

You only saw the good bits

A short book about measuring your life against other
people's edited versions and always coming second

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit. You see a piece of someone else's life, you hold your own life up against it, and yours comes off worse. It happens after a dinner at a friend's house, in the school car park, at a wedding, and twenty times an evening on a phone. Each time it takes a second or two, and it leaves you feeling a bit smaller than you were.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that comparing yourself with other people is normal, quick and sometimes useful, and I won't ask you to stop. You couldn't if you tried. The second is that the particular comparison you keep making is fixed before it starts. You're holding everything you know about your own life against a selection from somebody else's. You're choosing the most impressive person you know in each department. And you're playing for a ranking that has no top. Second place is built into the method. It tells you almost nothing about how your life is going. The third is practical. There's a question worth asking in the moment after the comparison lands, and there's a better thing to measure your life against. Chapters 12 and 13 cover both.

A few things this book isn't. It isn't an attack on social media, which gets one chapter and turns out to be less of the story than you'd expect. It doesn't claim that everyone you envy is secretly miserable. Some of them are doing very well, and chapter 9 deals with that honestly. And it won't tell you to count your blessings. That advice has never worked on anyone who was driving home from a housewarming.

Three cautions.

If you've felt low or hopeless most of the time for weeks, and everything you see seems to prove you've failed, that may be depression and not a comparing habit. Low self-esteem and feeling hopeless are among the symptoms the NHS lists. A GP should hear about it. Chapter 14 says more.

If most of your comparing is about your face, your body or your weight, and it's taking up a lot of your day, that also deserves more than a book. Chapter 14 gives the signs the NHS lists and where to go.

And if your life is hard in ways that are plain fact, such as money that doesn't cover the month, poor health or having nobody to talk to, I'm not going to tell you it's all in how you look at it. This book is about the extra weight that comparing adds. It can't take away the weight that's really there.

The notes at the back give the studies I've relied on and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The drive home

It's Saturday, a little after eight in the evening, and you're driving home from a housewarming.

The house was lovely. The kitchen had an island and a long window onto the garden, and the garden had a tree with a swing on it. Your friend showed you round with a glass in her hand, apologising for the state of rooms that were in no state at all. Her husband did something clever with lamb. Their children said please. At some point she mentioned, lightly, that she'd been made a director in the spring.

You like her. You've known her for fifteen years. You were glad for her, and you said so and meant it. But somewhere on the ring road a different feeling has arrived. Your flat was fine at four o'clock, and now it seems small and a bit tired. Your job, which you'd been quite enjoying, looks like the kind people get stuck in. You catch yourself working out how old she was when she bought her first place, and how old you are now.

Here's what I'd like you to notice about that drive. Nothing in your life changed between four o'clock and eight o'clock. You have the same flat, the same job, the same bank balance and the same people who love you. The only thing that changed is what you'd seen. And what you'd seen was four hours of one household, on a day they'd spent a week getting ready for.

Later, on the sofa, the phone adds three more. A man you worked with two jobs ago is thrilled to announce something. Your cousin has run a half marathon and looks happy and lean. A couple you met once on holiday are on a beach you'll never be able to find. None of it is aimed at you. By ten o'clock you've come second four times, and you go to bed with a feeling of being behind. If someone asked what you were behind in, you couldn't say.

I'm going to call that feeling the dip. It's the small drop in the stomach that follows a comparison you've lost. It deserves a name, because most of this book is about the second or two around it.

I'll use three other terms throughout. A good bit is a piece of someone's life that reaches you, such as a kitchen, a job title, a photograph or a remark. The edited version is what those pieces add up to in your head. The full version is your own life as you know it from the inside, with nothing left out.

The dip has some habits worth describing, because the details matter later.

It's quick, and you don't choose it. You didn't decide on the ring road to assess your housing. The sum had already been done by the time you noticed it, and the result arrived as a mood.

It's choosy about subjects. It turns up in the parts of life you care about and feel unsure of. If your friend had shown you her golf trophies, you'd have felt nothing at all.

It's choosy about people. A billionaire's yacht does nothing to you. Your old flatmate's loft conversion can spoil a weekend. The people who set it off are the ones who started roughly where you did.

It mostly points upwards. You've also been to homes that were smaller than yours, and I'd guess you didn't drive back from those feeling rich.

And it passes itself off as information. The dip doesn't say "I'm in a mood". It says "I'm behind", and it says it in the flat voice you'd use to report the time.

That last habit is the one that keeps the whole thing going. If the dip were only a mood, you'd wait for it to pass. Because it sounds like a fact about your life, you take it seriously and start planning round it. Sometimes you're drawing up those plans at one in the morning.

So the question for the next few chapters is whether it's a fact. I don't think it is, and I think that can be shown without pretending your friend's kitchen isn't nice.

If you'd like to test this as you read, try something for the next few days. When the dip comes, make a note of who set it off and what it was about. A line in your phone will do, such as "J, the house" or "cousin, running". Don't argue with the feeling and don't try to cheer yourself up. You're only collecting. The list gets used in chapter 5.

What measuring gives you

Suppose you sit an exam and get 64 per cent. You can't tell whether that's good until you hear what everyone else got. If most people scored in the forties, you'll be pleased for a week. If most scored in the eighties, you won't mention it.

In 1954 the psychologist Leon Festinger built a theory on that ordinary fact, and the subject has been studied ever since. He proposed that people have a drive to evaluate their own opinions and abilities, because acting on a wrong estimate of yourself can be costly. Where there's an objective test, people use it. Where there isn't, they look at other people.

Most of adult life has no objective test. Nobody marks your career, your home or your parenting, and nobody tells you whether you're doing all right for thirty-eight. So you look sideways at the nearest people, and you read your position off them. You're using the only instrument you've been given, and there's nothing vain in that.

It does real work, too. Comparing tells you whether your pay is fair for the job you do. It shows you what's possible, as when a friend retrain at forty and you realise that people can. It can warn you that you've let something slide. Now and then it gives you comfort.

