

Comparison Games and Why Almost Everyone Plays Them

What Comparison Games are, exactly? How do we learn to play, why do we keep using the game, and how does it affect our self-worth. What are the reasons the exit the games and how to do it.

Everyone wants stable self-worth — to be confident, self-assured, strong and not to care about what other people think.

There is obviously some connection between comparing yourself to others and how stable your self-worth is, but how exactly it works is less clear. Not all comparison looks the same way. Feeling worse than others is clearly a problem with self-worth and everyone agrees on that. Feeling better than others might be normal, or it might be pathological depending on how intense it is. And comparing yourself to yourself is supposed to be the healthy alternative altogether.

The whole thing seems ambiguous, with all the shades and qualifiers. So how does one actually build stable self-worth?

This article maps the comparison games: why everyone plays them, what the reward is, and how they operate, so the connection between comparison games and self-worth becomes clearer.

How and why comparison structure gets installed

Why do people play comparison games? Because they make sense. Or at least they seem like an easy solution to a universal problem. If a behavior is this common, there must be a reason everyone does it. There must be a payoff. And we all figure it out early, without knowing what we're doing.

5 stages of learning comparison games (through an example of Johnny)

Stage 1: Good vs bad

We learn how to behave long before we're thinking in words. We need to know how to relate to other humans, and we learn that by observing our parents. We then conclude what works and what doesn't, and what is the payoff of the behaviors that do work.

Johnny's example:

Little Johnny goes for a walk with his parents. His mother notices a drunk woman barely walking and comments to her husband: "Look at this disgusting drunk, no self-respect." They exchange a few more sentences in a conspiratorial tone, throw a couple of superior glances, and now mother seems to be in a better mood afterward.

What does Johnny learn here? That there are acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. This behavior is not only unacceptable — it's also disgusting. When we observe unacceptable behavior, we can (and should) point it out.

By seeing his mother's better mood, Johnny also learns the advantages of talking badly about someone else:

Separation: If this lady is a disgusting drunk without self-respect, then I'm not any of those things, so I am good.

Elevation: Because I'm not this disgusting person full of faults, I'm better.

Demonstration of intelligence: I'm smart enough to point that out in someone else, so I am above them.

Before Johnny leaves home for school, he knows that what people do is judge what's okay versus what's not okay, and when one sees a "not okay" thing, one can point it out and feel better.

Stage 2: Better than vs worse than

Stage two happens when we leave the family and enter larger and way more complex peer groups.

Johnny's example:

When Johnny starts school, he learns quickly and brutally that you're not only good or bad — you can also be better or worse. And being worse than someone else feels way worse than just being bad, while being better than someone else feels much better than just being good.

When the teacher praises his drawing and says it's the best one in class, Johnny feels amazing. Then the same teacher says: all the other children are clean; why are you so dirty? He feels awful. But suddenly Sarah says she prefers to play with him over Tim, and everything gets better again.

What's new here is ranking, and in this ranking system, being "worse than" becomes the thing to avoid at all costs.

Stage 3: How to feel better

When Johnny feels awful (because he's worse than Tim), he needs to do something with that feeling. And he knows what to do from observing his parents.

When Johnny feels not great about himself, he can look at someone else's unacceptable behavior. If that person is disgusting/stupid/wrong, then Johnny is not disgusting/stupid/wrong. Johnny is better than that person. Johnny is above that person. Johnny can feel better again.

The comparison game is now fully installed and runs automatically. Johnny uses it to deal with his own emotions.

Stage 4: The one mocking and the mocked one

Johnny observes that in social situations, he's not the only one who can point a finger. Others can do that to him too. So there's the one mocking and the one being mocked. And the one mocking has power.

Now Johnny discovers that pointing at others doesn't just make him feel better about himself. It also:

Wins power games: The one mocking has power; the one being mocked loses.

Makes bonding easy: Talking badly about others is an incredibly easy way to bond with people.

Guarantees belonging: Us versus them serves as social glue.

Is actually necessary: Everyone does it, and doing it back is the only response to getting it from someone else.

The ones being mocked might seem out of the game, but they're just on the defensive side. They are getting their portion of feeling better about themselves through talking about how awful the offenders are.

Stage 5: Sublimation

At this stage, the game becomes sophisticated. Some people do not want to be “bad gossipers.” So comparison takes less obvious forms that feel more justified, mature, or even healthy. But the structure remains the same.

Form 1: Righteous comparison

Mocking becomes righteous finger-pointing: “I cannot imagine how someone could do that,” “what a horrible person.” It does not matter if the statements are accurate. The point is whether they make the commentator feel better about themselves.

Form 2: General comparison

The comparison shifts from individuals to averages: IQ tests, competitions, rankings. “I’m better than most people” replaces “I’m better than Tom.” It feels objective and legitimate. The goal is still feeling “better than.”

