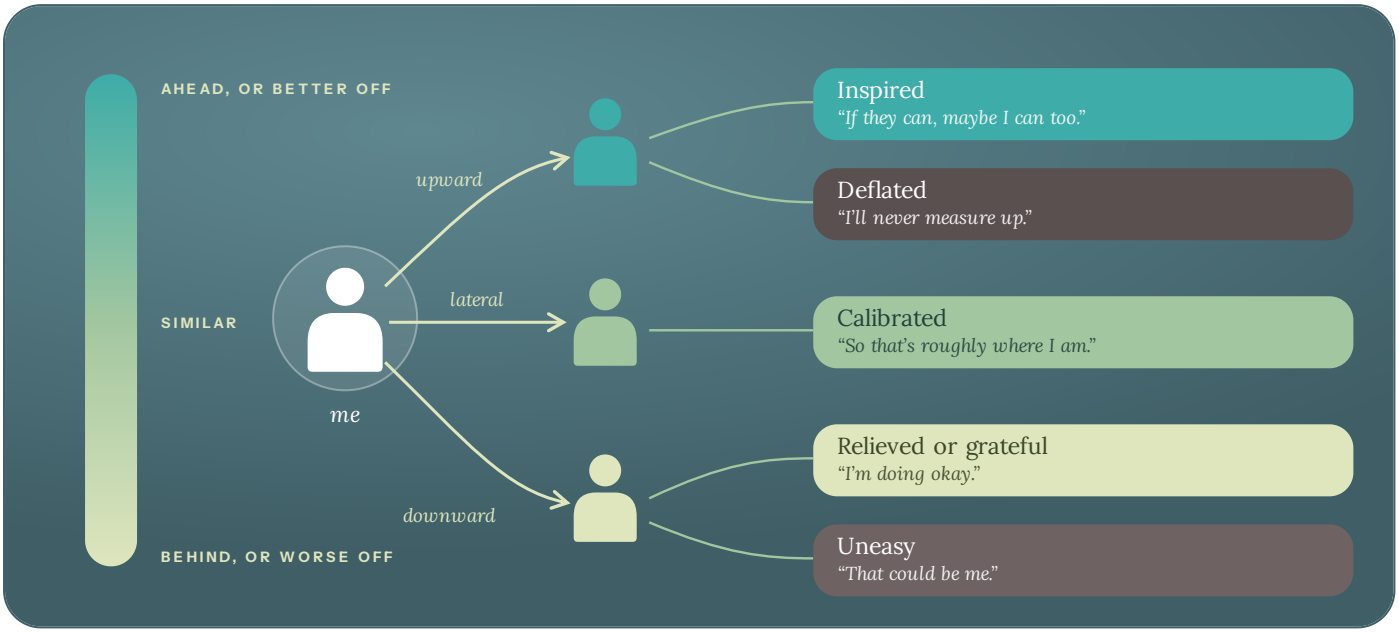
Social Comparison

LEON FESTINGER'S THEORY

Why we judge ourselves partly by looking at others, and how it affects mood, identity and self-worth

In 1954, Leon Festinger proposed that we have a basic drive to evaluate our own opinions and abilities. When there is no clear, objective yardstick, we look to other people, especially people similar to us (Festinger, 1954). Comparing is natural and often useful. What matters is *who* we compare with, *how*, and what we conclude.



01 Three directions

and two possible effects of each

UPWARD

Comparing with someone ahead

Can inspire and motivate, or leave us feeling inferior. Which happens depends partly on whether their success feels reachable (Collins, 1996).

LATERAL

Comparing with someone similar

Festinger's original focus: similar others give the most useful information about where we stand.

DOWNWARD

Comparing with someone worse off

Can lift mood when we feel low (Wills, 1981), but may also bring guilt, unease or "that could be me".

02 What shapes the effect

the same comparison can land differently

Similarity

The more alike we feel, the more a comparison stings or inspires.

Attainability

Reachable success can motivate; out-of-reach success can deflate.

Current mood

When we already feel low, comparisons tend to hit harder.

What we see

We often compare our inside with others' outside: their highlights with our everyday.

03 Mood, identity and self-worth

when comparison becomes a verdict

Information

Used lightly, comparison is **information**: a way to learn, set goals and find people to learn from.

A verdict

When worth depends on ranking above others, comparison can become a **verdict on the self**, feeding envy, shame and a fragile sense of identity.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Social comparison is one of the most studied ideas in social psychology. A large meta-analysis supported key parts of Festinger's theory: people do make social comparisons, and their choice of comparison target and the effects of comparison vary with context (Gerber et al., 2018).

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04 My comparison log

notice it, without judging it

WHO, OR WHAT	DIRECTION	AREA OF LIFE	HOW I FELT	WHAT I TOLD MYSELF	FAIR?
	○ up ○ similar ○ down				__ /10
	○ up ○ similar ○ down				__ /10
	○ up ○ similar ○ down				__ /10
	○ up ○ similar ○ down				__ /10
	○ up ○ similar ○ down				__ /10
	○ up ○ similar ○ down				__ /10

"Fair?" means: was it a like-for-like comparison, with the full picture?

05 Patterns I notice

across the week

Who or what I compare with most

Areas that sting the most

When I'm most likely to compare

06 Kinder, more useful comparisons

turning a verdict back into information

What can I learn from this person, rather than measure against them?

What am I not seeing about their life, or my own?

How do I compare with myself a year ago?

What matters to me, whatever anyone else is doing?

ONE SMALL EXPERIMENT

This week, when I notice a comparison, I will...

07 Reflection

what am I noticing?

What I've learned about how I compare

Something I want to remember

SOURCES

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