It's also automatic. In two studies published in 1995, Daniel Gilbert and his colleagues found that people compared themselves with someone even when they knew the comparison could tell them nothing. They then corrected for it afterwards, when they were able to. The researchers concluded that comparing may be

spontaneous and unintentional, and that it happens even when people think it's illogical. You don't decide to compare. You compare, and then, if you have the chance, you decide what to make of it.

So I won't ask you to stop. You'd fail, and you'd lose something useful along the way. If a book tells you to stop comparing yourself with others, it's asking you to stop doing something you never decided to do.

The trouble starts with how the instrument gets used day to day.

In 1992 Ladd Wheeler and Kunitate Miyake asked 94 students to record every comparison they made for two weeks. Comparing upwards, with someone better off, lowered how the students felt. Comparing downwards raised it. A bad mood beforehand led to upward comparisons more often than to downward ones. When the students already felt low, they tended to look at people who were doing better.

The largest summary I know of was published in 2018 and pulled together more than sixty years of experiments. When people were offered a choice, they showed a strong preference for looking upwards. And the usual result of any comparison was contrast, which means seeing yourself as further from the other person than you did before. The authors end by asking why people keep choosing to look upwards when the likeliest outcome is to feel deflated.

My answer, and it's an interpretation, is that looking upwards feels like finding out. You think you're collecting information about where you stand, and information seems worth a bit of discomfort. The next five chapters are about how little information you're actually getting.

One distinction will help from here on. Some comparisons are ones you run. You have a question, such as whether your salary is in line with the market. You go and get real figures, you get an answer, and it's over. That kind of comparing is useful and I've no quarrel with it.

The dip is a comparison that runs you. It had no question, unless you count "how is my whole life going against hers". Its evidence was four hours in somebody's kitchen. And it didn't end when you got home. That second kind of comparing is the one this book is about.

"I'm only being realistic"

The strongest defence of the dip is that it's honest. You looked at the evidence, the evidence said you're behind, and refusing to see it would be a comfortable lie. If that's how it seems to you, I'd like to look at the evidence.

Start with where it comes from. You see other people when they're with other people. You see them at dinners, at work, at the school gate and online. You almost never see them alone at the kitchen table with a letter from the bank. You're present for every minute of your own life, including all the minutes nobody else will ever hear about.

In 2011 Alexander Jordan and five colleagues published four studies on this, all with students at one American university. In the first, 63 students described recent times when they'd felt bad and times when they'd felt good. About 29 per cent of the bad experiences had happened with nobody else present, against 15 per cent of the good ones. The students said they'd tried to hide 40 per cent of their negative emotions from the people who could see them. For positive emotions the figure was 13 per cent.

The next study asked 80 students to estimate how many of their peers had recently been through those same experiences, such as a distressing argument or feeling sad about missing home. They underestimated how common the bad experiences were. Their estimates for the good experiences weren't out in the same way.

So the students' bad moments tended to happen in private and their good ones in company, and the bad ones in company got hidden. As a result, each student concluded that other people were having fewer bad moments than they really were.

It's a bit like judging a country's weather from its postcards. Every postcard is a real photograph of a real day. Nobody is lying to you. But nobody prints a postcard of the rain.

You may think this applies to acquaintances, and that your real friends tell you the truth. The third study followed 214 students through a ten-week term. They logged their emotions weekly, and at the end each named up to three people who knew them well, mostly friends, roommates and partners. Those close peers still underestimated the students' negative emotions and overestimated their positive ones. Part of the gap was explained by how much the students said they suppressed their bad feelings. Even your friends are showing you a selection. They don't mean to deceive you. "How are you?" is a greeting, and "Good, thanks" is what people say back.

The fourth study is the one that bears on the dip. Among 104 students, those who gave lower estimates of other people's bad experiences reported more loneliness and more brooding, and lower satisfaction with life. That's a correlation from a single survey, so it can't show which causes which. It does fit what you'd expect. If you think you're the only one struggling, the struggle gets heavier.

These were American students, mostly in their first year, and I can't prove that the figures carry over to adults with mortgages. I'd be surprised if the direction were different. Adults have had longer

to practise saying "Good, thanks".

Notice what this doesn't say. It doesn't say your friend is secretly unhappy. Nothing at the housewarming was fake. The kitchen is real, the promotion is real and the children really did say please. What persuades you about other people's good bits is that they're true.

The mistake is about what's missing. You saw four hours, chosen and prepared, and treated them as a fair sample of a life. Then you compared that sample with something that wasn't a sample at all.

So here's the question I'd like you to start asking when the dip comes. **What didn't I see?** You don't have to answer it. You certainly don't have to invent a hidden misery for your friend, which would be a different mistake and a slightly mean one. The question only marks the evidence as partial, and partial is what it is. You'd do the same with any other report that had half the pages missing.

You know too much about yourself

There's a second half to the unfairness, and it concerns what you know about yourself.

You have a complete record of your own life. You know about the argument in the car on the way to the housewarming. You know what's in the overdraft, what you said to your mother in March and how long it is since you opened the post. You know about the evening last week when you ate cereal standing up, and the email you still haven't answered. Nobody else knows most of this, and you know it all the time.

That record is what you hold up against your friend's Saturday. On one side there's a life known from the inside, with every dull and shameful minute included. On the other there's a life seen from the outside at its most prepared. These aren't two measurements of the same kind. It's like setting the estate agent's photographs of their house against a walk round yours on a Tuesday night with the big light on.

People sometimes answer that they'd settle for the outside of her life, thanks. That brings me to a second problem, which is what you were looking at.

In 1998 David Schkade and Daniel Kahneman asked large samples of students in the American Midwest and in Southern California to rate their satisfaction with life. Some rated their own. Others rated what they imagined for a student like themselves living in the other region. The two groups reported the same satisfaction with

their own lives. But students in both places expected Californians to be happier. Climate and cultural opportunities accounted for the difference they predicted.

