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## Family Focus Compare . . . and Despair

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. She is also available for parenting consultation.

It's human nature to compare and contrast ourselves with others. But some people do this to an extreme, many without even realizing it, and wind up sabotaging their ability to be happy and content.

If you feel deficient in some way and then see others who have what you think you lack, you'll only make yourself feel worse by making comparisons. Even if you feel relatively good about yourself, focusing on what others have can undermine some of your own positive feelings. Comparisons can be about physical appearance, athletic ability, financial success, achievements, artistic ability, friendships, or family. The list goes on and on.

Nina, a twenty-three year old graduate student, had a huge amount of insecurity about her weight and body. Although she was a normal weight and athletic, Nina wished she could be thinner, more toned, and taller. It was hard enough that she was so self-critical, but Nina also constantly scanned her environment to find other females with the kind of body she craved. The result was that Nina, who had so much going for her - brains, beauty, personality, good family and friends - was constantly dissatisfied with herself.

Our work involved deeper issues, but we also focused on helping Nina overcome the habit of comparing herself in ways that made her feel bad. For one thing, the comparisons were skewed. Most people, like Nina, compare themselves only to those who have more, not to those who have less. Until Nina could rid herself of the habit of making comparisons, her challenge was to notice a body not in as good shape as hers for each enviable body she saw. It was important for Nina to develop perspective and balance. She needed much more emphasis on appreciating what she had.

Stan, a fifty-three year old stockbroker who was going through a difficult divorce, made different kinds of comparisons. He compared his situation with all of the intact families in his family and community. He compared himself to his peers who were more affluent and drove nicer cars. And he even compared himself to his friends and business associates who were much better golfers. Stan had enough unhappiness in his life with his divorce. But especially

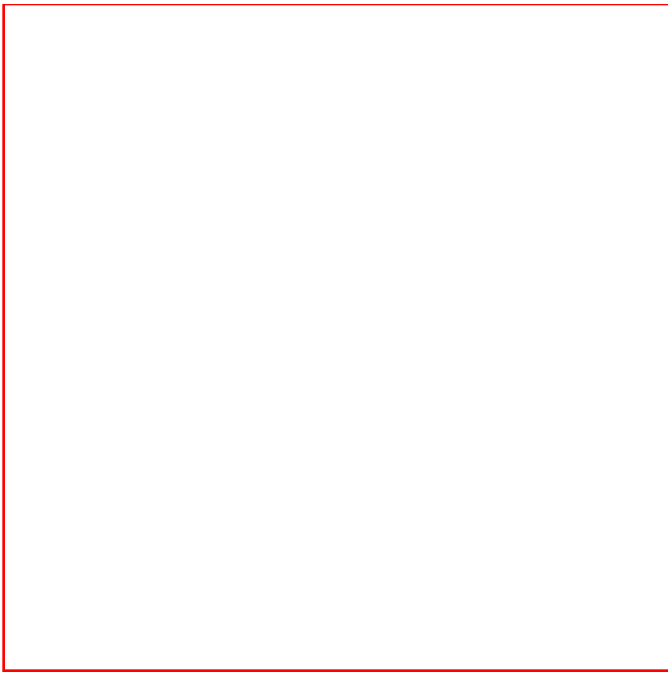
because he was at such a low point, he regarded everyone else around him as having more.

It takes practice over time to break the habit of comparing. First, you must catch yourself in the act of doing it. Awareness is an essential tool in changing a behavior. Then you need to focus on all that you have going for yourself. Try to appreciate everything, large and small. You may not have your ideal home, but there are probably aspects of your home or its location that you do enjoy. You may not like your thighs, but at least you have a body that works. And you probably have other features that you do like. You can remind yourself that no one has it all; even those who seem to often have challenges that aren't apparent to others.

As you are practicing avoiding comparisons, you can concentrate on admiring the successes or beauty or personality of others. You can practice not allowing their good qualities or good fortune to detract from your own feelings of well-being.

You can then begin to use this admiration as positive motivation for yourself. Perhaps you would like to be more like your friend who is in good shape or has a good relationship with her husband. This is your cue to work on these things for yourself. It is much easier to improve ourselves when it comes from a positive place than from a negative one.

Ultimately, of course, the goal is self-acceptance. Those who can accept themselves, limitations and all, are the fortunate ones, for they have a key to greater happiness.



Reach the reporter at: [margieryr@yahoo.com](mailto:margieryr@yahoo.com)

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