
FROM ENVY TO HAPPINESS

Christian Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D.

Comparing oneself to others is very normal but it can also cause a lot of problems. Envy is a feeling of discontent triggered by drawing comparisons to someone else who has an attribute or possession one deems valuable. Envy is interesting for the series of steps it requires and the destructiveness that is associated with it, both for the envious person and the target. Understanding envy and better uses of communication can help individuals better deal with this destructive emotion and help prevent it in the wider society.

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Envy as Destructive Motivator

Envy begins with a comparison between oneself and others. Without the comparison there can be no envy. There is a reason why people compare themselves to others. On the positive side, comparisons can lead to learning a new way of doing something, which can lead to improvements for oneself and others. Envy as an emotion can motivate people to gain something they regard as valuable and relevant to them in an important way.

However, envy can also be destructive in societies and economies which increasingly depend on teamwork, where the benefits to the individual from the success of the group far outweigh the expected average benefit to individuals from going out on their own.

Comparisons by themselves are neutral, and whether the consequence of it is positive or negative depends significantly on how one feels about oneself. If I have a good opinion of myself, others will by comparison not look much better. In other words, there must be a perception of a deficit in attributes or possessions which matters to the individual greatly. One main approach to reducing envy in an individual or a large group of individuals is to make them feel better about themselves. Since nothing works as well in making one feel better than the ability to engage in something one truly values, needs and aspires to, it begins with helping someone to discover these basic parameters.

A benign form of envy does not exist. If making someone else suffer were not part of envy, it would just be a motivation to improve in some area. Envy is thus largely incompatible with a world that is increasingly growing together. Achievement and self-improvement has helped humans to escape from the caves of the stone age, but this is different from envy which moves some to disconnect and even harm others. The difference is mainly what the individual does with the signal transmitted in the emotion of envy.

The Signal

Envy itself is only a signal which induces an individual to move the person towards thoughts, action or behaviours. The thoughts, actions or behaviours, however, are not pre-specified, but depend on information the brain has and how it processes information. A past experience, for example, can shape how one thinks about a present event and how one acts on a feeling. How one uses the signal depends on the own perspective and preferences, the needs, values and aspirations one experiences in the moment. Personality attributes and many other factors can also play a role.

Becoming aware of communication patterns inside and outside the own person can change how an individual reacts to a signal. Identifying the signal and reflecting on what it means and on what to change or which action to take can be learned and improved upon, which can turn a feeling of envy into a signal for positive change.

The Reference Point

Envy is a feeling which can play a significant role in interpersonal interactions, but also within larger groups. It always begins with a comparison between oneself and others, and without this comparison there can be no envy. People compare themselves to others often, and they do so for several reasons. On the positive side, comparisons can lead to learning a new way of doing something, which can lead to improvements for oneself and others. Envy as an emotion can motivate people to gain something they regard as valuable and relevant to them in an important way. However, envy can also be destructive to individuals as well as to whole societies and economies.

Envy is thus largely incompatible with a world that is increasingly growing together. Humans have always depended on each other for survival, but in a world that is increasingly dependent on teamwork and whose information flows are ever more interconnected and volume rich, the harm to the individual from the harm which another person experiences is becoming ever greater. Thus, envy can be a serious risk to the well-being of everyone affected by it. Envy can, of course, be motivating. Achievement and self-improvement has helped humans to escape from the caves of the stone age, but this is different from envy which moves some to disconnect and even harm others. The difference is mainly what the individual does with the signal transmitted in the emotion of envy.

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Envy is a feeling, and it is important to separate it from specific thoughts and actions, because the latter can be changed through learning or consciously based on insight and reflection. The feeling by itself does not automatically have to cause the same set of thought and behaviours. Once one develops an appreciation for the information signal contained in the emotion, it can then be even helpful working with this signal to meet one's true needs, wishes and aspirations. The key is to connect with oneself to identify these own basic parameters through connecting with oneself. Becoming more like someone else may not lead to greater self-awareness and pursuing a path that is in sync with one's own values and interests, which could lead to greater happiness. External reference point, such as the opinions and validations from other, can be information that one can learn from, but it should not replace the internal reference point. Only by following the own values, needs and aspirations can happiness be achieved in the long-run.

