The Psychology of Envy

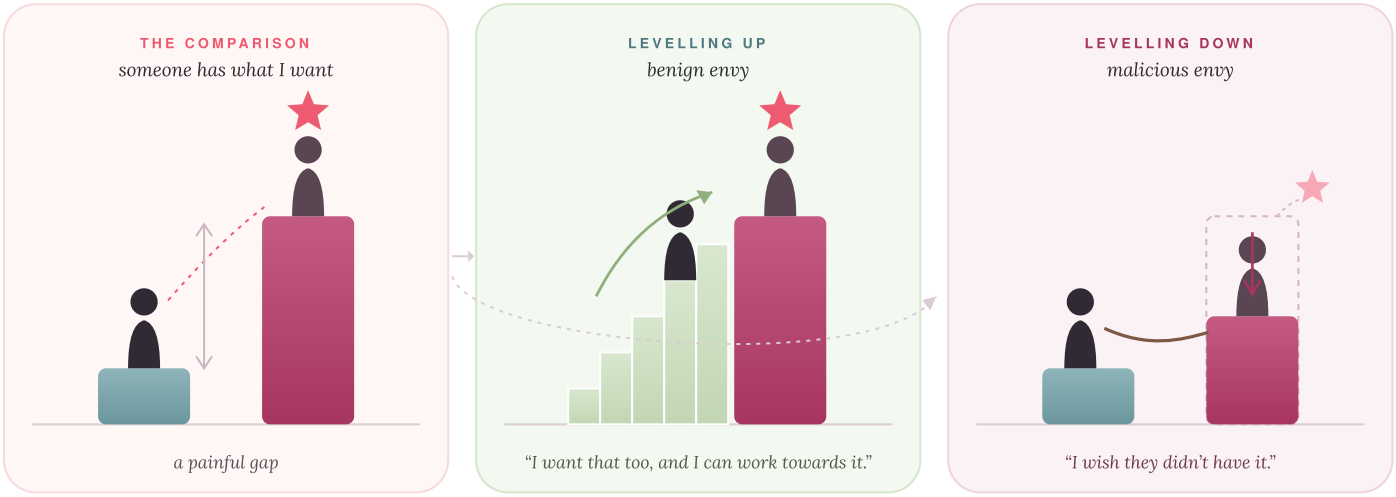
EMOTIONS · SOCIAL COMPARISON

A painful feeling with two very different directions

Envy is the uncomfortable feeling that arises when someone has something we want: a quality, an achievement, a relationship or an advantage. It is a common human emotion. Research suggests it comes in two forms, which feel similar at first but lead in very different directions, for us and for our relationships.

ENVY
"I want what you have."
involves two people: me, and someone who has something I lack

JEALOUSY
"I'm afraid of losing what I have to you."
usually involves three: me, someone I value, and a perceived rival



The same painful gap can pull in two directions: *raising myself up, or bringing the other down.*

VAN DE VEN, ZEELENBERG & PIETERS, 2009

01 Two forms of envy

how they differ

	BENIGN ENVY · LEVELLING UP	MALICIOUS ENVY · LEVELLING DOWN
Where attention goes	To the thing I want, and how to get it	To the other person, and their advantage
A typical thought	*"How did they do it? Could I?"*	*"They don't deserve it."*
The pull	To improve my own position	To lower theirs: criticising, undermining, or enjoying their setbacks
Effect on the relationship	Often stays intact; may even deepen through learning from them	Distance, resentment, and quiet damage over time

02 What tips envy one way or the other

and what it can be useful for

TWO KEY QUESTIONS

Deserved? Within my reach?

Envy tends to turn malicious when the other's advantage seems undeserved, and benign when it seems deserved and something I could also work towards (van de Ven et al., 2012).

A USEFUL SIGNAL

Envy points to what I value

Envy can show what matters to me. Benign envy has been found to motivate effort and improvement more than admiration does (van de Ven et al., 2011).

03 Where envy often shows up

tick any that feel familiar

- ☐ Social media
- ☐ A sibling or relative
- ☐ A colleague's success
- ☐ A friend's relationship
- ☐ Appearance or health
- ☐ Money or possessions
- ☐ Talent or ease
- ☐ Free time or freedom
- ☐ _____

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

The distinction between benign and malicious envy has been found across several countries, including in languages with only one word for envy (van de Ven et al., 2009). Some researchers debate whether these are two separate emotions or two outcomes of the same one. Either way, envy is common, and noticing it without shame is the first step to choosing what to do with it.

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04 Noticing envy

without judging myself for it

WHO, AND WHAT THEY HAVE *the comparison*	WHAT I TOLD MYSELF *about them, and about me*	HOW I FELT *tick any*	WHICH DIRECTION *tick any*
		☐ inferior ☐ frustrated ☐ hostile ☐ motivated	☐ level up ☐ level down ☐ both
		☐ inferior ☐ frustrated ☐ hostile ☐ motivated	☐ level up ☐ level down ☐ both
		☐ inferior ☐ frustrated ☐ hostile ☐ motivated	☐ level up ☐ level down ☐ both
		☐ inferior ☐ frustrated ☐ hostile ☐ motivated	☐ level up ☐ level down ☐ both

05 What is the envy pointing to?

the value underneath

FROM ENVY TO VALUE

Reading the signal

For example: "I envy my colleague's promotion. Underneath, I want my work to be recognised, and to grow in my role."

I envy _____

Underneath, I want _____

This matters to me because _____

06 Levelling up, one step at a time

turning envy into a direction

1
Is it within reach?
Fully, partly, or not at all for me right now

2
What could I learn?
How did they get there, honestly?

3
A first step
Small, specific, within my control

4
What I can let go of
Comparisons that are not serving me

07 Protecting the relationship

when I feel the pull to level down

Feeling hostile envy is human; acting on it is where relationships are affected. Noticing the pull gives me a choice.

What I notice when the pull starts	What I could do instead	Comparisons I could reduce

SOURCES

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