become a subtle form of self-sabotage. Someone who feels unworthy may unconsciously seek out targets that reinforce that sense, perpetuating a narrative of inferiority.[29]

The Promise of Temporal Comparison

One of the most promising antidotes to social comparison is temporal comparison — evaluating oneself not against others, but against one's own past. This strategy has been shown to increase motivation and satisfaction, especially when individuals can see concrete progress.[30]

Temporal comparison activates the same reward circuits as social comparison but avoids the threat systems associated with social ranking. It also reinforces agency: individuals focus on what they can

[28] Wood, J. V., Giordano-Beech, M., & Ducharme, M. J. (1999). Compensating for failure through social comparison. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25(11), 1370–1386.
[29] Bosch, J., & Wilbert, J. (2023). The impact of social comparison processes on self-evaluation of performance, self-concept, and task interest. *Frontiers in Education*, *8*, Article 1033488.
[30] Wilson, A. E., & Ross, M. (2001). From chump to champ: People's appraisals of their earlier and current selves. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(4), 572–584.

control and improve rather than what others possess. In therapeutic and coaching settings, temporal comparison is often used to help clients build self-efficacy and track growth over time.

Moreover, people who focus on self-improvement rather than social dominance are less likely to fall into cycles of envy or self-pity. They can still use others as inspiration, but they do so without attaching their self-worth to the outcome. This is not to say they never compare — but that they compare with awareness and perspective.

Comparison as Feedback, Not Judgment

The most skillful approach to comparison may lie not in eliminating it, but in reframing it as feedback. When we interpret comparison as information rather than a verdict, we open the door to learning. Instead of asking, "Am I better or worse?" we can ask, "What can I learn from this?" This shift turns others into teachers rather than rivals.

Psychologists emphasize that the key variable here is mindset.[31]

- **A fixed mindset** interprets comparison as a threat. If someone else is better, it means we are worse.
- **A growth mindset** sees comparison as a map. If someone else has reached a certain level, it means the path exists.

This reframing is not just a cognitive trick. It changes the emotional tone of comparison, making it more likely to inspire than to wound.

Reframing also requires emotional regulation — the ability to notice an initial pang of envy or shame without reacting impulsively. With practice, individuals can learn to pause, reflect, and reinterpret their

[31] Dweck, C. S., & Yeager, D. S. (2019). Mindsets: A view from two eras. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *14*(3), 481–496.

emotional responses. Over time, this builds resilience and self-trust, allowing comparison to become a catalyst rather than a cage.

A Tool That Needs a Teacher

Social comparison is one of the most powerful forces in human psychology. It helps us orient, improve, and belong. But it can also wound, distort, and paralyze. It is not inherently good or bad — it is a tool. And like all powerful tools, it must be used with care.

The challenge is not to eliminate comparison, but to manage it wisely. To know when it is helping and when it is harming. To distinguish between judgment and feedback, envy and admiration, identity and influence. With insight, awareness, and practice, we can turn comparison from a tyrant into a teacher — from a reflex that controls us to a skill we use with intention.

Philosophers have grappled with the nature of social comparison long before Instagram or influencer culture. From Confucius to Sartre, comparison has been seen not merely as a psychological habit, but as a deep ethical, spiritual, and existential concern. **While each tradition approaches it differently, they all agree that comparison is powerful — and how we use it matters.**

Confucianism views comparison as a path to moral growth, while Buddhism sees comparison as a form of craving that leads to suffering. Aristotle sees comparison as essential to moral development, while the Stoics warn against comparing ourselves on external measures like wealth or status.

Ultimately, all these philosophies agree: comparison can either erode or elevate us. The key is awareness. If we can understand its roots, reframe its meaning, and choose when and how to engage with it, comparison becomes not a trap, but a tool for transformation. And you can learn even more about how to use social comparison as a tool (instead of just learning about it) inside ***The Solved Membership***.

"Normally I stay in my head, optimizing frameworks and tools, or learning more instead of really doing the thing. With The Solved Membership I noticed this is different for me." – Larry

Find out more about *The Solved Membership* here.

Chapter 4: Digital Technology and Social Comparison

How the Internet Turned a Human Instinct Into an Emotional Arms Race

For most of human history, comparison was a local, bounded, and relatively slow process. We compared ourselves to neighbors, coworkers, classmates, and family members — people we saw daily and whose lives unfolded alongside our own. The benchmarks for success were usually tangible and culturally shared: land owned, social reputation, physical strength, or perhaps skill in a particular craft.

