

Five Ways to Ease Your Envy by Juliana Breines

Life is full of reminders of what we lack. There is always someone who is more successful, more talented, more attractive, or more advanced in meeting milestones than we are.

We encounter these people every day—in fact, they are often our friends, family members, and colleagues. Sometimes these encounters can leave us with a bitter taste in our mouths and a green glow in our eyes.

Envy is a state of desiring something that someone else possesses. It's a vicious emotion that can crush self-esteem, inspire efforts to undermine others' successes, or even cause people to lash out violently. It also just feels horrible.

So what can we do to disarm the green-eyed monster when it strikes? Here are five suggestions.

1. Acknowledge envy

Admitting that we are experiencing envy can be very threatening, because it means acknowledging our own weakness and insecurity.

The first clue that envy is lurking may be irrational feelings of hostility towards the object of our envy. Just the sight of them might make your skin crawl, even though they have done nothing wrong that you can put your finger on.

We are better off unravelling this form of vague resentment and identifying its green-colored root before it gets the better of us and damages our relationships. Paying attention to bodily cues may also be helpful, as certain forms of envy can trigger a “fight-or-flight” physiological response involving symptoms like increased heart rate, clenched muscles, and sweaty palms.

2. Recognize that pride is just the flip side of the envy coin

It is tempting—but generally unhelpful—to try to counteract envy with pride. “Sure, he has a nice car, but I’m better looking” is not going to get you very far. You might feel vindicated in the moment, but sooner or later someone is going to come along who has a nicer car than you and is better looking.

In other words, reassuring ourselves about our own enviable traits is unlikely to be sustainable, and it maintains the same unstable social comparison hierarchy where someone else needs to be put down in order for us to feel boosted up, and vice versa.

Instead of responding to the pain of envy with efforts to bolster your self-esteem, try

self-compassion instead. Acknowledge that it is hard to see someone do well when you're floundering, and remind yourself that you are very much not alone in your feelings of inadequacy. Even the most successful people suffer from self-doubt at times. Being imperfect is synonymous with being human.

3. Replace envy with compassion

Although envy seems almost like a compliment, it can be quite dehumanizing. It reduces the object of envy to something very narrow and masks the full picture of who they are and what their life is like.

Have you ever envied someone who seemed to have the perfect life, only to find out later that they were in fact suffering in a very major way? These cases are more common than we might think—we just don't have the opportunity to learn about someone's difficulties when we're mired in envy of their seemingly charmed life. (New research finds Facebook does not help things, by the way.)

It's not that we should seek out others' suffering, searching for chinks in their armor, but rather we should be open to seeing them in a fuller way, a way that will inevitably include both strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows. Doing so will allow us to notice things we may have otherwise overlooked—and as a result, be there for them when they are in need.

Appreciating a person in their fullness can also help us feel genuinely happy for their successes, a form of positive support called "capitalization" that has been shown to promote relationship well-being.

4. Let envy fuel self-improvement—when appropriate

When our envy is rooted in things we cannot change about ourselves, such as a difficult childhood, a traumatic event, or certain health conditions and disabilities, using envy to motivate self-improvement is more likely to dig us deeper into frustration and self-blame.

But sometimes envy alerts us to things that we want in life that are potentially attainable, if we're willing to make certain changes.

For example, if you envy your productive colleague, you may find that you could be more productive yourself if you learned to manage your time better. You may even be able to get a few tips from him or her—upward social comparison can be a source not only of motivation but also of useful information.

5. Don't forget to count your own blessings

As the saying goes, envy is counting the other fellow's blessings instead of your own.

Counting our blessings isn't the same as boosting our ego by reminding ourselves how we're better than others, as in the nice car/good looks example above. It's more about refocusing on what is really important in life, and on the sometimes intangible or invisible things we do possess—and that are less dependent on social comparisons, like a strong spirit, a diversity of life experiences, or just the simple fact of being alive.

The bottom line: Envy drains our happiness and saps our energy. It's appreciation that reveals abundance in places where we might have failed to look.