The authors called this a focusing illusion. When you judge a life from a distance, you give most weight to whatever is visible and different, and sunshine is both. The students rated climate as mattering more for someone in the other region than for someone in their own. For the people who actually live under it, the weather is a small part of a day that's mostly filled with the same things as anyone's.

The kitchen is your friend's sunshine. It's the part of her life you can see, and it differs from yours, so it carries your whole verdict. But her life is mostly made of things that were never on show at the housewarming. You didn't see her commute, her boss or her back. You didn't see her father's memory, her marriage on a Wednesday or her three o'clock in the morning. I've no idea how those are going, and neither have you, which is my whole point. You judged her life by its most visible feature, and then you judged your own by all of its features.

You may still think you'd be happier with the kitchen. You might be, a bit, and for a while. Wanting a nicer kitchen is a perfectly good want, and chapter 12 is about taking wants like that seriously. What doesn't hold up is the chain of reasoning on the ring road. It went from "her kitchen is better" to "her life is better" to "I'm failing". The first link is a fact. The second is a guess built on a very thin slice. The third doesn't follow even if the second were true.

Try turning it round. Think of the last time you had people over. You tidied, you cooked the thing you're good at, and you were funny because you'd had a glass of wine and you like these people. You didn't mention the overdraft. For that evening your guests saw the edited version of you, and it looked good. I'd bet that at least one person has driven home from your place feeling the dip. They were wrong about your life in exactly the way you've been wrong about your friend's.

Who you pick

If you've been keeping the list from chapter 1, have a look at the names on it. If you haven't, make one from memory. Write down the person who comes to mind for money, then for career, home, fitness, marriage, children and friends.

I'd guess you've written a different name on nearly every line. The friend with the house isn't the one with the enviable marriage. The colleague whose career you watch isn't the cousin who runs. You haven't been measuring yourself against a person. You've been measuring yourself against a committee, and each member was picked because they're the best you know at one thing.

Put like that, the result isn't surprising. You've entered a decathlon in which every event is run against a different specialist. You lose the sprint to the sprinter and the javelin to the javelin thrower, and you go home believing you're a poor athlete. None of those specialists has ever had to face the other nine.

There's good evidence that people pick their comparisons this way. In 2019 Shai Davidai and Sebastian Deri reported twelve studies with about 2,500 participants. People did rate themselves as above average in many areas, which is a well-known finding. But the standards they measured themselves against sat well above average too. When asked who they compared themselves with, they brought to mind high performers. They did this even when they'd just been told they'd performed badly, and even in areas

where they knew they were weak. The authors traced it to mental availability. Impressive people are simply the ones who come to mind.

Two years earlier the same researchers and Thomas Gilovich had found the same thing with social lives. Across eleven studies with more than 3,000 people, including students, shoppers at a mall and a large online panel, most people believed that others led richer and more active social lives than they did. The belief was strongest for things like how many parties people go to and how close they are to the centre of their social circle. The reason offered was the same. When you ask yourself how sociable other people are, the ones who spring to mind are the most sociable people you know. When the researchers made those extreme examples less available, the bias disappeared.

It's easy to see why impressive people come to mind. They generate news. A promotion gets announced, and so does a house, a marathon or an engagement. Your friend who's still renting and is reasonably content hasn't produced a single piece of news in four years, so she never appears on your list. Nor does the cousin who doesn't run. They're most of the people you know, and they've dropped out of your sums.

You may feel your comparisons are fairer than this, because you only measure yourself against people like you, such as those from your year at school, your first job or your street. But look at how you choose among them. There were perhaps thirty people in your year. The one with the director's job comes to mind, and the other twenty-nine don't. You've picked a fair group and then you've compared yourself only with its best performer in each event.

Two corrections follow, and both are quick.

The first is to count the quiet ones. When the dip tells you that everyone has a house like that, run through the people you know, including the ones who never generate news. "Everyone" usually turns out to be three people.

The second is to fill in the rest of the row. You've scored your friend on her home and her job. Try scoring her on the other lines of your list, and you'll find you can't, because you don't know. Your verdict on her whole life rests on the two lines you happened to see.

"It keeps me going"

You might grant all this and still want to keep the habit, because you suspect it drives you. Without the friend's promotion to needle you, you might never have applied for anything. If you stopped minding, you think, you'd stop trying.

There's something in this. Seeing what others have done can show you what's possible, and rivalry has got plenty of people out of bed. The question is when it helps, and the research is fairly specific about that.

In 1997 Penelope Lockwood and Ziva Kunda studied how people react to someone outstanding. The star affected people only when the field mattered to them. Then it came down to one thing. If the success seemed attainable, because there was still time or because people believed they could improve, they felt inspired. If it seemed out of reach, because the chance had passed or they saw their abilities as fixed, the same star left them, if anything, deflated.

A second line of work looks at envy itself. In 2009 Niels van de Ven and his colleagues studied people in the Netherlands, the United States and Spain and found two distinct experiences under the one English word. In what they called benign envy, people wanted to move up and improve their own position. In malicious envy, they wanted the other person pulled down. The two experiences feel different and lead to different behaviour.

So comparison can help you, under conditions. It helps when the thing is specific, when you believe you could get there, and when your attention goes to how it's done. Now hold the dip up against those conditions.

The dip on the ring road was about as vague as a verdict can be. "I'd like a garden" would have been specific. What you got was "I'm behind", which is a score for your whole self, and there's no next step from it. My guess is that the vagueness is why the dip deflates you. A verdict on everything offers nothing you could attain.

You can test this on your own list. Go down the names and ask what each dip led you to do in the week that followed. Count what you did, and leave out what you resolved to do. I'd guess the honest answer for most lines is an hour on a property site at midnight, a flat Sunday and a slightly cooler text to the friend. If the habit were motivating you, the list would show results.

Compare that with the times someone else's success really did move you. I'd bet they looked different. You saw a particular thing you wanted, you thought "I could do that", and your next thought was about how. Often you ended up asking the person. There may have been a pang in it, but it didn't score your whole life and it didn't last long. It was a wish with a next step attached.