Even on the motivational side, becoming more like someone else may not lead to greater self-awareness and pursuing a path that is in sync with one's own values and interests, which could lead to greater happiness. External reference point, such as the opinions and validations from other, can be information that one can learn from, but it should not replace the internal reference point. Only by following the own values, needs and aspirations can happiness be achieved in the long-run. But these parameters interact in important ways with those of others. The more an individual is interacting with others meaningfully, the more the basic parameters can give rise to behaviour and thoughts that takes the basic parameters of

others into account. This means that the reference point stays with the own person but at the same time involves those of others. There is a strong link between internal and external communication. Aligning them in some areas is as important as noting the differences. Communication supports auto-regulatory processes, while also inducing more communication.

Solutions to envy are greater insight into one's own values, needs and aspirations and greater insight into how the world works. The tool is in both bases communication, and the result a transformation of envy into a wish for achievement, fulfilment and happiness. Awareness into how one works with communication patterns and how one distils meaning from communicated messages can be gained through meaningful interactions with others and via internal communication. A therapeutic setting is a communication space which can lead to awareness, insight and experimentation if there is a meaningful process between therapist and patient. This entails an exchange of messages that have an effect and lead to change in the other, which in turn requires reflection (internal processing) and internal perceptiveness as well as openness, emotional and in terms of other important information, to the other person.

The Basic Parameters

Values, needs, aspirations remain relatively stable over time. They define basic parameters of what it means to be oneself. There is even a more fundamental sense of self which is generated by the flows of information and information processing capabilities of the brain. The sense of self is rather shapeless, while the basic parameters have quality and quantity. Risk averseness, for example, as a general attribute is a value of these basic parameters.

The basic parameters play a role in relation to envy because the more in sync one's thoughts and behaviours are with them, the easier it is to focus on what is truly important, which reduces feelings of envy. They make it easier to distinguish between own expectations, standards and value attributions and those of others. (Haverkamp, 2017)

Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is interpreted as a feeling. When individuals feel better, they also feel more confident. So, one reason for low self-confidence, which could lead to greater feelings of envy, could be a depression where emotions in general are reduced and people feel and think more negatively about themselves and the world around them. This can in turn cause more unfavourable comparisons with others and together with the more negative state increase feelings of envy. Feelings of envy may thus indicate an untreated mental health condition.

Studies have demonstrated that inciting envy changes cognitive function, boosting mental persistence and memory. The problem with envy is the directedness. If one feels lonely and envious, targeting energy against someone who is not does little to resolve the underlying problem. Rather the energy should be focused on building relationships. If one has a high sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy, the energy can be invested in oneself to achieve what one perceives as necessary. Knowing more about oneself and the world raises self-confidence, which helps direct envy in better ways.

Meaningfulness and Relevance

Differences between oneself and others may not be relevant, and quite often differences are a good thing. To someone working as a movie actor being not too tall is actually an advantage. Anxious personality traits can also bestow an advantage in terms of life expectancy as compared to recklessness and indifference to risks. Important for identifying relevance are again the basic parameters, the own values, needs and aspirations. Relevance is also linked to meaning. (Haverkamp, 2018a, 2018b) If something is not meaningful, it cannot be relevant. Realizing that a facial feature does not contain any meaningfulness to oneself, should make it irrelevant. Whether it has meaning to others may make a difference in social interactions, but only to the point where more important information is exchanged which actually carries meaning.

Deficit

Even if something is potentially relevant, this does not mean one has to have it. Also, many attributes are subjective. What people consider as beautiful varies from one to the next, as it does with many other attributes. The same applies to an extent also to possessions.

