

Comparative Suffering & Compassion by Emily Rose Barr

Measuring one's suffering against that experienced by others is not an unusual tendency. The disproportionate degree of loss we have witnessed over the past year has left many struggling to make sense of where they fit into the whos-got-it-worse-hierarchy. When the world as we know it is undergoing tumultuous shifts, how do we view our blue days and broken hearts? In this article, writer and therapist Emily Barr explores the concept of comparative suffering and its antidote: compassion.

I write a lot about resilience and navigating uncertainty: the inevitability of change, and its counterpart, resistance; our incredible capacity to survive, thrive even, amidst trauma; the neuroplasticity that allows us to adapt to even the direst of circumstances. I write about this not only because my heart goes out to the suffering, but because I, like I imagine most of you reading, have experienced the kind of upsets that knock you off your feet and the moments in which you feel like the life you're living is not the one you signed up for.

There's a term, comparative suffering, which refers to our tendency to measure our suffering in the light of someone else's pain. In other words, when you perceive someone as having it worse than you, your woeful experience suddenly pales in comparison. Here's an example:

You get in a fender-bender on the way home from work. Naturally, you're peeved. The logical, reasoning part of your brain switches off and the emotional, intuitive half starts rattling off worries like that's its job. (It kind of is.)

Why me?
What a disaster.
Will my insurance cover this?
What was that other driver thinking?

Meanwhile, traffic has come to a halt. Your heart races and you start drafting a mental list of all the reasons you hate commuting, not before you utter a quick prayer to anyone who's listening to be anywhere but in the right lane with your hazard lights on at the peak of rush hour.

Did I mention that it's raining? Of course it is.

Later that evening, when you're no longer taking your anger out on the innocent throw pillows that are only there to look pretty and the kitchen cupboards that are only there to house the dishes that you suddenly deem "all wrong," you start thinking about the toll the latest natural disaster is taking on its unsuspecting victims and the sea turtles that are dying each year from ingesting the plastic that litters our oceans. You recall the homeless

person you pass every time you step out to lunch, today no exception, and are convinced that you could write a thesis on how our current economic system is failing the poor.

As you sit down to compose said thesis, you start feeling guilty for having made such a fuss about the minor dent that, however temporarily, has ruined your otherwise pristine car. "I'm so lucky to have a reliable set of wheels," you say. Abandoning the blank screen before you — the thesis can wait — you pour yourself into recording everything you're grateful for, from the clean air you breathe to the season premiere of that show that everyone's been talking about that you can't wait to watch.

And just like that, you've fallen into a shame spiral because who are you to get upset over a mere fender-bender when the whales are dying and your neighbor can't sleep because her baby's nocturnal?

The problem with comparative suffering, researchers argue, is that it leads us to believe that our feelings don't matter, at least not as much as those of individuals who are climbing a steeper hill than we are. Continually telling yourself that the disappointments you face and losses you endure aren't a big deal doesn't serve anyone. In fact, doing so only directs your energy away from helping the very individual, group, or species, you're measuring yourself against.

We don't need a friend's experience to be better or worse by comparison to make sense of our own; a flower needn't rank its beauty by the blooms that surround it any more than a raindrop need determine its significance by where its fellow raindrops land.

It's ok to be bummed that your favorite coffee shop is closing while being grateful to live in a city where there's no shortage of places to get a caffeine boost. It's ok to feel heartbroken about the end of a relationship at the same time as your colleague's going through a messy divorce. It's even ok to cherish your daughter's firsts while worrying that all the other moms are doing it better than you.

It's ok to be where you are and with what you're feeling. Losses are meant to be grieved; disappointments meant to be soothed.

Over the past year, many of my clients exhibited guilt and shame when speaking about things like work difficulties or the trials and tribulations of home-schooling. They distanced themselves from their associated feelings of frustration and anger, dismissing their complaints with an "It could be so much worse."

As a therapist, I'm no stranger to this phrase. But it was being used with such regularity that I knew something was up. It's not that my clients' concerns weren't valid; they just weren't being regarded as important enough to dwell on in light of the number of people that were dying from COVID-19.

Sound familiar? When we judge ourselves and our worries in this way, we're quick to recite all the blessings we've overlooked, a sort of penance for this perceived misallocation of emotional energy.

But the blessings we tally don't count against the grievances we're allowed to air. And the anger that arises when we witness social injustice doesn't mean we can't feel that unique mix of resentment and self-pity when we stub our toe.

There will always be someone who has it better than us and someone who has it worse

than us. Instead of being hard on yourself for the seemingly small disruptions that knock you off balance, tune into your feelings and honor their validity. Then proceed with compassion toward all who are suffering, including yourself.

Additional resources:

Brené Brown did a fantastic podcast on this topic. You can listen to it [here](#).

If inspired, begin a loving-kindness meditation practice today. During loving-kindness meditation, you focus warm and loving energy toward yourself and others. If helpful, use the links below to get started.

https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/loving_kindness_meditation

<https://www.mindful.org/a-6-minute-loving-kindness-meditation-to-expand-your-awareness/>

<https://self-compassion.org/guided-self-compassion-meditations-mp3-2/>