That gives you something to do with envy when it turns up, which it will. Ask it two questions. What exactly do I want from that? And how did they do it? The first usually shrinks the thing a good deal. You don't want your friend's life, with her commute and her boss.

You want a garden, or a job with more say in it. The second turns a judgement on you into a piece of research, and the person you envied becomes your best source.

The worry underneath this is complacency. Contentment, the thought goes, is how people stall. I don't see why it would be. Wanting specific things keeps your ambition intact, and it may be in better shape for not spending Sundays being told it's already lost. The person who's at peace with the housewarming and wants a garden is more likely to get one than the person lying awake with a score.

A league with no top

Here's an example that may be familiar. You get a pay rise, a decent one, and for a month you're pleased. Then you learn by accident that a colleague at your level earns two thousand more. Your salary hasn't gone down by a penny, but your satisfaction with it has collapsed.

That reaction has been measured. In 2012 four economists ran an experiment at the University of California. A new website had begun listing what the university's employees were paid. The economists told a random subset of employees about it, and later surveyed all employees about their jobs. Those who found they earned less than the median for their unit and occupation reported lower satisfaction with their pay and their job, and were more likely to say they'd look for another. Those who found they earned more than the median were unaffected.

Look at the shape of that result. Finding out you're behind made people less satisfied, and finding out you're ahead did nothing for them. If that holds generally, and I suspect it does, then checking your rank costs you when you lose and pays you nothing when you win.

A study from 2010 by Christopher Boyce, Gordon Brown and Simon Moore points the same way. They tested whether life satisfaction follows how much people earn or where their income ranks within a comparison group. Rank predicted satisfaction. Absolute income did not, and neither did the group's average. They also found that people gave more weight to those above them than to those below.

As the authors note, a rise then makes you happier only if it moves you up the order, and every place you gain is a place someone else loses.

People will pay a lot for rank. In a survey published in 1998, Sara Solnick and David Hemenway asked people to choose between two worlds. In one they'd earn more than those around them. In the other they'd have twice the real income while everyone else had more still. Half chose the first world, with half the income and a higher rank. Concern for position was strongest for attractiveness and for praise from a supervisor. It was weakest for holiday time.

There's a well-known study of Olympic medallists too. Victoria Medvec, Scott Madey and Thomas Gilovich analysed the reactions of athletes at the 1992 Summer Games, at the end of their events and on the podium. Bronze medallists tended to look happier than silver medallists. The authors' explanation was that the silver medallist is comparing with gold, while the bronze medallist is comparing with no medal at all. If that's right, how the athletes felt about their medals depended on which comparison each was making, more than on the finishing order.

Now think about what kind of contest rank is. It has no finish, because there's always someone above you. And the group you measure against moves as you do. Festinger argued that people compare themselves with those who are similar, and as your life changes, the people similar to you change with it. The reward for winning the league is a harder league.

I'd bet your friend with the kitchen has been to a housewarming with a bigger kitchen, and drove home quiet.

You might say you don't need to be top, only somewhere respectable. But "respectable" is set by whoever's near you, so it moves too. If you'd been shown your present life ten years ago, you'd probably have taken it gladly. You're dissatisfied with it now only because you're measuring against people you hadn't met then.

So a life measured by rank can't be satisfied, however well it goes. I don't think that's a gloomy conclusion. If the ranking could never have paid out, you lose nothing by ignoring it, and you can stop treating it as a debt you owe. What to aim at instead is the subject of chapter 12.

What the phone adds

All of this is older than the phone. Festinger published in 1954, and people were driving home quiet from housewarmings long before anyone could photograph the lamb. It matters to say so, because if you blame the apps for the whole habit you'll expect deleting them to cure it, and it won't.

The phone does change the conditions, though, in four ways I can see.

It raises the volume. You used to get a housewarming a few times a year, and now you can get thirty good bits before breakfast. It extends the reach, from people you know to people you've never met, some of whom look effortless for a living. It improves the editing, since a photograph can be chosen from forty and adjusted, which nobody could do with a Saturday. And it puts numbers on things, so that even a holiday arrives with a count of how many people admired it.

The research on this is large and less settled than the headlines suggest. Here's what I think it supports.

In 2012 Hui-Tzu Grace Chou and Nicholas Edge surveyed 425 students in Utah. Those who'd used Facebook for longer agreed more that other people were happier, and agreed less that life is fair. Those who spent more time on it each week agreed more that others had better lives. So did those whose "friends" included more people they'd never met. It's a single survey and it can't show

cause. The detail about strangers is worth keeping, though. The less you know about someone's full version, the more weight their good bits carry.

Ethan Kross and colleagues texted 82 young adults five times a day for two weeks in 2013. The more someone had used Facebook since the last text, the worse they felt at the next one, and heavier use over the fortnight went with a decline in life satisfaction. Talking with people directly showed no such pattern. A follow-up led by Philippe Verduyn found that the damage came from passive use, meaning scrolling without posting or messaging, and that it worked through envy.

One finding surprised me. In 2014 Mai-Ly Steers and colleagues ran a fourteen-day diary study with 152 people and found that comparing went some way to explaining the link between time on Facebook and depressive symptoms. That held for comparing upwards, and it also held for comparing downwards and for comparisons in no particular direction. It's one study. But it suggests that scoring your life against other people's all evening goes with feeling worse, whether or not you win.

There's one proper experiment I'd mention. In 2018 Melissa Hunt and colleagues randomly assigned 143 students at the University of Pennsylvania either to carry on as usual or to limit Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat to ten minutes each a day. After three weeks the limited group showed larger falls in loneliness and depression. Both groups became less anxious, which the authors put down to everyone keeping an eye on their own use.

Now the other side of the ledger. In 2022 Adrian Meier and Benjamin Johnson reviewed this whole field. They found that the earlier studies linked comparison and envy on social media with lower well-being. Newer ones increasingly contradict that. Some find positive links, and many find effects that differ from person to person or run in both directions. The honest summary is that feeds are bad for some people some of the time, and that you'll have to find out for yourself whether you're one of them.