Feedback was social, but not always instantaneous. And importantly, it was personal. It came from people who lived under the same roof, worked in the same fields, or gathered around the same fire.

That world is gone.

Today, social comparison happens at scale, in real time, and with algorithmic amplification. We are now exposed to a global stream of other people's lives — not as they are lived, but as they are curated, filtered, and optimized for visibility. Social media has turned every active user into a performer and every scroll into a measurement. People we have never met become benchmarks. Strangers become rivals. Even friends become objects of envy or aspiration, depending on how they present themselves.

Digital technology did not invent the comparison instinct. But it has transformed it — intensified, distorted, and weaponized it. What was once a subtle signal for social calibration has become an overwhelming flood of metrics, images, and narratives, all competing for attention and

triggering the ancient parts of our brain that care deeply about status, belonging, and value.

This chapter explores how social comparison operates in the digital age: how platforms engineer it, how it affects mental health and identity, and what strategies can help us reclaim this instinct in an online world built to exploit it.

The Algorithmic Design of Comparison

Social media platforms are not neutral spaces. They are behavioral ecosystems designed to maximize engagement, attention, and profit. Their business models depend on keeping users online as long as possible and encouraging them to interact — click, comment, like, share. To do this, platforms use sophisticated algorithms that prioritize emotionally provocative content: images that inspire desire, posts that elicit outrage, and stories that trigger intense emotions.

These emotional reactions are not accidental. Research shows that posts generating high-arousal emotions — whether positive (awe, excitement) or negative (anger, envy) — are more likely to be shared and engaged with.[32] Platforms, in turn, learn to prioritize this content, creating feedback loops that continually surface the most attention-grabbing material.

[32] Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral? *Journal of Marketing Research*, 49(2), 192–205.

In practice, this means users are disproportionately exposed to extreme versions of life: physical beauty, professional success, perfect relationships, and luxury consumption. These are the stories that rise to the top — not because they are common, but because they are engaging.

The result is a warped sense of reality in which success, beauty, and happiness appear ubiquitous and effortless, while struggle, failure, and mediocrity seem invisible or shameful.

This dynamic weaponizes the comparison instinct. Our brains evolved to track social status in small groups of roughly 150 people.[33] But on social media, we are exposed to hundreds or thousands of others, many of whom are presenting only their most flattering moments. The brain doesn't distinguish between curated reality and lived reality. It simply

[33] Dunbar, R. I. M. (1998). The social brain hypothesis. *Evolutionary Anthropology*, 6(5), 178–190.

reacts. And the reaction is often: “I am behind. I am less. I am not enough.”

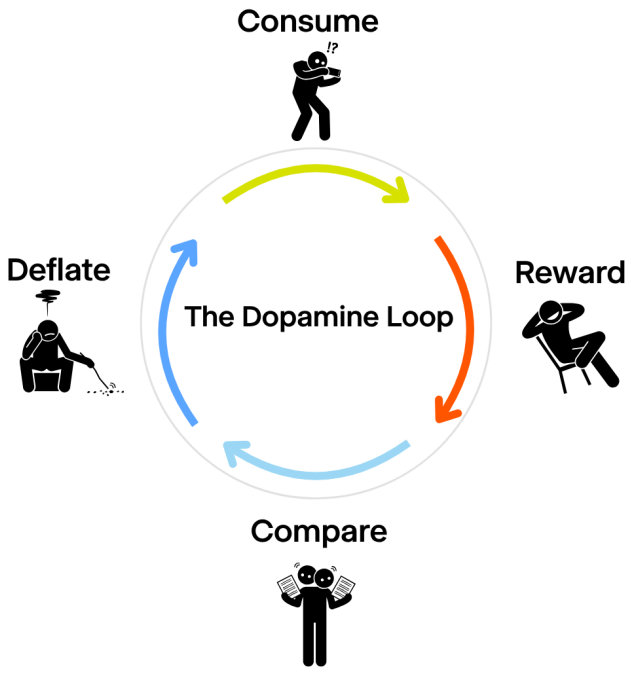
Neuroscience Meets Notification

The emotional potency of digital comparison is not just psychological — it is neurobiological. When users receive likes, comments, or followers, the brain’s reward circuitry lights up, especially in the ventral striatum — a region associated with primary rewards like food, sex, and monetary gain.[34] Social approval has always mattered to humans, but now it comes with a dopamine hit. This makes engagement addictive and comparison habitual.

