

DR. JULIE SMITH

Bestselling author of
*Why Has Nobody Told Me **This** Before?*

You have big decisions to make

You're overwhelmed with stress

Open When...

You're dealing with difficult people

Your friends are not your friends

You're under pressure

Fear shows up

You struggle to say no



A
Companion
for Life's
Twists &
Turns

Open When

A Companion
for Life's
Twists and Turns

DR. JULIE SMITH



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Dedication

*For Sienna, Luke, and Leon.
My wish is that you never need this book.
But I wrote it just in case.*

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Introduction

A letter from me to you

Get busy with life's purpose, toss aside empty hopes, get active in your own rescue—if you care for yourself at all—and do it while you can.

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 3.14

Despite the words laid out in front of you, I have never been a talker. Even as a child, I observed and absorbed, but rarely approached anyone in times of need. For that, I did what many quiet kids do: I turned to books. Looking back, I see my impulse to read as a kind of searching. I was asking of the pages what I was unable to ask of real people. I waded through book after book. Sometimes I found what I needed. Sometimes I didn't.

With that in mind and my current profession as a clinical psychologist, you would be forgiven for assuming that I want to promote inward-focused self-reflection. That is not the case. The inner world is like a sauna; there are benefits to being there, as long as you don't stay for too long. Instead, I strongly urge you, in challenging times, to connect with other humans in the real world wherever possible. That is where most of the answers are to our naturally fluctuating mental health in the face of life's ups and downs. But I am also realistic enough to know that not everybody has a reliable and trustworthy person available to them at the most crucial of times. When you

find yourself working things out alone and you struggle to be the voice for yourself that you need to hear, this book is for you.

The moment I realized that I needed to write this book was when I heard stories of how people were carrying around my first book, *Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before?*, so that they could refer to it in difficult moments. While these stories were often shared with me as a compliment, I couldn't help but think that it wasn't written for that purpose. It was the wrong book for the job. That book is filled with the concepts and skills that help people to work on their future mental health, often by looking back at past difficult moments. Not one of those pages contains the words I say to people as they sit in their most vulnerable moments, raw with emotion.

In the days before a hurricane, a hammer and nails are exactly the tools you need to arm you for what might lie ahead. But the moment that storm hits, the last thing you need to hear is how you could have been better prepared. In those moments, what we all need is someone to look us straight in the eye and bring the words we need to hear right now. Words that say "I'm here. Let's move forward together. I know a way through." You might say my previous book was the hammer and nails. This book is my hand reaching out to yours in the chaos of the storm, saying "Come this way and let's get to work."

In moments of pain or confusion, most of us struggle to be the voice that we need to hear, not because we are pathological in some way, but because we are all simply learning as we go. This is the book for us all, for our children as they fly the nest, for our friends who live out of reach, for our family when we can't find the right words, and for ourselves when we need to find a way through.

With my own experience as both a reader and a clinician, I know that in dark times, words can light the way, illuminating a new path you didn't know existed. As I wrote these letters to you, which you'll find at the beginning of each chapter, I wished at times that I could read your mind and know precisely what you are dealing with and the words you need the most. An impossible task, since I can't predict the details of the challenges you face. Instead, all I have are the gems I have discovered along my own path and a chance to lay them out on yours.

This book can serve only as a lighthouse. Unable to pull you from the water, but able to shine a light in this direction so that you can work out which way is up when confusion reigns. Use that as you will, but the work of navigating toward calmer waters is all yours.

In the trials that lie ahead, I have high expectations for you because I can be sure of two things. First, that you have potential beyond anything you

could comprehend from your current standpoint. Second, no matter where you are starting from, the path to all things better is always through new effort and willingness to learn. It is true for all of us that we don't know what we don't know. Please trust me when I say that you have no idea how much better things could get for you until you're there.

*Kindest,
Julie*

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When it's hard to be with other people

Chapter 1

When you compare yourself and come up short

There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self.

—Attributed to Ernest Hemingway

A letter from me to you

If you compare yourself to someone else and come up short, that can leave you in one of two places. You either feel inspired, energized, and motivated to learn from what you have seen is possible, or you fall uncontrollably into a downward spiral. If your experience is the second one, then the problem is not you and all of your apparent inadequacies, it's your comparisons.

If you have some underlying self-destructive beliefs about whether you are fundamentally good enough, then you will not be choosing comparisons that help your progress. You will be choosing comparisons that confirm those core beliefs, however damaging they may be. You will sit in full view of your own weaknesses and gaze at someone else's best show of strength as if this were a level playing field. You will not see that person in a fuller, more real way that incorporates all the parts of their life that they don't put on display. Even if you get a peek at their imperfections, you are likely to ignore them.

You will put this person on such a pedestal in your own mind that the only way to lift yourself up will be to pull them down, turning you into the kind of person you never wanted to become.

