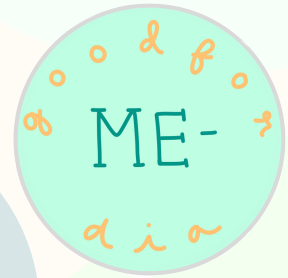


# What Youth NEED to Know:

## #GoodforMEdia's Guide to Social Comparison

#GoodforMEdia is a peer mentoring campaign for older teens and young adults to share their personal stories, insights and strategies with younger teens and tweens to support their healthy engagement with social media. We created this guide to help youth tackle social comparison, a common phenomenon which can make social media a draining experience.



## What is social comparison?

Social comparison theory is the idea that individuals determine their own social and personal worth based on how they compare to others ("Social Comparison Theory," 2022).

**Upward social comparison:** the act of comparing yourself to someone who you believe is better than you in some way ("Social Comparison Theory," 2022).

**Downward social comparison:** the act of comparing yourself to someone who you believe you are better than in some way ("Social Comparison Theory," 2022).

### **Social comparison is extremely common on social media:**

In the offline world, social comparison usually involves yourself and a few others in your immediate community, like friends and relatives. However, social media provides us with many more opportunities to compare ourselves to others, from casual acquaintances to celebrity influencers. Research shows that the majority of social comparisons made on social media are upward comparisons (Vogel et al., 2014). Generally, the act of upward comparison lowers self-esteem and can also increase feelings of anxiety (Lee, 2021; Jiang & Ngien, 2020).

Social comparison can feel instinctive as we passively view other people's lives through social media. How can we combat social comparison and the distressing feelings that may accompany it? First, let's establish a key fact:



## **Social media distorts reality.**

Young social media users tend to post about their best moments, creating the appearance that their lives are constantly happy and exciting when this may not be true in reality: **Forty-three percent of U.S. teens feel pressure to only post content on social media that makes them look good to others** (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). 49% of teens say they post about their accomplishments on social media, whereas only 13% post about personal problems (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Furthermore, **photos on social media may be heavily stylized or edited.** Individuals can retouch their appearance using filters or basic editing apps. Celebrities or influencers with mass followings often have entire teams of people who edit their photos to make them appear “flawless,” thereby upholding a false standard of perfection.

Some users decide to create “**finstas**,” separate accounts dedicated to posting content from their lives that is less elegant and curated than the posts on their main account. However, users often limit their finsta followers to close friends to avoid sharing unpolished content with their broader follower bases.

**Understanding that social media is a highlight reel is crucial to recognizing and critically analyzing instances of social comparison in our lives!**

Now, let's talk about a few different types of social comparison and how to deal with them.

# 4 types of social comparison:

## I. FOMO

FOMO, the fear of missing out, is “the worry that social events, or otherwise enjoyable activities, may be taking place without you present to enjoy them” (RSPH, 2017). You might experience FOMO while viewing posts from friends or far-off celebrities about fun life experiences.



FOMO has been associated with higher levels of social media use and can intensify feelings of loneliness and inadequacy (Fioravanti, 2021).

### Examples of FOMO-based comparisons:

- “Everyone is posting pictures from that party – I wish I had been invited.”
- “It looks like all of my classmates are having so much fun this year, but I am barely getting by.”
- “My friends are all posting vacation pictures, but I am stuck at home – my life is so boring.”
- “I need to stay up to date on my classmates’ posts so that I am not left out at school.”

### Strategies to avoid FOMO-based comparisons:

Remember that **social media is a highlight reel**, so others’ lives are not necessarily as fun or glamorous as they appear to be on social media.

Since FOMO is driven by our desire for connection, after experiencing FOMO, you might want to keep scrolling on social media to stay in the loop. However, if you are already in a difficult headspace, you may make more upward comparisons and experience even more FOMO the longer you scroll. So, **take a break from social media after noticing that you are feeling FOMO.**

Ask yourself: **Why am I feeling FOMO?** Is it because I am genuinely disappointed to have missed out on an event for the sake of the experience, or because I believe my worth is based on whether I attended an event?