At the same time, seeing others receive more attention — or seeing idealized representations of their lives — activates areas of the brain associated with pain and threat.[35]

This neurological double-bind — pleasure from attention, pain from others’ success — creates an unstable emotional environment. Users become dependent on validation but are constantly exposed to reasons to feel inferior. The result is emotional whiplash: a state of chronic comparison anxiety exacerbated by the very tools people use to feel connected.

[34] Sherman, L. E., Payton, A. A., Hernandez, L. M., Greenfield, P. M., & Dapretto, M. (2016). The power of the like in adolescence: Effects of peer influence on neural and behavioral responses to social media. *Psychological Science*, 27(7), 1027–1035.
[35] Takahashi, H., Kato, M., Matsuura, M., Mobbs, D., Suhara, T., & Okubo, Y. (2009). When your gain is my pain and your pain is my gain: Neural correlates of envy and schadenfreude. *Science*, 323(5916), 937–939.



Adolescence in the Age of Permanent Performance

While adults are certainly affected by digital comparison, adolescents are particularly vulnerable. Developmentally, the teenage years are marked by heightened sensitivity to social evaluation and an urgent need to form a stable identity. In this context, social media becomes both a stage and a scoreboard — a place where identity is performed, judged, and constantly revised.

One of the key psychological shifts introduced by digital platforms is the *permanence* of social content. Embarrassing moments, failed experiments in self-expression, or impulsive posts do not disappear — they can be archived, screenshotted, shared, and repurposed. What was once a fleeting social misstep now becomes a data point in a permanent public record. This reality discourages risk-taking and promotes conformity. It also increases anxiety, as the cost of social error appears much higher.

Studies show that adolescents who spend more time on social media — especially platforms emphasizing appearance and popularity — report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and body dissatisfaction.[36]

The pressure to present a desirable self online often conflicts with the emotional volatility and uncertainty that define adolescence. When their online selves receive little validation, teenagers interpret this not as a problem with their presentation, but as a flaw in their personhood.

Moreover, platforms encourage identity construction based on metrics: followers, likes, and views. Over time, users begin to conflate these metrics with personal value. The result is a fragile self-esteem that depends not on intrinsic qualities or relationships but on algorithmic visibility.

Fear of Missing Out, Relative Deprivation, and Anxiety

Beyond individual comparison, digital life fosters a broader emotional syndrome: *fear of missing out* (FOMO). Social media platforms expose users to constant updates about events, achievements, and experiences that others are having. Even if one's own life is satisfying, seeing a stream of parties, travels, purchases, or milestones creates a sense that one is being left behind.

FOMO is not trivial. It is linked to increased loneliness, dissatisfaction, and anxiety, especially among frequent social media users.[37] The emotional logic is clear — if everyone else is doing something meaningful, then whatever I'm doing must be less meaningful. This

[36] Twenge, J. M., Joiner, T. E., Rogers, M. L., & Martin, G. N. (2017). Increases in depressive symptoms, suicide-related outcomes, and suicide rates among U.S. adolescents after 2010 and links to increased new media screen time. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 6(1), 3–17.
[37] Przybylski, A. K., Murayama, K., DeHaan, C. R., & Gladwell, V. (2013). Motivational, emotional, and behavioral correlates of fear of missing out. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(4), 1841–1848.

perception undermines the presence, gratitude, and enjoyment of real life.

A related phenomenon is *relative deprivation* — the sense that one is worse off not because of actual need, but because of unfavorable comparison. Research shows that even individuals with objectively high standards of living can feel deprived when exposed to the curated abundance of others online.[38] The standard for "enough" becomes not one's own needs, but others' presentations.

These effects are cumulative. Over time, chronic exposure to upward comparison creates a baseline of dissatisfaction. Users begin to expect that their lives should look a certain way. When reality fails to match the image, they assume the problem lies within. The internal narrative becomes: "I'm doing it wrong."

When Comparison Motivates

The difference lies in framing. When success is presented as a result of effort, process, and persistence — rather than innate talent or unreachable privilege — viewers are more likely to experience constructive comparison.

This is why platforms that emphasize transparency, authenticity, or incremental growth (such as fitness tracking apps, learning communities, or niche forums) often foster more positive engagement.[39] They make progress visible, contextualize achievement, and highlight effort.