You can find out cheaply. For a week, notice how you feel in the minute after you close each app. Don't go by how you feel during, since a feed is built to be pleasant during. You already have your list of dips, and it will show how many of them came from a screen.

If the answer is "a lot", there are three adjustments worth making, and none of them involves giving anything up for good.

Mute generously. Muting an account doesn't mean you think badly of the person. It means you've noticed that you leave their posts feeling worse. They won't know, and you can still ring them.

Be careful with strangers. Chou and Edge's detail points here, and so does common sense. With a friend you at least know some of the full version. With a stranger whose job is to look good, the good bits are all you'll ever get.

And watch your timing. Wheeler and Miyake found that a low mood steers people towards upward comparisons. When you're tired and flat at eleven at night you'll find the most enviable post in

the feed, and you'll have the least energy for arguing with it. If you're going to look, do it when you're all right.

"But some people really are doing better"

So far I've argued that your evidence is partial, that you know too much about yourself, that you pick a committee of specialists and that the ranking has no top. A fair reader will have been waiting to say something, and this chapter lets them say it. Some people really are doing better.

They are. I'm not going to pretend otherwise, and no study I've described says otherwise. Jordan's students underestimated other people's bad moments. That doesn't mean everyone's bad moments are equal. Some people have more money than you, and some have better health, easier children, kinder parents or better luck. Your friend may well be happier than you are this year. The previous chapters show that you can't tell from a housewarming. They don't show that it's false.

So here is how I'd treat the cases where it's true.

Start by separating two things that arrive together. "She earns more than I do" is a fact. "I'm behind" is a score. A fact describes the world and can be checked. A score needs something more, which is a race that you both entered, with the same start line, the same finish line and an agreed way of counting.

Lives don't meet any of those conditions. You and she didn't start in the same place. People's starts are some of the most heavily edited bits of all. Nobody announces the help with the deposit, the parents who paid the fees or the illness they never had. You aren't heading for the same finish either, because you've wanted different

things and chosen accordingly. You may have picked work you cared about over work that paid. You may have stayed near your family when she moved for the job. Those were real choices, and they bought you things that don't show up in a kitchen. It makes no sense to choose meaning over money and then mark yourself on money.

And there's no agreed way of counting. The dip quietly assumes one, which is whatever the other person happens to be good at. At the housewarming it counted in houses, with your cousin it counts in kilometres, and at the school gate it counts in children's reading levels. If the unit changes every time, you aren't being measured against anything.

Sometimes the difference comes from a choice of yours that you'd now make differently. That does hurt, and I won't wave it away. But it's regret, and regret is a different thing from a score. It points at something specific, and what you can usefully do with it is decide what you want from here. Chapter 12 deals with that. Being behind isn't a condition you can act on, whereas wishing you'd trained for something different is.

Last, suppose the fact is simply true and owes nothing to your choices. She has more, she started level with you, and she's content. Even then, ask what the dip adds. The fact was just as true at four o'clock, before you'd seen the kitchen, and your life was fine at four o'clock. Her house takes nothing out of yours. The only thing that made your evening worse was the score, and the score was your own contribution.

So when the dip comes and you can't honestly call the evidence partial, try saying the fact on its own. "She has a bigger house than I do." Then stop there. It's surprising how little that sentence weighs once "and therefore" has been taken off the end of it.

"Everyone my age is further on"

One version of the dip gets a chapter of its own, because it doesn't need a housewarming to set it off. A birthday does it, or a form asking for your age. You're thirty-four, or forty-six, and you start doing sums. By now you should own somewhere. By now you should be senior, or settled, or have children, or know what you're doing. Everyone else your age seems to.

It's worth asking where the timetable came from, since nobody ever handed you one. My answer is an interpretation, but I think it holds. You pieced it together from announcements.

Think about what gets announced. People announce that they've arrived somewhere, with an engagement, a set of keys, a baby or a new job title. Nobody announces the waiting. You won't see a post saying "still renting, quite like it" or "third year of trying" or "same job, no news". So in any given month you hear from the few people in your circle who've just arrived somewhere. You hear nothing from the much larger number who haven't.

Run that for a few years and it feels like everyone. It's the effect from chapter 5 again, with a calendar attached. The people who come to mind are the ones who produced news, and you've taken the news for the norm. If you count the quiet ones, the picture changes. Of the people you were at school with, work out how many own a home, have a senior job and have a settled family. I'd be surprised if it's more than a handful, and I'd guess none of them got all three when the timetable says they should have.

The committee is at work here too. One friend bought at twenty-nine, another made partner at thirty-three, and a third had her children early. Your timetable takes the earliest date from each of them. No real person has kept to it, including the people it was assembled from.

You're also seeing arrivals without their terms. You see the keys. You don't see the size of the mortgage, who helped or what was given up for it. You hear about the promotion, and you don't hear about the three years of evenings that went into it. Whether you'd have wanted it on those terms is a separate question.

There's a fair objection, which is that some clocks are real. Fertility has a timetable. Pensions reward an early start. Some careers are hard to enter late. I agree, and those are good candidates for the kind of comparison you run, from chapter 2. If a real deadline may apply to you, get the facts from someone who knows, such as a GP, a pensions adviser or a person already in the field. You'll come away with an answer and some options, which the dip never gives you.

But the feeling of being behind hardly ever takes that form. "I should check my pension forecast" would be a useful thought. What the feeling tells you is that you're late for your whole life, as though there were one schedule and you'd missed it. There isn't one. There are many people arriving at different things in different orders, and some of them never arrive at some things and live well anyway.

So I'd make a small change in wording. When you catch "by now I should have", swap it for two plainer questions. Do I want that? If I do, what's the next step? Then "later than her" is only a fact about dates, and you can drop the word "behind", because nothing was ever scheduled.

Your own good bits

Go back to the housewarming for a moment. At some point your friend asked how things were with you. You said "Yes, all good", and told her about the one project that's going well. You didn't mention the overdraft, the row in the car or the fact that you've been sleeping badly since February. It didn't seem the moment, and besides, everyone there seemed to be doing so well.