- It's okay if the answer is "yes" to both!
- Remember that **your worth is not defined by external factors**, which are unstable and unreliable. Only you know what is best for yourself, so trust your intuition, and you are enough!

**A day of two after you experienced FOMO, reflect on the post that caused your FOMO:** does the event that you missed out on still feel as serious? Did your absence lead to any concrete, negative consequences (other than FOMO)?

## 2. Appearance

Since social media centers heavily on images and videos, **these platforms can amplify the narrow beauty ideals** that already exist in our society. Social media is filled with images of people presenting their favorite version of themselves, which leads many users to compare their body to an **unrealistic standard**.



Research from Facebook suggests that **social media can exacerbate a negative view of one's appearance:** 1 in 3 teenage girls who experience body image issues reported that using Instagram made them feel worse about their body (Raychoudhury, 2021). Boys also face body image pressures on social media as certain types of bodies are idealized although they are not attainable or healthy for everyone.

## Examples of appearance-based comparisons:

- “There’s no way I could pull off that outfit as well as they do”
- “That person looks so toned in all of their photos, but my body never looks like that”
- “I wish my skin were as clear as theirs”
- “All of the fitness influencers I see have the same body type. Since I don’t look like them, I must not be healthy”



## Strategies to avoid appearance-based comparisons:

Again, **remember that social media is highly curated and edited**: the person you are comparing yourself to probably spent a long time preparing and posing for one photo that they liked.

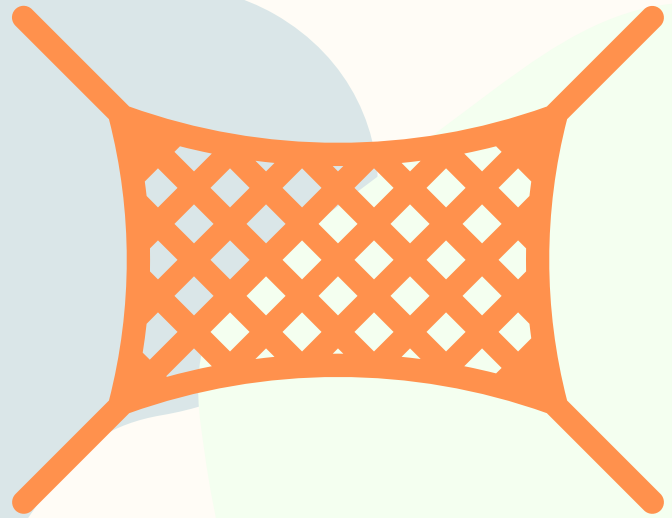
Also, lots of celebrities and “influencers” use photo editing tools to alter their pictures, so you may not even be comparing yourself to a real image and standard.

Practice **truth-based affirmations** – here are some examples:

- My body is uniquely made for me.
- My body is helping me live life and achieve my goals.
  - Ex: my body allows me to rest, read, think, and talk.
- My body is unconditionally deserving of respect.
- I am defined by more than what my body looks like.

**Take advantage of the algorithm:** If certain kinds of content consistently cause you to make appearance-based comparisons, block or mark that you are “**not interested**” in these types of posts so that social media algorithms will stop recommending you harmful material. (On Instagram and YouTube, the “Not Interested” button allows you to do this.)

Make a “**safety net**” list of accounts to turn to when you are having a bad body image day that was caused or worsened by social comparison on social media. These accounts should consistently uplift you and remind you that all bodies are worthy of respect and kindness!



### 3. Achievement



On social media, we are bombarded with content from people about their achievements, offering lots of opportunities for us to compare our everyday highs and lows to their success. Especially if you are dealing with challenges or rejection, comparing your experience to the success you see on social media can worsen your self-esteem and feelings of anxiety.



## Examples of achievement-based comparisons:

- "I just failed my driver's test, and my classmates are posting photos with their new cars."
- "My best friend's promposal is going viral, and I don't even have a date."
- "I was rejected from my dream school, but all of my friends are posting about their acceptances."