A deficit should also be meaningful and relevant. If it is neither meaningful or relevant to oneself, there is little point in worrying about it. Sometimes one may have the perception that society is attaching a value to something which oneself is not. One way out of this dilemma is to consider the value society is attaching to it. Quite often one finds a shared general value which underlies the more specific values people talk about. Humans in general are quite similar in their basic values, and often it is possible to look at the deeper values to find meaning in something. However, one can still do things in many different ways, and this is where uniqueness and individuality comes in. Innovation is usually doing the existing in a novel way. Rather than being envious of what someone else is doing or something another person possesses, it may be useful to think about an own way of looking at or doing things.

Envy leads to Unhappiness

Bertrand Russell said that envy was one of the most potent causes of unhappiness. 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. It is tempting to regard emotion as atomic, meaning that it cannot be split further into constituent parts, such as the signal to effect change which is contained within the feeling of envy.

Taking envy at face value rather than reflecting on what it could mean wastes time and processing resources. Conscious thought is limited in the volume of information it can process which makes it easier to use the

emotion as it is. Since an emotion is itself the product of large volumes of information from inside and outside the person, it can lead to an adequate response in many everyday scenarios a human in a stone age culture might have had to deal with daily. In more complex and evolved societies, however, the conscious processing of information becomes increasingly important, which nonetheless needs as an input such pre-processed information as the emotions.

Rather than dealing with the root of envy, that something might be miscommunicated, or a perspective should be adjusted, the apparent need is addressed, such as the perceived need for a possession of plastic surgery, for example. This often leads to greater unhappiness in the long-run. A better way would be on identifying what thoughts or actions could get one closer to what really matters to oneself. Frequently there may also be emotional conflicts stemming from past experiences which need to be resolved. Here also, better connectedness with oneself is a proven way to reduce them.

For the Good of All

In modern society the individual's top priority may no longer be the survival of individual information encoded in individual genes but contributing to humanity and life as whole. As people become more connected and similarities, as well as unique characteristics, become clearer to more people in one's environment, the value one sees in other people, and thereby connectedness, increases. In this setting envy in the classical sense of creating friction is no longer helpful to anyone. However, if one just takes the signal embedded in the emotion and looks for thoughts, feelings and behaviours that make good use of the signal, it would lead to greater connectedness with oneself and with others to obtain what one feels is missing. This will often not be the obvious on the surface, but something that is closer to the true values, aspirations and needs. So, a feeling of envy can lead to helping other people and thereby eliminating a perceived deficit. Much depends on how a signal is channelled into interactions with oneself and others.

A positive use of the signal provided by a feeling of envy depends on self-image and self-confidence. The more positive they are, and the more positive the comparison with others is as result of it, the more the signals contained in a feeling of envy will lead to constructive and inclusive results, which benefits others. Unfortunately, in relationships, groups and societies it may seem easier to stay at a superficial level of conflict rather than to identify underlying needs, values and aspirations, which can then help to resolve the underlying problems, and with it the signal.

Dealing with Envy

If one is suffering from feelings of envy, or another person is suffering from it, some of the important steps have been discussed above. The central piece is to better connect with oneself emotionally and cognitively. This means working on better noticing and identifying feelings and reflecting on them. If, for example, an activity triggered certain feelings, to discover and explore this association helps shedding light on own needs, basic interests, values and aspiration, which make up important components of the basic parameters.

Positive thinking by itself is usually only of limited and transient use. The reason is that positive thinking that does not derive from one's values and basic interests and aspirations does not have the emotional quality to be 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.

Transformation

An emotion of envy is not the problem. The key is to identify the emotion and the signal it contains. The next step is then to unlock its meaning and initiate thoughts, actions or behaviours that are helpful in the situation. Helpful means that it brings about a movement in the right direction, fulfilling needs and aspirations and acting closer to one's values. Over the long-run, this brings greater happiness.

The term transformation may be a misnomer because fundamentally the individual does not change, as in terms of basic parameters, such as values, needs or aspirations. However, the change that takes place when one becomes more aware of these values and develops more adaptive and more effective strategies to act on emotional signals, the interaction with others and oneself seems transformed.



Dr Jonathan Haverkamp, M.D. MLA (Harvard) LL.M. 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 or on the website www.jonathanhaverkamp.ie.

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