In other words, you edited. That's no crime, since it's what people do at parties, and chapter 3 showed how common it is. But it has a consequence you may not have considered, which is that you're somebody else's good bits.

Your holiday photographs didn't include the day it rained and you argued about the hire car. When you mention work, you mention the win. To at least a few people you look calm, solvent and on schedule. Each of those people is holding their full version against your edited one and coming second. The habit is a loop, and you're keeping it going as well as suffering from it.

Jordan's third study has a detail on this. How far friends misjudged a student's feelings depended partly on how much that student suppressed the bad ones. The more the students hid, the rosier the picture their friends formed. It follows that everyone in a circle can be struggling and hiding it, and every one of them can believe they're the only one.

There's a cost to friendship as well, and I think it's the largest cost in this book. When you're keeping score against a friend, you can't be wholly glad for her. There's a small tax on every piece of her good news. You start holding back your own news too. You hold back the bad because it would lose you points, and sometimes the good in case it looks like competing. Your conversations turn into an exchange of press releases. You can know someone for fifteen years on those terms and know less about her life each year.

The way out is to go first with one true thing, and it needn't be a confession. I'd strongly advise against a public post about your troubles, which is only editing of a different kind. I mean telling one friend, in person or on the phone, one thing from the full version. You might say "Work's been rough since the restructure, to be honest," or "We've been worried about money this year."

I can't promise how it will go. What usually happens, I think, is that you get one back. Your friend looks relieved and tells you about her boss, or her father, or the mortgage that keeps her awake. At that point you know something about her life that no housewarming could have shown you. You can't see anyone's full version unless they show it to you, and they generally won't until someone goes first.

The other half of this is how you answer good news. Congratulate early and be specific. Send the message before the dip has had time to settle in, and say something that shows you noticed what it took. My reasoning is simple. Envy pulls you away from the person, and a warm message sent quickly pulls the other way while that's still easy. It also happens to be what a friend would do, and you may be surprised how much of the dip goes once you've acted like one.

A measure of your own

If the ranking can't tell you how your life is going, something else has to. It's no use being told to stop using a measure unless you're offered a better one, because the need behind it is real. You do want to know whether things are all right. I think two measures work, and you already have both.

The first is your own past. You're the only person whose full version you've had access to at two different dates. So comparing yourself now with yourself five years ago is the one comparison where both sides are complete and the start line is shared. It answers real questions. You can ask whether you're better at your work, whether you're kinder at home, whether you're less frightened of things that used to frighten you, and whether the money is in better or worse order. Some of the answers will please you and some won't. All of them are about your life, and all of them point at something you can do.

The second is your own wants, and here most people find a gap. Try this with the list from chapter 5. For each area where the dip tends to strike, write down what you want in your own terms, and what would count as enough. Don't write what would impress people. Write what you'd choose if nobody were ever going to see it. For home, you might find that you want a second bedroom and some outside space, and that you don't care about islands. For work, it might be more say over your week and no more travel. For fitness, to get up the stairs at the station without puffing.

If you've never done this, you've been borrowing. Without a written want of your own, whatever you saw last becomes the target by default. You drove to the housewarming with no opinion about kitchen islands and drove home needing one. A useful test for a borrowed want is to ask whether you wanted the thing before you saw it.

Once you have the list, the dip has something to be checked against. When it arrives, you can ask whether the thing is on your list. Often it isn't. You don't want to run marathons and never did, and the dip was only registering that someone had won at something. Those can be let go with no effort. Sometimes it is on the list. Then the dip has reminded you of a thing you want, and the answer is a next step, written down. You treat it as something still to be done. You don't treat it as a score.

There's some evidence that people who are doing well work roughly like this. In two studies from 1997, Sonja Lyubomirsky and Lee Ross had students perform a task alongside a peer who did better or worse than they did. Students who'd rated themselves as unhappy were strongly affected either way. Happy students reacted when the peer did worse and were largely unmoved when the peer did better. The studies can't say why. My reading is that the happy students were checking their performance against something of their own, so a faster neighbour didn't change the result.

You may wonder whether it would be simpler to look downwards. There are always people worse off, and "count your blessings" is old advice. I don't recommend it as a method. A study from 1990 by Bram Buunk and colleagues, with cancer patients and with

married people, found that comparing in either direction could leave someone feeling better or worse. Looking at someone worse off can comfort you, and it can also show you where you might be heading. It also keeps you in the ranking business. You'd still be reading your worth off other people, only from a more flattering angle, and that angle will turn as soon as someone impressive walks in.

Appreciating what you have is a different act, and a good one. It doesn't need anyone else to be doing badly.

The decision

Everything so far comes down to one decision, and it's smaller than you might expect. You can't decide to stop comparing, because comparing isn't something you decide to do. What you can decide is to stop treating the dip as information. From now on, when it says "I'm behind", you treat that as a claim to be checked, the way you'd treat a rumour. You don't treat it as a finding.

Here's the method. It has six parts. The first four happen in your head in under a minute, and the other two are arrangements you make.

Name it. When the drop comes, say to yourself "That's a dip." This does more than it sounds. It moves the thing from the class of facts about your life into the class of events in your evening.

Ask the question. What didn't I see? You aren't required to answer. You're marking the evidence as partial, and it nearly always is.

Say the fact without the score. "He's been promoted." "They've bought a house." Then stop there, with no "and therefore". A fact about him leaves your day as it was. The part that hurt was your own addition.

Check it against your list. Do I want that, and did I want it before I saw it? If the answer's no, you're finished. If it's yes, write one next step where you'll find it again. You might look up what the course costs, ask her how she did it, or move fifty pounds. The envy has then done the only useful thing it can do.

Do something for the person. Send the congratulations promptly and make them specific. If what you felt was curiosity, ask your question. You'll be behaving like a friend while the feeling is still deciding which way to go.