[38] Chou, H. T. G., & Edge, N. (2012). "They are happier and having better lives than I am": The impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(2), 117–121.
[39] Baños, J. H., Noah, J. P., & Harada, C. N. (2019). Predictors of student engagement in learning communities. *Journal of Medical Education and Curricular Development*, *6*, Article 2382120519840330.

Even on mainstream social media, some users deliberately follow accounts that inspire rather than intimidate. These might include creators who share behind-the-scenes struggles, who normalize failure, or who celebrate others' growth. The emotional tone of one's feed matters. Comparison is inevitable, but we can always choose the content we compare ourselves to.

Strategies for Reclaiming Comparison

Given that comparison is unavoidable, the goal is not elimination but intention. Several strategies can help turn the tide.

1. **Shifting from *social* to *temporal* comparison** — evaluating one's growth against past versions of the self — can reduce anxiety and increase motivation.[40] Apps that track progress, such as Duolingo or Strava, leverage this instinct effectively. They give users visible markers of personal development, anchoring self-worth in change rather than status.

2. **Reframing** the question from "Why not me?" to "What can I learn from them?" transforms comparison from judgment to information. This subtle cognitive shift engages curiosity rather than envy and restores agency.

3. **Setting digital boundaries** — such as time limits, curated follow lists, or device-free zones — can reduce exposure to harmful triggers.
   These boundaries are not acts of weakness but of alignment. They create space for reflection, autonomy, and mental health.

4. **Practicing gratitude and self-compassion** can buffer the emotional volatility of comparison. When individuals recognize

[40] Brown, R., & Middendorf, J. (1996). The underestimated role of temporal comparison: A test of the life-span model. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *136*(3), 325–331.

> their own values, limitations, and journeys, they are less likely to collapse their self-worth into a single metric.[41] Gratitude grounds us in what is, rather than what isn't.

Designing for Dignity

Social comparison is an ancient instinct. But in the digital age, it has been transformed into an always-on feedback loop, fueled by algorithms and performed identities. The emotional stakes are high. The visibility is constant. The benchmarks are ever-rising.

Yet comparison, even now, is not inherently toxic. It remains a powerful source of feedback, aspiration, and connection — when used wisely. The task before us is to redesign our environments, habits, and mindsets so that comparison becomes a teacher, not a tyrant. A mirror, not a verdict.

The internet will not stop showing us others. But we can choose how we see ourselves within it.

[41] Neff, K. D. (2011). Self-compassion, self-esteem, and well-being. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *5*(1), 1–12.

Social comparison used to be local and personal, but digital technology has turned it into a 24/7 emotional minefield. Today, we compare ourselves to thousands of curated, filtered lives. To legitimate strangers and influencers who become benchmarks for success. This constant exposure triggers our brain's reward and threat systems, making us feel either validated or deeply inadequate, often in the span of a few scrolls. This is especially damaging for teens, whose identities are still forming and are shaped by likes, follows, and permanent digital records.

But comparison doesn't have to be toxic. When framed as inspiration instead of judgment, it can motivate growth. Curating who we follow, setting digital boundaries, and focusing on personal progress can turn comparison into a tool for reflection, not self-doubt. It's not about eliminating comparison. It's about using it with intention.

If you don't know how to apply what you learned in this guide in your daily life, consider joining me inside ***The Solved Membership***.

It's your chance to get the support you need to make small, actionable changes every day and see the kind of results you want in your life.

Join *The Solved Membership* today.

Chapter 5: The 80/20 of Managing Comparison

How to Make Peace With the Measuring Instinct—And Even Put It to Work for You

For all the damage that comparison can do — corroding self-esteem, fueling envy, amplifying insecurity — it remains, paradoxically, one of the most reliable tools for human growth. The question is no longer whether we compare ourselves to others. That has been answered decisively across the span of human evolution, philosophy, and psychology. The real question, and the more urgent one, is how to compare wisely.

The psychological literature offers an overwhelming number of strategies for managing comparison: reframe your thoughts, change your inputs, limit social media, meditate, journal, develop self-compassion, practice gratitude, and so on. Many of these are useful. Some are transformative. But not all are equally effective. Nor are they equally accessible for everyone at all times.