Form 3: Self-comparison

This is the form many people consider the healthy alternative: “Compare yourself only to yourself.” Me before therapy, me last year, me before meditation. It feels like growth and maturity. It’s still the same structure of feeling “better than.”

All these roads lead to the same place: comparing ourselves feels good. We’re not that wrong thing; we’re better, we’re above. It’s cheap and doesn’t require anything actually. Seems like all advantages and no problems.

If everyone does it and it works, what is the problem?

What is so bad about a little discrete mock here or there? Or a little vent about how awful the ex-husband is? If it can help us feel better, and there is no harm, why not?

The advantages seem obvious, the cost nonexistent. But that’s not how comparison games work. They’re casino games with rigged odds.

1. Wins only look like wins

Tokens, not real money: One bets for self-worth but only gets a short-lived hit of superiority. “Feeling better than” doesn’t translate into “feeling good about oneself.”

They disappear: The feeling lasts until one forgets or feels bad again.

Once in, the money stays in: Winning once means nothing because the position is never secure. “What if my new coworker is better?” “What if my wife finds someone better?”

2. Wins are impossible to secure.

Wins stay on the shared table — anyone can claim them at any time. The last result is the only one that matters. Fifty wins against Tom disappear with one loss.

3. Betting against anyone is betting against oneself.

If one uses social norms to bet against Tom, the same rules apply to them too. If Tom is disgusting for getting drunk, John becomes equally disgusting for doing the same.

4. This is not a solo game.

The comparison game is social by nature. One’s position depends on other people — their behavior, their opinions, their presence.

Players try three strategies to stabilize their position, but each costs:

- One can surround oneself with “inferior people” — some choose “uglier” or “less intelligent” friends to guarantee their superiority.
- One can form coalitions — two people agreeing creates shared reality. But coalitions are fragile. When allegiance shifts, yesterday’s ally becomes today’s enemy.
- One can seek confirmation from high-status people. Their approval is worth more, but so is their criticism.

5. Either you win, or you lose. A pass is not possible.

The comparison game is not a game to win or lose. It’s a game one is winning or losing right now. If losing, one has to try to win. If winning, one has to try not to lose.

Gossiping, mocking, or “feeling better than” can feel like buying a scratch card rather than betting your house in a poker game. But betting even 10¢ on that game means you believe the tokens are real and that someone else being one way or another has anything at all to do with you. And that is dependence.

Comparison games are the cause of low self-worth.

Comparing to oneself is “good” and “healthy.” Comparing from above downward is not great — either a sign of low self-worth or just “something everyone does.” Comparing from below up is the problem, the clear sign of low self-worth. Work on feeling worthy, and the comparison stops.

This treats direction as something that matters. It doesn't. But comparing up, down, to oneself, to others has the same structure and same problems.

The causation is also backwards. Comparing oneself to others is not a result of low self-worth, and will not stop if “one works on their self-worth.” It is rather that the whole comparison structure can't deliver what it promises.

For some reason, to describe how we feel about ourselves, we use words like worth, value — both borrowed from economic language. A closer look at both of those reveals what the actual problems with our concepts are:

- Worth is always a comparison. Dollars versus euros, gold versus diamonds, house versus market. Worth exists in relation to something else.
- Worth is never stable. It fluctuates constantly. The price of gold changes, currencies shift, real estate goes up and down. What people call “stable worth” just means low volatility, not actual stability.
- Worth is determined by the market, not the owner. A house is worth what buyers will pay for it, not what the owner thinks it's worth. A horse's worth is how many people find it appealing and how much they're willing to pay for it.

The same problem applies to “inherent value.” Value is never inherent — it is fundamentally relational, and ultimately depends on who is assessing it, when, and how,

One might argue that the fact that worth and value are taken from economics doesn't say much about the concepts themselves. But doesn't it really?

We are so used to comparative structures that we miss the absurdity. Logically, there should be no reason why a man called Tim getting promoted should have any influence on how John feels about himself. Tim did not punch John, did not steal anything from him, did not say anything bad to him. In fact, Tim might not even know that John exists.

That can only make sense if John believes there's some common ground where he's being assessed against Tim. That common ground where two things get assessed against each other is called a market. And it works exactly as a horse market does. With two horses on the market, if one limps, then the other one suddenly looks better. When one runs extra fast, the other looks slow in comparison.

The problem with humans is that there is no actual market. There is no buyer, no one keeping the score, and no horse of the year award.

We're running a phantom market with casino rules to give ourselves a bit of validation, all in our own heads.

How to exit the comparison games

As with every deep pattern, the solution is both simple and not easy. Simple, because all we need to do is to stop participating in the game. Not easy, because stopping once does not make us free in an instant. We need to repeat stopping over and over again.

Persistent patterns work like programming that gets installed in childhood to serve a function. In this case the pattern is providing the good feeling and superiority. Because the function is important, it gets automated and fires each time an occasion appears. Then the pattern gets repeated over and over again, becoming more automatic and less visible with time. Changing is difficult because the pattern is “useful”, so the system has no reasons to change it. We also identify with our patterns, seeing them not as something automatic, but as “something wrong with us.”

