

Break free from the comparison trap

Constantly measuring yourself against other people can undermine your self-esteem. Here's how to let go of unhelpful habits and set yourself up for success

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When you hear someone in group has reached target, or has just had a great weight loss that week, what goes through your mind as you smile and congratulate them? Chances are it's something like: 'She's doing so well, she's so much more focused than me, why can't I be more like that?' Welcome to the comparison trap! You can't 'switch off' your mental habit of measuring yourself against the people around you – it's one of our innate drives and it does actually serve a purpose. Keeping track of what others are up to is a good way of gaining an objective view on how well you're doing yourself. Unfortunately, comparison has a dark side: there's a danger that by using other people as a yardstick, we start to feel as if we never quite measure up.

With a few smart strategies, you can manage this powerful drive so it becomes a positive rather than a negative force in your life. Here are the six most common comparison traps and how to side-step them...

COMPARISON TRAP #1

Taking it personally

Measuring yourself against people you feel are doing better than you can become a form of self-criticism. 'What many of us do without realising it is to compare what we see as someone's strengths to what we see as our weaknesses,' says counsellor and psychotherapist Rachel Shattock Dawson (therapyonthames.co.uk). 'So it's not surprising it leaves us feeling bad!' If you fall into this trap, every time you see somebody else achieving success the subconscious message you receive is: 'I'm not good enough'. Over time, this starts to erode your self-esteem – not to mention your confidence that you can reach your weight-loss target.

Break free It's tempting to try to avoid slimmers who are losing weight more quickly or more consistently than you. However, this could be self-defeating; they may be the mentors you need to help you to target. 'You can feel like you're alone in the challenges you face,' says Consultant Lynda Stock, who runs a group in Denton Holme, Carlisle. 'Staying to IMAGE Therapy will help you realise that other people have setbacks, too.' Psychologist and lecturer Fiona Robards, author of *What Makes You Happy?* (Exisle Publishing, £9.95), says: 'There's nothing wrong with comparison – in the end, it's just about noticing difference. The key to lasting contentment is knowing your own strengths and talents and valuing your uniqueness.'

COMPARISON TRAP #2

Getting status envy

It's hard to imagine life now without social media. The downside is we've got hundreds more people to compare ourselves with. It's easy to forget that what we tend to see on people's personal pages are the edited highlights. 'Very few people post about something boring or upload bad pictures of themselves,' says Rachel. It's no wonder that the more time you spend on Facebook, the more you compare your body to your friends' – and, according to research from the University of Strathclyde, the more negative you'll feel about yourself as a result.

Break free 'Monitor how you feel when you've been online – you may log on to relax but end up feeling agitated,' says Rachel. If this tends to happen, limit your social media time. Or visit your group's Facebook page to get the support you need. Self-acceptance starts with self-compassion, adds Rachel. 'Be kind to yourself, however unnatural it may feel at first. Rather than mentally wagging a finger, tell yourself you're doing OK.'

COMPARISON TRAP #3

Comparing apples with pears

There's no doubt other group members' experiences can be inspirational. **But** you'll never look exactly like your tall slimming buddy if you're short and pear-shaped, and that's OK! **Other people's achievements are motivating**

only if they're also attainable for you.

'Everyone's journey differs – even two members with very similar builds and starting weights will slim in a different way,' says Lynda Stock.

Break free The good news is that slow and steady will still get you to the finish line. 'It can be frustrating if you lose a pound when another member loses three or four,' says Lynda. 'Occasionally what you're seeing is the difference between sticking to Food Optimising 100 per cent or only half following it, which is when keeping a Food Diary can be helpful.' Some people simply lose weight more slowly than others. 'I tell members it's like the story of the tortoise and the hare – keep going with your steady weight loss and you'll get there in the end,' adds Lynda.

COMPARISON TRAP #4

Thinking 'perfect' is normal

We're constantly bombarded with images of unattainable bodies in the media, and comparing yourself to celebrities or models can be like pouring cold water on your own hard-won achievements. As so many photos are digitally altered, you may be holding yourself up against an ideal that doesn't actually exist in real life. 'Goals are only motivating if they're actually achievable,' says Fiona Robards.

Break free Give up on perfect and focus on real achievements. 'Comparison presses the "perfectionist" button for some,' says Rachel Shattock Dawson. 'If you always

have to be top of the class, you're going to feel like a failure every time someone seems to be doing better. And that can make you consider giving up, especially if you've had a tough week.' Let go of those unrealistic ideals, and aim for the version of yourself you really want to be instead.

COMPARISON TRAP #5

Always wanting more

We live in a consumer society that encourages us to buy – whether it's new clothes, a kitchen makeover or a better car – all the time. Yet in psychological studies, people with a materialistic approach score the lowest in life satisfaction, and have the highest levels of insecurity and anxiety (because there will always be something they want and can't have). 'There's a lot of truth in the saying that happiness is wanting what we have, rather than having what we want,' says Fiona. 'People who see a very big gap between what they have and what they want (whether it's money, a job, friends or health) are unhappier than those who see the gap as smaller.'

Break free Count your blessings! Cultivating an attitude of gratitude isn't just a powerful defence against this toxic type of comparison – studies have shown it helps reduce stress and increase feelings of contentment. Every day, jot down something you're grateful for on a scrap of paper, fold it up and put it in a glass jar, says Fiona. 'When you're in need of a pick-me-up, dip in and read a happy thought.' If you're struggling for

inspiration, try answering the following questions: What are you thankful for? What little pleasures make your days happier? What is going well for you and what difference has this made? 'Another good question is: how have I contributed towards those things I appreciate?' says Fiona. 'It helps boost your confidence to see you can make positive changes in your life, including reaching a healthy weight.'

COMPARISON TRAP #6

Forgetting to compare yourself with... yourself!

When you've got your radar permanently set on what others are doing, it's all too easy to overlook what matters most – your own progress. In the end, it's keeping track of the positive changes you've made that will motivate you to carry on. 'If you've been at group and everyone seems to have done better than you, you might start to think what's the point,' says Lynda. Focusing on your own journey is especially important in a week when you've had a weight gain.

Break free Think 'big picture'. 'We often forget how far we've come and start to take our weight loss for granted,' says Lynda, 'which is why it's so important to fill in the personalised progress chart on LifelineOnline, the free online resource for members – it gives you a visual picture of your journey.' Always keep your favourite 'before' and 'after' pictures close to hand, too. As Lynda says, 'Just looking at them can give you an instant shot of motivation and remind you that yes, it does work.'