That's where the principle of the 80/20 rule comes in. Known formally as the Pareto principle, it suggests that 80 percent of outcomes come from 20 percent of causes.[42] Applied to the management of social comparison, it means that a small number of deliberate changes in how we think, feel, and act around comparison can yield a disproportionate amount of relief, clarity, and constructive energy.

This chapter outlines those few high-leverage strategies — the ones that shift comparison from a destructive reflex to a developmental force. They require no denial of human nature, no spiritual transcendence, and no impossible psychological feats. What they do require is awareness,

[42] Rodd, J. (1996). Pareto's law of income distribution, or the 80/20 rule. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, *1*(1), 85–93.

intention, and some willingness to make discomfort productive. Because at its best, comparison does not just show us who we are. It shows us who we could become.

Comparison Is a Signal, Not a Sentence

The first principle of managing comparison is learning to interpret it as a signal rather than a sentence. Most people experience comparison as a verdict: they see someone more successful, attractive, wealthy, or admired, and interpret the difference as a judgment of their own inadequacy. But this interpretation is optional. What if, instead, comparison were understood as feedback — an emotional data point that reveals what we care about, what we aspire to, or where we feel vulnerable?

Paul Gilbert's work on social rank theory highlights how emotions like envy, shame, and pride are not arbitrary — they evolved to help us monitor our place within social hierarchies.[43]

These emotions arise not to torment us, but to prompt adaptive behavior. The problem is not the emotion itself but what we do with it.

- Envy, in its benign form, can motivate self-improvement.
- Pride reinforces social bonds and achievement.
- Shame encourages corrective action.

When comparison stings, the first move is to pause and name the feeling: envy, inadequacy, resentment, longing. Then, ask:

- What does this reveal about my values?
- What am I reacting to?
- Is this comparison pointing to something I want, something I fear, or something I have been ignoring?

[43] Gilbert, P. (2001). Evolution and social anxiety: The role of attraction, social competition, and social hierarchies. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 24(4), 723–751.

Treating comparison as a signal opens space between the trigger and the response. And in that space lies choice.

Audit the Algorithm: Curating Comparison Inputs

One of the most practical ways to shift comparison is to change who and what you compare yourself to. In the digital age, much of this happens unconsciously. The feeds we scroll, the accounts we follow, the people we text or see online — all of these serve as our informal benchmarks. Over time, they shape our perception of what is normal, desirable, or possible.

Psychological studies have confirmed that repeated exposure to idealized images and status cues increases upward comparison and decreases self-esteem.[44] But unlike in-person social networks, digital platforms allow for unprecedented control over input. You can unfollow people whose content leaves you feeling inadequate. You can mute accounts that stir envy or shame. You can follow creators who share process, struggle, or vulnerability — not just polished outcomes.

This is not about creating an echo chamber or shielding yourself from excellence. It is about choosing mirrors that reflect you in useful ways.

The Most Reliable Benchmark: You, Yesterday

Temporal comparison — measuring yourself against your past self — is one of the most effective antidotes to toxic social comparison. Research by Wayment and Taylor found that people who focus on

[44] Fardouly, J., Diedrichs, P. C., Vartanian, L. R., & Halliwell, E. (2015). Social comparisons on social media: The impact of Facebook on young women's body image concerns and mood. *Body Image*, 13, 38–45.

self-improvement over social dominance report higher levels of well-being, greater resilience, and more sustained motivation.[45]

The reason is simple. Temporal comparison reintroduces fairness and agency into the equation. When you compare yourself to someone else, you are rarely comparing equal starting points, resources, or challenges. But when you compare yourself to your past, you account for your own context. Improvement, not superiority, becomes the metric.

This is why journaling, progress tracking, and habit monitoring can be so powerful. They offer visible proof of growth. Even small improvements — running one extra mile, reading a few more pages, showing a little more patience — become cause for celebration when seen in the light of who you used to be. The self becomes a moving target, not a fixed point of failure.

Additionally, research has shown that people who reflect positively on their past growth experience higher self-esteem and greater optimism about their future.[46]

This framing supports what psychologists call *self-continuity* — the sense that who you are today is connected to who you were and who you are becoming. In a world of volatile benchmarks, this kind of internal anchoring is a stabilizing force.