If the people you compare yourself to are friends or family, then it can become a destructive force on your relationship. Comparison thwarts connection because it suggests that their success is your failure and carves out a path toward resentment and bitterness between you. The more isolated you become from the people in your life, the more that feeds such comparison. But getting to know those people more deeply is a counterforce to the type of comparison that poisons the relationship. The more deeply you know someone, the less you will be inclined to make such superficial and false judgments. You can form a friendship in which you can recognize your common humanity and see yourself as a team that supports each other in your different endeavors. Then you can start to be happy for their personal victories and genuinely compassionate when they face setbacks. When you get to know an individual, you start to realize that they don't share the same intricacies of life as your own and therefore make a terrible model for comparison.

So many people will tell you that it's simple: just stop comparing yourself to others. But it doesn't take long for you to try that and fail, and to see that it really is not that simple. Your tendency to compare is a built-in tool that is as helpful as it is dangerous. When used right, it can steer you in the right direction, inspire you, and push you beyond your limits. When used in the wrong way, the damage it can do is far-reaching and long-lasting.

Comparing and coming up short doesn't have to be a bad thing. It doesn't mean that we should never have compared ourselves at all. If that comparison leads to constructive forward motion and a bolstered belief that we can become more than what we are today, then it served us well. If it leads to envy, resentment, bitterness, and a loss of self-worth, then we are getting it all wrong, and both our efforts and our attention have been misplaced in a way that could cost us heavily. What we need is to know how to use comparison to our advantage and to spot when it's self-destructive.

Real-time tools

These tools go beyond the usual dismissal of comparison with a "just stop doing it" approach. The natural human urge to understand our place in the world by looking to others is as much a part of our nature as the intake of

breath. Telling you to just stop comparing yourself will, at best, stoke the fire of positivity in your belly for a few minutes. That fire will be easily blown out the next time you open your favorite social media app. Within seconds of walking into a room of peers, you feel a sense of your social or professional status in that room. The act of comparison itself is not always a set of thoughts. Your brain is working faster than that to establish how you should approach the situation you find yourself in. At the same time, you don't have to be at the mercy of the downward spiral that social comparison inflicts on your mind. There are things you can do to spot the destructive ways we compare ourselves and to make a conscious effort to redirect toward comparisons that can genuinely serve you.

What makes comparison destructive

Social media

It's difficult to self-evaluate without some level of comparison because we don't live in isolation. We live in communities that have norms and expectations for everyone. Comparison helps us avoid the humiliation, rejection, and loss of social status that might happen if we unwittingly breached those expectations. It helps us navigate all our social interactions throughout life, determine whether we're contributing enough and whether we're acting in ways that will be acceptable, and establish whom we want to emulate and whom we don't. How you measure up in your community matters if you want to navigate successfully within it. So your ability to engage in social comparison is not always your enemy. It's an essential life skill that you wouldn't do so well without.

But while it helps to consider your own surroundings as a part of self-evaluation, when you consult social media, what you're looking at is not your real community. In fact, much of it is not real at all. It's a collection of carefully crafted, digitally altered images that a person or company wants you to see.

And within minutes of you indulging in some wildly unfair and deeply unhelpful upward comparisons, the algorithm has mapped exactly what will keep your attention and feeds you a never-ending stream of the content that will make you sick. Rather than any social comparisons that might help you live your life most effectively, you have the most corrosive, poisonous comparisons on repeat that leave you feeling dissatisfied with yourself as a person and with the life that you could be out there enjoying.

The psychological toxicity produced by this whole process is either turned inward on ourselves in the form of self-loathing and depression or gets reflected outward in the malicious sabotaging of those other people we have come to feel so bitter and resentful toward.¹ You don't need to scroll for long before you find hordes of keyboard warriors spewing their rage at another human being, picking at imperfections like hyenas at a wounded animal, with the attempt to bring them down a peg or two and to steer the perception of the group away from one of admiration for this person who dared do so well.

The urges to take someone else down online happen more than people will admit, but if you notice it in yourself, or the degeneration of satisfaction in your own life, it's time to turn away from social media and spend more time in real life with real people and real connections.

Comparing with loved ones

Outside social media, if you notice you're comparing yourself to someone who means a lot to you, a friend or family member, don't let it go unchecked. The damage can stretch beyond your own well-being and poses a risk to the whole relationship.

Friendships or family connections that could have been a positive force in your life can rupture irreparably if you start measuring yourself against them. You cannot be a team if you set up the game so that you can't all win at the same time. Even if their goals don't match your own, the jealousy and resentment that ignite when something threatens to diminish your own social status is hard to acknowledge but will destroy a relationship if left to fester.

