

Cameron Keegan

Williamson

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Without Compare

Judges, I have a confession to make. Before this round even started, every competitor in the room was doing something we don't want to admit to you or ourselves...we were [pause] sizing up the competition. That's right, we noticed exactly who polished their shoes this morning and who's wearing the best suit. The answer, of course, was me. Suit by Target... We also observed who's tie was crooked and who forgot to wear that matching pocket square. Yeah, guilty with that one as well.

But here's my point: If we constantly compare ourselves to others even without the nagging of Instagram, I'm worried we may have a comparison crisis on our hands. In fact, social scientists at Humboldt University in Germany found that out of 584 Facebook users, the most common emotion aroused by using the social media site was *envy* ("Get"). So, how can we prevent ourselves from turning green every time we log on? Let's begin by cozying up to what Shakespeare coined as the big "green-eyed monster of envy" and get to know what provokes this beast. Then we'll discover how to tame the green eyed monster before he devours us whole.

But first, is social comparison really all bad? Well, not necessarily, according to Dr. Kipling D. Williams of Purdue University. See, there's such thing as an upward comparison and a downward comparison. A downward comparison is something we do to make ourselves feel better, for instance, if I compared myself to you—looks like someone's having a bad hair day.

On the other hand, an upward comparison is designed to motivate us, for instance, if I compared myself to our wonderful panel of judges—where *do* you get your hair done? However, the problems lies in human nature, since comparing ourselves to more accomplished people can often turn us into big green monsters of envy.

So when did this green monster that breeds negative social comparisons begin its spawning season? In the 1970's, people wanted to improve kids' chances of success by instilling a sense of self-esteem. Students were encouraged to make collages celebrating their best qualities—*I'm helpful and honest!* And of course, and *prizes* were given out for this. Unfortunately, rather than boosting self-esteem, we seem to have boosted narcissism instead [pause] confirmed by the fact that a whopping 58% more college students scored higher on the narcissism scale in 2009 than in 1982. As professor of psychology Roy Baumeister puts it, "It [The self-esteem movement] [pause] was an honest mistake." Whoopsies. You see, when they're little, it's cute to tell kids they're a princess or a rockstar or whatever their t-shirt says. When they're 15, it's no longer cute. As a result, *Time* magazine reports that 40% of millennials believe they should be promoted every two years, *regardless* of job performance. These unrealistic expectations coupled with the culture of narcissism that social media promotes and it's clear that when the Millennials of our generation compare, we fall especially hard.

Now it's a simple fact—we live in a world where our peers constantly dominate our realities, both virtual and non-virtual, which leads to a high visibility of others' successes and achievements. And when we see that someone else is achieving their expectations of life and we aren't, the cycle of obsession and inadequacy starts (Stein). After the Public Library of Science studied 82 Facebook users this past August, they found that the more someone uses Facebook,

the less satisfied he or she is with life (“Get”). And as Hanna Krasnova of Humboldt University in Germany explains: "A photo can very powerfully provoke immediate social comparison, and that can trigger feelings of inferiority. You don't envy a news story." What we end up with is “the envy spiral.” You see, when we see photos of our friends skiing the Alps or sailing the French Riviera, we compensate with even better photos of ourselves. And before we even know it, we fall victim to the clutches of the green-eyes monster (Winter).

Sadly, the longer we linger with this monster, the worse things get. As it turns out, falling short of standards is the initiation of the six-step process towards suicide. Psychologist Roy Baumeister confirms this, finding that suicide rates are lowest on Fridays and highest on Mondays. Similarly, they drop just before major holidays but then spike sharply afterwards (Bering), illustrating what can happen when expectations aren't met. Curiously, a 2012 study published by the San Francisco Federal Reserve found that those living in wealthier neighborhoods are at a much higher risk of committing suicide than those living in poorer neighborhoods—a tragic reality of keeping up with the Joneses (Sanburn). And while I'm not saying that Facebook users are going to become suicidal, we need to know when enough is enough.

And when it comes to social comparison, that's something we all need to tell ourselves—I know it's something I've had to tell my sister. Mom had taken her to the doctor for some tests, and as it turns out, she's had ADD, or Attention Deficit Disorder, all her life. And while it definitely could have been a lot worse, to her this wasn't just a simple diagnosis, it was a life-changing realization. You see, her mind just won't let her perform as well as she wants to in AP and advanced courses, and while her friends will make it look easy and move on to the next class,

she's stuck wondering "why me." And I know we've all been there, [pause] I've *definitely* been there, and it *just* hurts. And we take a step further into the lair of the green-eyed monster every time we compare or dwell. But we can't help ourselves from putting our noses over the fence and seeing those pastures as greener. You see, what my sister truly needs won't come from a doctor's visit, and it surely won't come from a bottle of pills. What she needs is self-acceptance, and I can't help to think that our society needs the same.

So how *exactly* do we escape the clutches of this green-eyed monster? Well, I have two solutions, ranging from easy to much more difficult. First, we must understand that looks can be deceiving. After all, it's called *virtual* reality for a reason. In 2012, a Stanford University study noted that we as people routinely overestimate the happiness of others, so, the first step is to simply understand that what we see framed on Facebook is only a snapshot in time—and that snapshot has *probably* been *doctored-up* with some Instagram filters (Sachs).

The second and final way is the hard way. Psychologist Judith Orloff explains that in order to combat the feelings of envy we get from social comparison, we need to step up, be the bigger person, and wish others well—mentally, verbally, or however we can (Orloff). Okay, I admit, maybe *you* really *do* have the best hair in this round. And you know, I think parents know what I'm talking about best. Sure, Leah's parents will brag that she got a 2400 on her SAT and Jon's parents will bask in the glory of his recent acceptance to Yale, but will parents love their kids any less if they aren't Rhodes scholars? Of course not. Unfortunately, kids often compare their achievements to their parents' expectations of them, and when they—when *we*—fall short, we feel like failures; we may even feel like life's not worth living.

Anson Ha's parents always wanted him to be a doctor, and he had every intention of

fulfilling their dream. He studied hard. He took the right courses. But when Organic Chemistry and Calculus proved impassable in his junior year of college, he knew he would never be accepted to medical school. His straight A's in English and Childhood Development were not enough, and the comparison to the other pre-med students loomed large—larger than his will to live. So Anson drove home to San Jose, spent one last night with his family, then drove to a deserted parking lot and shot himself.

But, no one needed to ask his friends if they still would have respected him if he had changed his major. And no one needed to ask his parents if they would have loved him even if he became a teacher instead of a doctor. In fact, they would've given anything if he had.

It's easy for us to know that we would love our mothers or brothers whether or not they get into medical school, but imagine a world where we could grant that same unconditional love to ourselves. That's right—stop comparing our achievements and attributes to others; stop comparing our possessions and talents to others. Look in that mirror and accept what we see. Look at that transcript and accept—with gratitude—what we've been able to achieve.

You see, as more social media tools emerge, the nagging of others' success will only increase—but by understanding that we only see part of the story, wishing others well, and ultimately accepting ourselves, we can *break free* from the green-eyed monster's clutches. So if Shakespeare himself asks “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?” Just say “No, thank you!” I—we—are without compare.

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