Arrange the supply. Mute the accounts that reliably leave you lower. Drop the strangers whose job is to look good. Stay off feeds when you're tired or flat, because that's when you'll look upwards and won't have the energy to correct for it. Gilbert's studies found that people undid a pointless comparison when they were able to. You're least able at eleven at night.

Plans of the form "when this happens, then I'll do that" have a good record in research on habits, because they tie the new response to the moment that needs it. You could make three of them. "When I feel the drop, I'll say that's a dip and ask what I didn't see." "When a friend tells me good news, I'll congratulate them the same day." "When I notice I've opened a feed in a low mood, I'll close it and do something else for ten minutes."

As for what to expect, the comparisons will keep coming, and if Gilbert and his colleagues are right they always will. What changes is the gap between the dip landing and you setting it aside. At first that might take an evening. With practice I'd expect it to come down to a few minutes, and for many dips to a few seconds. That's an expectation and not a promise. You'll still get the odd bad drive home. There should be fewer of them, and they won't run on into the next day.

Don't wait for the right occasion to start. There'll be a dip before the week's out, because there always is, and you can begin with that one.

Weddings, reunions and bad weeks

Some occasions make all this harder, and it's better to know which in advance.

Weddings, reunions and big birthdays show everyone's edited version at full strength. People have dressed for it and have their two-minute summaries ready. You've prepared yours too, which is worth remembering when you're standing in the middle of it. Expect dips, and expect more of them than usual. Name them as they come and don't try to settle anything about your life in the taxi home. Reunions have one thing going for them. By the second hour, someone usually says something true, and the room warms up. You could be the one who says it.

Some news lands on a real wound. If you've been trying for a baby for three years and a friend announces she's pregnant, what you're feeling is grief, and you shouldn't mistake it for a dip or for pettiness. The same goes for a friend's wedding in the year of your divorce. Nothing in this book asks you to talk yourself out of grief. Send a short, kind message, because the friendship matters and her news is good. Then look after yourself in whatever way works, including leaving early. Your loss is real and it needs looking after. It isn't something you scored badly on.

Work is a special case, because rank there has consequences. If a colleague gets the job you applied for, that's a comparison somebody else made, and it affects your pay. Treat it as one you run. Ask what decided it and what would change the answer next time. You're entitled to feel sore for a while. The thing to avoid is

sliding from "they chose her for this post" to "I'm behind in life". The first is an event at work, and the second is a dip that's come along with it.

Then there are bad weeks. When you're tired, ill, short of money or have just had a knock, the dips come thicker and the method seems to stop working. That doesn't mean you've failed or misunderstood the book. It's what Wheeler and Miyake's diaries would predict, since low mood sends people looking upwards. Do the small thing. Name the dips, stay off the feeds for a few days and see one person who knows your full version. Don't count how long you'd gone without a bad evening, because the number doesn't mean anything. Pick it up again at the next dip.

Sometimes, though, the comparing is a sign of something that needs more than a method. A review of studies in clinical groups, published in 2020, found that seeing yourself unfavourably against others was strongly associated with depression, and with anxiety too. The studies can't show which comes first, and it may well run both ways. In practice, that means it's worth speaking to a GP if any of these apply.

- You've felt low, hopeless or worthless most of the time for weeks, and everything you see seems to confirm it. The NHS lists continuous low mood, low self-esteem and feeling hopeless among the symptoms of depression.
- You spend a lot of time worrying about a particular part of your appearance, comparing your looks with other people's and checking or avoiding mirrors. Those are among the signs the

NHS gives for body dysmorphic disorder. It says the condition can get better with treatment, and it advises seeing a GP.

- Worry about your weight or shape has started to change how you eat, such as eating very little, making yourself sick or exercising too much. Those are among the NHS's signs of an eating disorder, and its advice is to see a GP as soon as you can.
- You've had thoughts of harming yourself or that people would be better off without you. That needs help the same day. In England, call NHS 111, ask your GP surgery for an urgent appointment, or call 999 if you're in immediate danger.

In England you can also refer yourself to NHS talking therapies without seeing a GP first. If you take prescribed medication, keep taking it and raise any changes with your doctor.

Needing that kind of help says nothing about how well you read this book. When the mood is doing the comparing, the mood is the thing to treat.

The drive home again

Here's the same Saturday a few months on, as an example of how it might go.

The housewarming is a different friend's this time, and the house is, if anything, nicer. There's a garden room. The children play instruments. Over the lamb, which seems to be what everyone cooks, he mentions that the business has had its best year.

On the ring road, the drop comes. It always will, since this is how minds work and yours is a normal one. Your flat starts to shrink again.

"That's a dip," you say, possibly out loud.

You ask what you didn't see. You don't know, and you don't need to. You saw four hours, and they'd been tidying for a week. You say the fact on its own. They have a lovely house and the business is doing well. You put nothing after it.

Then you check it against your list. You don't want a garden room. You do want outside space, which is already on your list, with a next step you've been putting off. When you get in, you spend ten minutes on it and no more, and you close the laptop. It's a quarter to nine.

You send a message. "Lovely evening. The garden room is wonderful, and I know what the last two years took. Really pleased for you both." You mean it, and sending it makes you mean it a little more.

The phone stays on the arm of the sofa. It's late and you're tired, and you know what you'd find.

Nothing in your life has changed since four o'clock. That was true the first time as well. What's different is that this time you noticed it, and the evening is still your own.

It won't always go that well. Some dips will get past you, some weeks will be heavy, and there are people whose news you may always find a little hard to hear. What I'm confident of is smaller. The dip is a claim, and it rests on poor evidence. Once you've seen how the comparison was put together, it's hard to go on taking its result as a verdict on your life.

If you're going to keep one thing from this book, keep the question. What didn't I see?

And one action, for today. Think of the friend whose life you most often measure yours against. Ring them, or see them, and tell them one true thing from your full version. Then listen to what comes back.

Notes

This book gives general information. It isn't medical or psychological advice, and it's no substitute for a doctor or therapist who knows your situation.