As Alain de Botton put it, "There are few successes more unendurable than those of our close friends."² Before you know it, you go from viewing yourself as someone who would always be happy to see friends succeed to finding it excruciating to be around them. Whether you avoid them, start excluding them from a wider group, or isolate yourself, the outcomes are dismal for everyone. These are the dark places where careless and nonconstructive comparisons can lead us.

When you avoid that particular friend, what you are really doing is avoiding the feelings their success has brought up in you. That knowledge is so valuable to you only if you are willing to look at it and be honest with yourself about whether you are happy with the direction your own life is moving in. When you are brave enough to look at those emotional reactions with curiosity rather than trying to eliminate them by bringing the friend

down or avoiding them altogether, then you have a path toward resolution and the possibility of feeling genuinely happy for your friends when things go well for them. If your sense of self-worth is dependent on feeling superior to your friends and family in some way, then take that as a sign, not to reject them, but to reevaluate your own life. If you have your own values clear in your mind and you are living in line with them, then superficial signs of apparent success or failure are less earth-shattering than they might otherwise be.

When a friend finds a path to move up in the world, or is knocked down fighting their own demons, and if that brings up in you some very uncomfortable feelings, which it will, do not act with impulse to push against them, but instead listen to the feelings and ask yourself with genuine curiosity what those teach you about yourself. Sometimes it will be just fleeting emotions that pass and allow you to come back to feeling satisfied with your life. At other times it could spark some positive changes. But for that to happen, the comparison usually needs to be constructive. Here are some ideas for how to make comparisons helpful to you.

How to make comparison constructive

Turn envy into inspiration

When we use comparison in the correct way, we can take advantage of its power to influence how we feel and behave. Let's say you're working to improve your skills in your favorite sport and you know that you have a specific weakness that holds you back. In this scenario, some upward comparison with a player who has managed to master that skill offers you a huge opportunity to learn from them and improve your own skills in the process. But for that to happen successfully, your comparison needs to get these three elements right:

1. Keep a clear focus on the specific skill you envy in their performance. Be laser-focused on specifics and do not be tempted to make a global comparison between your whole self and theirs. You don't want to be that person, but there's something in the way they do things that you want to take on board and benefit from in your own life.

2. Prime yourself with a growth mindset. This means keeping in mind that you have agency in your own life and can learn and improve at most things with effort. This mindset will lead to positive action toward your own goals, as opposed to a more fixed mindset that assumes your abilities are fixed and some people are just lucky. That fixed mindset will likely lead to more destructive comparisons, bitterness, and fractured relationships.
3. Your self-worth remains nonnegotiable at all times. It should never be on the line. This is absolutely essential. If your estimation of yourself as worthwhile is measured by others, this is the rogue ingredient that will turn everything sour. Turning envy into inspiration is no problem at all as long as you are not measuring your self-worth by how other people seem to be doing. We can all find someone who is doing better than us at something. But that says nothing about your fundamental worthiness as a human being. If that is never in question, then that gives you a core stability that renders you strong enough to use comparison to your advantage. When the slightest indication of not being the best yet is used as justification in your mind for the belief that you are worthless and doomed to inadequacy, it becomes impossible to work on yourself. The prospect of looking into the eyes of your own imperfections becomes too threatening and too painful. Performance is always workable, but worthiness is a constant.

Do not mistake self-worth for self-indulgence. In fact, it demands a complete lack of entitlement. The tendency to assume that good fortune has been simply gifted to others by the universe and the world owes you the same because you are worthy, too, is more likely to lead to bitterness and resentment rather than the action required to get you there.

To keep this work constructive and not let it dissolve into global criticisms of the self, it requires that we ask questions like the following:

- What do I feel envious of specifically?
- What specific skills do they have that I would like to have also?
- Would learning those skills help me with achieving my own goals?

- How did they get there?
- Can I imitate any of that process to help me get closer to my personal goals?

This process turns envy into inspiration rather than a tool to hit yourself over the head with. Then comparison becomes a valuable part of the learning process.

Choosing your subject with precision

The most helpful upward comparison that inspires us to act on our goals is when we compare ourselves to individuals with a similar skill level in the discipline we are invested in mastering, rather than people who differ greatly from us.³ That's another reason not to use social media for this. Even if the content is real, you are rarely looking at people who are in the middle of honing their craft. The algorithm throws you extremes, so you will be comparing yourself to the best in the world who are much further along their journey than you.

However momentarily inspiring or intriguing that may be, being bombarded with such extremes can be more likely to cause feelings of inferiority and depression rather than inspired learning of your next steps.⁴ It can also lead to the justification of self-sabotage.⁵ We zero in on extremes that seem so unattainably superior that we save ourselves from the discomfort of trying and failing to be the best.

If you notice you are making comparisons with extremes and feeling discouraged or disheartened by it, make a firm intention to seek out inspiration from someone just a few steps ahead. The boost you will experience from then achieving that will fuel your drive to keep working and improving.

