

## Overcoming Envy

Dr. Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D.

### *The Perception of a Deficit and giving it Relevance*

Envy is an emotion which "occurs when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it". [1] However, it is important to realize that this is always a subjective perception, which involves two steps:

A. Seeing that one is lacking what another has

B. Regarding A as relevant

We are all different, but in envy and other 'negative emotions' that question is whether the differences are relevant. I may not be able to change that someone is taller or shorter than I am, but I can decide whether to give it relevance or not. This is where the perception of one's values and fundamental interests comes in.

### *Envy leads to Unhappiness*

Bertrand Russell said that envy was one of the most potent causes of unhappiness. [2] Not only is the envious person rendered unhappy by his or her envy, Russell explained, but that person also wishes to inflict misfortune on others. Although envy is generally seen as something negative, Russell also believed that envy was a driving force behind the movement towards democracy and must be endured to achieve a more just social system. [3]

It has been suggested that there may be two types of envy: [4] [5]

- malicious envy that can lead to self-harm and the urge to cause someone else to suffer
- benign envy as a positive motivational force to change for the better by following another's example

However, it can be argued that even the benign envy is highly problematic. If I have to change to become more like someone else this may not lead me closer to becoming aware of myself and pursuing a path that is in sync with my own values and interests, which ultimately leads to greater happiness.

### *The Loss of Direction*

Based upon Charles Darwin's (1859) theory of evolution through natural selection, socioevolutionary theory has argued that humans behave in ways that enhance individual survival and also the reproduction of their genes. The experience and expression of envy is thus seen as a necessary mechanism for survival and procreation. [6] Indeed, recent studies have demonstrated that inciting envy changes cognitive function, boosting mental persistence and memory. [7] However, it is arguable that admiration, excitement, pleasure and – most importantly – happiness can provide the motivation to pursue achievements we see in others. It is also a better process to find out what one really wants and lends a more enduring and positive energy to pursuing it. In today's world, largely due to the availability of vastly improved communication, we might be able to do without envy altogether.

### *Envy leads to the Pursuit of Unhappiness*

Often, envy involves a motive to "outdo or undo the rival's advantages". [8] In part, this type of envy may be based on materialistic possessions rather than psychological states. Basically, people find themselves experiencing an overwhelming emotion due to someone else owning or possessing desirable items that they do not. Feelings of envy occur in the forms of emotional pain, a lack of self-worth, and a lowered self-esteem/well-being.

Envy may negatively affect the closeness and satisfaction of relationships. Overcoming envy might be similar to dealing with other negative emotions (anger, resentment, etc.). Individuals experiencing anger often seek professional treatment (anger management) to help understand why they feel the way they do and how to cope. Subjects experiencing envy often have a skewed perception on how to achieve true happiness. By helping people to change these perceptions, they will be more able to understand the real meaning of fortune and satisfaction with what they do have. According to Lazarus, "coping is an integral feature of the emotion process". [9] However, in the long-term self-discovery and discerning what is truly relevant to

oneself and what is not provide a more permanent solution to envy. They also lead to greater happiness.

### *Dealing with Envy*

Coping with envy can be similar to coping with anger. One may need to distinguish between an envious reaction and the more chronic form of envy that influences one's thoughts and actions for a longer time. According to research done by Salovey and Rodin (1988), "more effective strategies for reducing initial envy appear to be stimulus focused rather than self-focused." [10] Salovey and Rodin (1988) also suggest "self-bolstering (e.g., "thinking about my good qualities") may be an effective strategy for moderating these self-deprecating thoughts and muting negative affective reactions". [10] However, positive thinking may only be of limited use. The reason is that positive thinking that does not derive from one's values and basic interests and aspirations is not believable to oneself over an extended period of time. The important first step to make envy disappear is to investigate and discover one's values, needs and wants. In most cases one will discover that a perceived difference is not relevant to oneself. If someone else has more money this may not be relevant if I have get recognition in a job I like and can provide for the safety of my family. Often, we think we need something to make us feel better, when there is a much easier way to achieve the same goal. This openness and flexibility to alternative routes with an und understanding of what is truly relevant to oneself is very powerful against envy and its potentially disastrous consequences.

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*Dr Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D. trained in medicine, psychiatry and psychotherapy and works in private practice for psychotherapy, counselling and psychiatric medication in Dublin, Ireland. The author can be reached by email at [jonathanhaverkamp@gmail.com](mailto:jonathanhaverkamp@gmail.com) or on the websites [www.jonathanhaverkamp.com](http://www.jonathanhaverkamp.com) and [www.jonathanhaverkamp.ie](http://www.jonathanhaverkamp.ie).*

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