

When we feel strong emotions – such as fear, sadness, shame, or hopelessness – we have often just had an *automatic thought*. These thoughts can happen so quickly and effortlessly that we are not even aware we've had them. It can take practice to notice them as they arise. Automatic thoughts often feel convincing, but they are not always 100% accurate.

They are often *exaggerated, biased, distorted, or unrealistic*. There are different types of biases, which psychologists call *cognitive distortions* or *unhelpful thinking styles*. We all think in exaggerated ways sometimes, but it can become a problem if your thoughts are distorted very often or very strongly.

Social comparison is a style of thinking where you compare yourself with others. Making comparisons is a normal and automatic process that has helped us survive as a species. Comparisons that highlight your talents and abilities ('downward' social comparisons) can sometimes boost your self-esteem, but if your comparisons draw attention to your flaws and weaknesses ('upward' social comparisons), they can be distressing. Although often well-intended, social comparisons can be self-defeating, biased, and inaccurate, and they can cause problems.



Social comparison is associated with a wide range of problems:

- Body image problems
- Depression
- Eating disorders
- Low self-esteem
- Narcissism
- Perfectionism
- PTSD
- Self-harm
- Social anxiety
- Suicidal thoughts

Overcoming social comparison

Noticing and labeling

The first step in overcoming your social comparisons is to catch them. Practice *self-monitoring* so that you get better at catching your negative comparisons as they happen. When you notice one, say something to yourself like:

- "I'm comparing myself again."
- "There's another social comparison."



Compare yourself differently

Social comparisons are often biased and selective. For example, you might compare your body with only slim people, or focus just on differences in income. However, you can make your comparisons fairer in lots of ways.

- Rather than being selective, compare yourself with the first 10 people you see – what do you notice about them?
- Rather than focusing on one feature, compare a few neutral things (e.g., sense of humor, hairstyles) – not just the characteristic you feel sensitive about.



Disengage from your comparisons

It's not your fault that you make social comparisons (your brain is designed to do it), but you do have a choice about whether you focus on them. Whenever you notice a social comparison, ask yourself:

- "Is this social comparison helpful or good for me?"
- "Is comparing myself like this consistent with my values?"
- "How could I treat myself with compassion right now?"
- "What else could I focus on (e.g., the conversation, rather than how the person looks)?"



Test your beliefs about comparisons

Do you think your social comparisons are helpful, reassuring, or motivating? You can find out by doing experiments:

- Compare yourself as much as you can for three days.
- Try to compare yourself less for the following three days.
- On which days did you feel better?
- What does that tell you about your social comparisons?