Focus on the Process, Not the Outcome

Much of the toxicity of comparison comes from focusing on outcomes — how much money someone makes, how many followers they have, what awards they've won. But outcomes are poor indicators

[45] Wayment, H. A., & Taylor, S. E. (1995). Self-evaluation processes: Motives, information use, and self-esteem. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 27, pp. 173–221). Academic Press.
[46] Bluck, S., & Liao, H.-W. (2013). I was therefore I am: Creating self-continuity through remembering our personal past. *The International Journal of Reminiscence and Life Review*, *1*(1), 7–12.

of effort, especially in systems saturated with inequality, randomness, and illusion. When we compare outcomes, we often miss the process behind them — and discount our own efforts because the payoff hasn't come yet.

Focusing on the process changes the stakes. It shifts attention from results to habits, from performance to practice. Carol Dweck's research on growth mindset demonstrates that people who value effort and learning over static success are more resilient, adaptive, and motivated.[47] This holds true in social comparison as well. When we look at someone doing well and think, "What are they doing that I can try?" we activate curiosity rather than shame.

Focusing on process also helps reframe envy as mentorship. The person you're comparing yourself to becomes a model, not a rival. You shift from judgment to inquiry. What choices did they make? What systems support them? What sacrifices are hidden behind their success? This orientation reclaims comparison as a learning tool. And it breaks the illusion of instant success by honoring the slow grind beneath the surface.

[47] Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.

Comparison isn't going away — but it doesn't have to control you. When used intentionally, it becomes a powerful signal that reveals what you value, where you feel insecure, or what you want to grow toward. Instead of reacting with shame or envy, you can pause and ask: *What is this trying to teach me?* Shifting from judgment to curiosity turns comparison into a tool for self-awareness.

The most effective way to make peace with comparison is to manage your inputs and focus on your own growth. Curate your social feeds to reflect progress, not perfection, and compare yourself to your past self, not to someone else's highlight reel. Anchor your worth in your effort, not external outcomes, and treat others' success as inspiration, not a threat. The goal isn't to stop comparing, it's to start doing it in a way that builds you up instead of breaking you down.

If you don't know how to do that, may I suggest checking out ***The Solved Membership***?

"If you enjoy Mark's way of communicating and don't want to be burdened by a program that requires a lot of your time, this is the answer. My favorite part has been learning techniques while actually applying them." – Abby

It might not be for everyone. But if it sounds like it might be for you, you'll be in good company. Click here to join us.

Redefine Status: From Scarcity to Contribution

One of the most damaging myths embedded in comparison is that status is zero-sum. If someone rises, we fall. If they win, we lose. This view leads to envy, sabotage, and performative behavior. But it is also false.

While some forms of status are indeed limited (there can only be one CEO, one gold medalist, one valedictorian), many are not. Respect, trust, competence, and generosity are expandable currencies. They grow through sharing. In communities where status is tied to contribution rather than competition, comparison becomes less about ranking and more about recognition.

Lockwood and Kunda found that people are more likely to be inspired by comparison targets when those targets are seen as role models or collaborators rather than competitors.[48] This is especially true in environments that emphasize collective growth, mutual support, and value alignment.

Redefining status also requires redefining success. Instead of asking, “How much do I have?” we can ask, “What value am I creating?” Instead of seeking applause, we can seek alignment — with values, with purpose, with process.

This shift may not eliminate envy entirely, but it can place it in a wider context — one that includes meaning, not just metrics.

The Role of Emotional Intelligence

Managing comparison is not just a cognitive task. It is an emotional one. Recognizing and regulating the feelings that arise during

[48] Lockwood, P., & Kunda, Z. (1997). Superstars and me: Predicting the impact of role models on the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(1), 91–103.

comparison — envy, shame, anxiety, inferiority — is essential to using it well. Emotional intelligence involves the capacity to notice, name, and navigate emotions without being overwhelmed by them.

This is where practices like mindfulness, therapy, and self-compassion come in. They help build the muscle of awareness — the ability to pause between stimulus and response. When you feel a pang of comparison, can you pause and ask: What am I feeling? Where is it coming from? What narrative am I telling myself?

This inner dialogue is not indulgent. It is a form of psychological self-governance. It allows you to interrupt automatic reactions and choose deliberate ones. Kristin Neff's work on self-compassion shows that people who treat themselves kindly in moments of perceived failure are more likely to persist, take risks, and recover from setbacks.[49] These are the exact qualities needed to reframe comparison as a developmental force.

Digital Boundaries as Acts of Compassion

In a world designed to trigger comparison, setting boundaries is not a retreat — it is a moral act. Social media platforms are engineered to exploit our attention and status sensitivity. They deliver a constant stream of comparison triggers with no off switch unless we create one.