Because all patterns have the same structure, working with them always follows the same steps

1. **Notice there is a pattern running.**
2. **Understand the pattern** — which means answering two questions: what exactly is going on and why, in the sense of “what is the reward here” (what this article provides for comparison games).
3. **Take a decision to work with it** — consciously decide to work with it instead of letting it run unnoticed.
4. **Observe** — Catch the pattern, either in real time or afterwards, and...
Detach — Name it, laugh at yourself running the pattern, tell the pattern off...
Move attention elsewhere — Don't dwell or analyze more than necessary
5. **Reward yourself for noticing** instead of punishing yourself for the pattern running again.
6. **Remember** — put an alarm, write on the mirror, tell a friend...
7. **Optional: Replace with a different approach.**

What worked for me: working with comparison-game pattern

Although the general method of working with persistent patterns is universal, the concrete ways of working with any particular pattern are highly personal. Some people will do better with analyzing them, some with laughing at themselves, some will need to write things down, and for others, telling the pattern to “fck off” may work perfectly well. For this reason, rather than giving advice to follow, I am sharing what worked—and still works—for me, as inspiration.

In particular:

Laugh at yourself whenever possible: “Oh, here comes Johnny!” “What a wonderful horse market I am running here.” “Yup, another token to my worthless collection.”

Focus on your own comparison games rather than taking superiority hits from other people.

“Oh, here comes Johnny” aimed at someone else can very quickly become another source of superiority hits.

Respond to automatic thoughts with abrupt, explicit dismissal: “This has nothing to do with me.” “I am not a horse on the market.” “I do not need to care what other people think.” And my favorite: “I don’t have time for this shit.”

Name patterns that were not caught in real time: “I just spoke badly about someone because they made me feel worse about myself.” “I was trying to feel superior by being judgmental.” “I just used my progress to feel worthy.” Be careful of not changing it into self-beating.

Question patterns that do not change simply by being watched: “Why do I care who looks superior here?”

Approach the process as a scientific experiment. Treat each new observation as a win and acknowledge it explicitly: “Interesting!” “Good catch!” The point is to make noticing the pattern itself rewarding.

Move on quickly instead of dwelling. Sometimes this can be as simple as saying, silently or aloud, “Moving on!” and putting attention back on whatever is happening in the moment.

Put more emphasis on the times the pattern was interrupted than on the times it ran freely: “Oh, I could have judged the rude client, but instead I thought they were probably just having a bad day, and it had nothing to do with me.”

Check whether you are being honest with yourself. Is it really “observing my own progress,” or is it “feeling superior to my old self,” which could easily turn into feeling awful if that progress were lost? Is it “just having a little fun with friends,” or is there a need to feel better about yourself?

Tread lightly. Some days are better than others. Sometimes gossip is just gossip; sometimes a little hit from feeling better than your past self feels great. And that is okay too.

Replacing the pattern: Valuing instead of evaluating

Replacing the comparison pattern may be tricky because many solutions for building “stable self-worth” use the same comparison structure, just hidden. Examples include:

- Compare yourself to yourself instead of others
- Know your strengths (where you are stronger compared to others)
- Be grateful for what you have (that is better compared to what others have)
- Celebrate your small wins (which is being better than your previous self)
- Be your own judge (which means comparing to what your pattern says is acceptable or not)

The habit of evaluating can be replaced with something that sounds similar, but works in a different way: valuing.

To value something means to hold something in regard, without any particular reason. We understand this instinctively. We value our long-term friendship although it's not "worth" anything material. We value our old, worn t-shirt although no one else would pay a cent for it. We value our dog regardless of his "market worth" being negative when we look at the food and the vet bills.

We value our dogs, or cats, and we do not care if anyone agrees. We do not need to compare our dog to other dogs to prove he is better than them. We do not look at other dogs and think they have nicer fur or prettier eyes than our dog. We do not need to compare how much better our dog behaves now versus before. When the dog gets old and clumsy and slow, we still value him the same, or more. When our dog behaves badly, we do not think he humiliated himself and is now a horrible dog. We do not need to judge other dogs to prove to ourselves that our dog is "the goodest boy."

We already know how to value without comparison.

Valuing can be applied to ourselves using a method similar to the one used for working with persistent patterns.

1. Take a decision to value yourself instead of evaluating yourself, and notice when you do each of those — the evaluation or valuing.
2. Say explicitly to yourself that you are choosing valuing, and actually choose it. ("I am valuing myself, so... I do not want to compare, I do not want to waste time on what other people think, I do not want to feel better than my old self")
3. Reward yourself for valuing instead of punishing yourself for evaluating.
4. Remind yourself regularly how it feels to value something and check if you are valuing yourself in the moment.

And when we value ourselves, we also value our time and energy. With time, what other people do, have, or how they look and act becomes something that has nothing to do with us, one way or another, and that is freedom.

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