From resentment to gratitude

Hand a child a treat, and see their face light up. Hand the child next to them two treats, and see the first child's face change to instant dissatisfaction with what they felt so pleased with just a moment ago. The risk of focusing on what others have that you don't is the creation of deep dissatisfaction with a life you could have loved. It no longer matters what I have, only that you

have more. It is okay to want better for yourself, but if that comes from a place of resentment, then everything you achieve and accumulate will never feel enough. You will never get there. Your life will be marked by a repeated moving of the goalposts and shifting of whom you compare yourself to.

Resentment is not a reflection of what the world owes you. It is a sign of what you need to work on. You can see this as you look around at people who have more than most to be grateful for, but who are living in bitterness and resentment. This is something that can happen so easily when we make comparisons that don't serve us. If you are making comparisons that are not helpful to you, then you'll be wishing you had been dealt someone else's hand.

Listen to resentment. It might mean that you need to start putting in effort on your own behalf and speaking up for yourself. Or it might mean that you need to exercise gratitude by taking control of the focus of your attention in a way that serves you better.

Gratitude as a practice is often dismissed as too simple or insignificant. But if it was as easy as it sounds, there would be much less bitterness and resentment to witness. So strengthen your ability to turn your mind toward gratitude by making it a part of every day. Just two minutes each day reflecting on what you have to feel grateful for can be transformational and can remedy some of the damage done by unhelpful comparisons.

Why not immerse yourself in deep gratitude that you had the chance to see something wonderful achieved and that you live in a time when you have the freedom to work for something similar should you so wish? Deliberately find gratitude for the opportunity to try and the joy you can experience as you work on it. Doing this dissolves the need to match up to your comparison before you can feel satisfied with your life. In any case, we are comparing ourselves to people who are further along in their journey, so measuring success by our ability to catch up with them is not a good strategy. It keeps our own satisfaction with life always in the future, as we never reach the illusory destination. It forever remains somewhere up ahead.

Comparing downward is incredibly helpful for accessing a sense of gratitude. In the lowest of moments there is always something to be grateful for, but finding it can be difficult. So comparing your situation to the countless people who have it worse helps to shift that downward spiral and level off your perspective. (Unless you are using it to invalidate your own problems, which is less than helpful. Other people having it worse is not a good reason not to help yourself.)

“Resentment is not a reflection of what the world owes you. It is a sign of what you need to work on.”

Reconnect with your values

If you are stuck in a pattern of destructive comparison, you will undoubtedly have lost touch with some of the things that matter most to you in your own life. When this happens, we look in the wrong places for a measure of ourselves.

We look out toward a world that is trying to sell us the fantasy that we would feel enough if only we had more stuff, extreme wealth, fame, and an appearance that can only be bought from a surgeon. This feeds more negative comparisons because the only way to know if you are keeping up with the Joneses is to examine them and see how you compare. Taking these marketing tools as your own values puts you at greater risk of depression, anxiety, addiction, narcissism, and the rest.⁶ Don't wait to be told what matters to you. It doesn't take long to reconnect with the things that are guaranteed to bring a more deeply meaningful experience to your life.

I have placed exercises that help with this in the [appendix](#), partly because they are relevant to every one of life's problems. Knowing who you want to be before you look too deeply at others gives you a rudder to steer your life in the direction that best suits you.

The most useful comparison to you

The best comparison you can make is with yourself. Ask yourself if you have made today that tiny bit better than yesterday. This allows you to witness your own progression. But don't stop there. Next, take a look at the comparison between where you are now and where you want to be tomorrow, next month, and next year. Are you doing things today that are taking you in that direction? What does that tell you about the actions you need to take now?

If you trained yourself to notice when you were engaging in self-destructive comparisons and replaced them with comparison focused entirely on your own goals, imagine what you could achieve in just a year. Imagine how differently you could feel about yourself and your life. There is only one way to find out.

Takeaways

- If you compare yourself to someone else and come up short, either you feel inspired by what is possible and motivated to learn, or you fall into a downward spiral of dissatisfaction with your life and yourself. If your experience is the second one, then the problem is not you and all of your apparent inadequacies, it's your comparisons.
- It is never as easy as just deciding to stop comparing yourself. Your ability to do that is a built-in tool that is as helpful as it is dangerous. When used right, it can help steer you in the right direction, help inspire you, and help you push beyond your limits. When used in the wrong way, the damage it can do is far-reaching and long-lasting.
- Comparing yourself to people on social media or in your most cherished social circle will do damage to you and your relationships. When you notice yourself doing it, act fast and remind yourself of the essential components of helpful comparison.
- Keep any comparisons goal-specific and directed toward your own improvement and how you intend to get there.