Studies have shown that limiting social media use improves mood, reduces anxiety, and enhances focus — especially among young adults.[50] This doesn't require deleting all apps or becoming a Luddite. It means using technology with intention. Choose what you consume. Schedule breaks. Protect spaces of silence and self-reflection. Do not confuse the absence of comparison with the absence of value.

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[49] Neff, K. D. (2003). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2(3), 223–250.
[50] Hunt, M. G., Marx, R., Lipson, C., & Young, J. (2018). No more FOMO: Limiting social media decreases loneliness and depression. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 37*(10), 751–768.

Digital boundaries also protect relationships. When we stop monitoring others for signs of success or failure, we become more present, generous, and trustworthy. We stop treating friends as rivals and partners as benchmarks. We return to the deeper rhythms of connection — where value is intrinsic, not comparative.

The Mirror You Choose

Comparison is here to stay. It is part of our mental architecture, part of how we learn, grow, and relate to others. But when unmanaged, it becomes a tyrant — eroding joy, hijacking focus, and distorting identity.

The 80/20 rule of managing comparison is simple, but not easy. Treat comparisons as signals, not as sentences. Curate your inputs. Compare to your past, not their present. Focus on the process, not the outcome. Redefine success in terms of contribution, not applause. And protect your emotional bandwidth with boundaries and compassion.

When we stop asking, “How do I rank?” and start asking, “What am I learning?” We reclaim the comparison instinct from performance to purpose. We choose mirrors that show not just what we lack, but what we are becoming. And in that shift, we find freedom — not from comparison, but through it.

Conclusion: The Quiet Measure of a Life

Every person carries a quiet instinct to measure. It hums beneath ambition, friendship, love, and solitude. We notice, we compare, and we judge, often without meaning to. Yet at some point, there comes a moment when this habit begins to feel like a question: *Is this how I want to keep living?*

That question is not about achievement or perfection. It asks something deeper about the kind of presence we bring to the world. Each of us must decide whether to live as an observer of others or as a participant in our own unfolding. The difference lies in attention. One kind of attention scans outward, searching for signs of worth in what others have built. The other turns inward, listening for what feels true, what feels alive, what feels enough.

To live a good life in an age of endless comparison is to practice noticing what stirs admiration without letting it become envy. It is to allow inspiration to move through you rather than shrink you. When we meet excellence in another person, we have two choices: we can see it as proof that we are behind, or as evidence that something beautiful is possible. Only one of those choices leaves us free.

There is dignity in deciding that your worth is not a contest. There is strength in measuring yourself only against the person you were yesterday, or the person you still hope to become. You can still care, still strive, still reach, but from a steadier center. You can want growth without turning it into a race.

Most of what comparison distorts is not our ambition, but our belonging. It convinces us that value is conditional, that love or meaning must be earned by catching up. But what if growth were not a ladder, but a path? What if the work was to walk it with integrity, no matter how far others seem ahead?

Conclusion

In the end, what matters is not who applauds, nor how we rank, but whether we have lived with curiosity, courage, and a measure of peace in our own skin. The world will always offer reasons to compete. Our task is to remember that we can also choose to understand, to learn, to be inspired.

So the next time you feel yourself comparing, pause long enough to ask: *Who do I want to be in this moment?*

The one who turns away, or the one who lets the sight of another's light remind them of their own direction?

That is the choice waiting inside every glance, every scroll, every conversation. It is the quiet measure of a life — one not spent trying to be more than others, but becoming more of yourself.

Suggested Reading

- *Being and Nothingness* — Jean-Paul Sartre
- *The Second Sex* — Simone de Beauvoir
- *The Denial of Death* — Ernest Becker
- *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* — Adam Smith
- *Man's Search for Meaning* — Viktor E. Frankl
- *Self-Compassion* — Kristin Neff
- *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* — Daniel H. Pink
- *The Courage to Be Disliked* — Ichiro Kishimi & Fumitake Koga
- *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour* — Helmut Schoeck
- *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* — Erving Goffman
- *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* — Yuval Noah Harari
- *The Origins of Political Order* — Francis Fukuyama
- *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* — The Dalai Lama & Howard Cutler
- *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* — Jonathan Haidt
- *The Society of the Spectacle* — Guy Debord
- *Meditations* — Marcus Aurelius
- *The Road to Character* — David Brooks