I've kept sources out of the chapters where I could so they read easily. Here they are by chapter, with the limits I'm aware of. Unless I say otherwise, I read the published summary of each paper and not the full text. I checked each paper for a retraction notice in September 2026 and found none. Where a chapter isn't listed, it rests on my own reasoning. That includes chapters 1, 9, 10 and 15, the advice in chapter 11, and the two measures and the list of wants in chapter 12. The NHS pages were read in September 2026. They're written for England, and services differ elsewhere.

Before you start. The symptoms of depression are from the NHS page "Symptoms, depression in adults".

Chapter 2. Festinger, "A theory of social comparison processes", Human Relations 7, 1954, pages 117 to 140. I read the opening of the paper, which sets out the drive to evaluate opinions and abilities. Gilbert, Giesler and Morris, "When comparisons arise", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 69, 1995, pages 227 to 236. Two laboratory studies. Wheeler and Miyake, "Social comparison in everyday life", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 62, 1992, pages 760 to 773. The 94 participants were college students recording their own comparisons, so the record depends on what they noticed and chose to write down. Gerber, Wheeler and Suls, "A social comparison theory meta-analysis 60+ years on",

Psychological Bulletin 144, 2018, pages 177 to 197. The authors note that few of the studies they pooled had a control group that made no comparison. The distinction between a comparison you run and one that runs you is mine.

Chapter 3. Jordan, Monin, Dweck, Lovett, John and Gross, "Misery has more company than people think: underestimating the prevalence of others' negative emotions", Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 37, 2011, pages 120 to 135. I read the full text. All four studies used students at one university in the United States, most of them in their first year. The figures of 29 and 15 per cent, and 40 and 13 per cent, are from the first study, in which 63 students described 187 negative and 187 positive experiences. The fourth study measured everything at a single point in time.

Chapter 4. Schkade and Kahneman, "Does living in California make people happy? A focusing illusion in judgments of life satisfaction", Psychological Science 9, 1998, pages 340 to 346. The study concerns judgements about regions. Applying it to a friend's kitchen is my step.

Chapter 5. Davidai and Deri, "The second pugilist's plight: why people believe they are above average but are not especially happy about it", Journal of Experimental Psychology: General 148, 2019, pages 570 to 587. Twelve studies, 2,474 participants, four of the studies preregistered. Deri, Davidai and Gilovich, "Home alone: why people believe others' social lives are richer than their own", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 113, 2017, pages 858 to 877. Eleven studies, 3,293 participants, three preregistered. The committee of specialists and the two corrections are my way of putting it.

Chapter 6. Lockwood and Kunda, "Superstars and me: predicting the impact of role models on the self", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73, 1997, pages 91 to 103. Van de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters, "Leveling up and down: the experiences of benign and malicious envy", *Emotion* 9, 2009, pages 419 to 429. The explanation of why the dip deflates, and the two questions to ask of envy, are mine.

Chapter 7. Card, Mas, Moretti and Saez, "Inequality at work: the effect of peer salaries on job satisfaction", *American Economic Review* 102, 2012, pages 2981 to 3003. Boyce, Brown and Moore, "Money and happiness: rank of income, not income, affects life satisfaction", *Psychological Science* 21, 2010, pages 471 to 475. It's an analysis of survey data and can't show cause. Solnick and Hemenway, "Is more always better? A survey on positional concerns", *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 37, 1998, pages 373 to 383. The choices were hypothetical. Medvec, Madey and Gilovich, "When less is more: counterfactual thinking and satisfaction among Olympic medalists", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, 1995, pages 603 to 610. Other researchers have since proposed other explanations for the medallists' expressions, and I haven't read that work. That people compare with similar others is how Festinger's theory is usually summarised. I haven't read that part of the paper. The argument that a ranking can't be satisfied is mine.

Chapter 8. Chou and Edge, "'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, 2012, pages 117 to 121. Kross and eight colleagues, "Facebook

use predicts declines in subjective well-being in young adults", PLoS One 8, 2013, e69841. The 82 participants had an average age of about nineteen and a half. Verduyn and eight colleagues, "Passive Facebook usage undermines affective well-being: experimental and longitudinal evidence", Journal of Experimental Psychology: General 144, 2015, pages 480 to 488. Steers, Wickham and Acitelli, "Seeing everyone else's highlight reels: how Facebook usage is linked to depressive symptoms", Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology 33, 2014, pages 701 to 731. Hunt, Marx, Lipson and Young, "No more FOMO: limiting social media decreases loneliness and depression", Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology 37, 2018, pages 751 to 768. Meier and Johnson, "Social comparison and envy on social media: a critical review", Current Opinion in Psychology 45, 2022, 101302. Several of these studies were of students and most concern Facebook, which is no longer where many people do their scrolling. The four ways the phone changes the conditions are my own list, and so are the three adjustments.

Chapter 11. Jordan and colleagues 2011, as above. The advice to go first with one true thing and to congratulate early is mine and hasn't been tested that I know of.

Chapter 12. Lyubomirsky and Ross, "Hedonic consequences of social comparison: a contrast of happy and unhappy people", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 73, 1997, pages 1141 to 1157. Two studies with students. The authors don't claim to know why the happy students were less affected, and my reading is a guess. Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen and Dakof, "The

affective consequences of social comparison: either direction has its ups and downs", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, 1990, pages 1238 to 1249.

Chapter 13. Plans in "when, then" form are from Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119. Gilbert, Giesler and Morris 1995, as above. The inference that a tired mind is worse at setting a comparison aside is mine. The six parts haven't been tested together, and the account of how dips shorten with practice is my expectation and not a finding.

Chapter 14. McCarthy and Morina, "Exploring the association of social comparison with depression and anxiety: a systematic review and meta-analysis", *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy* 27, 2020, pages 640 to 671. Of 54 studies reviewed, 14 could be pooled. In clinical groups, how favourably people rated themselves against others correlated at minus 0.53 with depression and minus 0.39 with anxiety. The symptoms and advice are from the NHS pages "Symptoms, depression in adults", "Body dysmorphic disorder", "Overview, eating disorders", "NHS talking therapies" and "Where to get urgent help for mental health".