## Strategies to avoid achievement-based comparisons:

**People tend to post about their best moments online.** So, keep in mind that everyone has struggles and failures which they do not publicize on social media.



**Reframe the upwards comparison to reflect on what success truly means to you:** this looks different for everyone, but success can only be measured by you. Remember that failures are frustrating, but inevitable and necessary for growth! As long as you have the courage to take risks and the awareness to learn from your mistakes, do not let failure discourage you.

**Practice gratitude:** although we can get hung up on failures, try to find appreciation for small successes or sources of comfort in your life to put failure into perspective.

- After noticing that you are practicing achievement-based comparisons, try making a list of 5 things you are grateful for. How do you feel afterwards? What is it like to engage with social media after establishing a foundation of gratitude for aspects of yourself and your life?

## 4. Social Media Metrics

Many aspects of social platforms inherently enable comparison, such as follower counts and like counts. We believe that someone's social media network is an accurate representation of their popularity despite the fact that social media connections are wildly different from meaningful relationships: following someone requires one push of a button, whereas creating trusting friendships takes substantial time and energy.



### Examples of metrics-based comparisons:

- "This user has more followers than me, so they must be way more popular than I am."
- "I have more followings than followers... some people must not like me."
- "My friend's post got twice the number of likes that mine did, which means that people think she is cooler than I am."

### Strategies to avoid metrics-based comparisons:

**Social media friendship does not automatically translate into real-life friendship.** So, people with lots of followers are not necessarily more fulfilled or beloved than you are. Some users do not even know most of their followers in real life!

People often mindlessly scroll through their feed; whether or not they interacted with your post **does not define your worth.**

If possible, **turn off the like count** on your profile so that you are not tempted to compare your metrics with others.

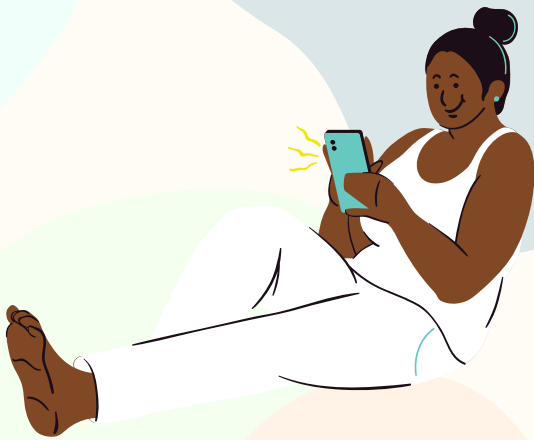
**Post to make yourself happy rather than to satisfy others.** In the long run, their "likes" matter less than your joy and authenticity.



## Be Kind to Yourself

When you catch yourself engaging in social comparison, be kind to yourself rather than feeling frustrated! **Even social media professionals struggle with social media:** speaking on the pressures to maintain a perfect, captivating image on social media, content creator Zach Jelks said, "I feel like social media is built to burn people out" (Lorenz, 2021). Many social media influencers need to take breaks from social media to protect their mental health (Lorenz, 2021). Make sure to **tune into how you feel when you are interacting with social media** so that you can recognize social comparison with self-compassion and employ your favorite strategies or take a social media break when you need it

## Social Media for Inspiration, not Intimidation



Social media provides a multitude of opportunities for social comparison; is it even possible to use social media without falling prey to upwards comparisons? Along with implementing the strategies above, strive to treat social media content as inspiration, not intimidation.

One survey of college students found that "inspiring social media and online video use, but not overall time spent on social media was related to everyday experiences of gratitude, awe, [and] vitality... but not connectedness" (Janicke et al., 2018). When we know that social media is a compilation of users' highlight reels (rather than a comprehensive reflection of their lives) we can be more open to experiencing joy or gratitude as we view others' posts while resisting upwards comparison.

**To learn more strategies about navigating social media, by youth, for youth, visit [goodformedia.org](https://goodformedia.org)**

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