

IT'S A TRAP

I doubt myself. I overthink, and I binge on self-judgment. I am socially perplexed. In large crowds, I stay silent. I am the listener. I compare myself to others. I don't know how to cope with my anxieties. I am vulnerable. I am hesitant. I hate my body. My body shape is not exactly how I like it to be. My weight bothers me. I want to be like that model in that magazine. I am hesitant to approach my fears and limits. I can't express my true feelings. I am alone. I am lost. I am afraid. I am afraid of being alone. I am afraid of being different. I am afraid to be crazy. I like to stay in my comfort zone.

We tend to compare ourselves with people we think are “better” than us. If we don't meet personal standards, we tend to modify our actions in order to fit into society. Why do we long for acceptance? We crave bonds with other people, but why do people perpetuate the idea that we must “fit in”? Whether it is to conform to social norms or simply to feel accepted, we unknowingly copy the expectations others create for us.

Through performance art, I created a series of actions that depict how I encounter imperfection. The video is split into two “cuts” to represent how no one is alike. This video shows the evolution from living a mundane, black-and-white existence into a celebrating a colorful, carefree life.

Comparing yourself to others is not the life one should live. Although everyone compares themselves with others in some way, it does not mean they will always find themselves unworthy. While it is natural to strive for excellence, we should not be negative or insecure. We should break unattainable perceptions of perfection and lead our own, unique life.

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We all have these thoughts at one point in our lives, whether it is comparing yourself with someone who is “better” than you or feeling anxiety in social situations. We all hold these thoughts in our minds, but never do we ever speak up about them with one another.

A couple of years ago, I met this boy named John. We were both the same age and ethnicity so we found many similar interests between each other. We became friends immediately. He possessed the ideal characteristics you could ever ask for in a best friend. He always seemed to care for my problems, helping me resolve them and encouraging me to make the right choices. We shared wacky stories, inside jokes, and stupid humor together. I told him everything and he was the friend I would go to first when I needed help because I knew I could trust him and he would make no judgments. He accepted me for who I was and respected me. He loved me for who I was. However, a thin glass screen separated us from each other.

John was a friend that I met online. He lived nine hundred twenty-seven miles away from me, in another state. Although a great distance limited our connection with each other, our friendship was like any other friendship nonetheless. Once I understood John better, I discovered he never acted the same way he acted with me with anyone else. It was later when I realized we both held similar attributes when we were set in “the real world.” Instead of someone with a bright, outgoing personality, John was a shy and timid boy who was undergoing a difficult stage in his life. By creating a strong relation with me, he wanted to feel accepted by someone who wouldn't judge him. All he wanted was acceptance. By becoming the ideal friend that someone could die for, he made it happen for me. I felt the warmth of acceptance whenever I was with him.

Reflecting back on the experience I had with John, we all seek acceptance in some way. We all seek the warmth of love and care, which make us feel filled with joy and happiness. When we do not feel accepted, we tend to modify our actions and thoughts in order to fit into society again. The ability to fully feel accepted in society is difficult to acquire. You may feel physically accepted by the actions produced by your outer-self, but mentally, your inner-self is trapped with insecurities that won't let go of the past tragedies or fears you have grappled with throughout your life. Social norms allow us to think that we must embrace the idea that we must fit in; “becoming the norm” or “feeling accepted” by others. Whether we agree or disagree with these social norms, we unknowingly feel the need to become the norm every day.

Why do we long for acceptance so much? We crave for bonds with other people in order to successfully thrive – but why is it so hard to achieve it? It is hard for people to fully feel inclusive within society at times due to their insecurities. What causes us to experience rejection?

The opposite of acceptance is rejection. Rejection can elicit emotional pain so intense it affects your confidence and self-esteem, destabilizing your fundamental feelings of belonging. The pain associated with rejection is not so different than the pain of physical injury. In order to survive and thrive, people have the tendency to want to connect with other people, whether they speak the truth or lie. Feeling turned down also cause mental health problems, often leading to disorders, such as depression.

Once someone does not feel accepted by others, it often leads to isolation and loneliness. Feeling isolated is often complicated by our own internal thoughts. This space is where it becomes the battleground within ourselves which creates negative, self-critical thoughts (Isolation and Loneliness, 2009). These detrimental patterns are what makes up our Critical Inner Voice (CIV). The CIV gives us cruel directives, which are not based, on reality, but from self-destructive points of view. “It constructs us to how to live our lives and influence how we feel about ourselves and how we behave” (PsychAlive, 2012). It is the part of us that is turned against our self and consists of negative thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that oppose our best interests and diminish our self-esteem. CIV can lead to self-defeating and self-destructive behaviors, such as giving up, self-harming, and abusing the use of alcohol or drugs. These behaviors trigger desperation, which create a gloomy state of mind to the person, thinking it is fine to react with such negative actions.

The CIV creates angry and cynical attitudes towards others and can create negative and pessimistic views of the world. The CIV can also be deceptively self-soothing (PsychAlive, 2012). For example, if you’ve had a long day, your CIV will tell you to eat a lot of food because you deserve it, but after you finish your food, your CIV will create regret and sorrow for eating so much food. Most of the patterns from CIV come from your childhood, which ultimately shapes how you view yourself. The teachings of your parents usually influence a child’s actions the most. As a child, if your parents cared for you with negative attitudes and always compared you with other people, this part of self-consciousness will be carried along throughout your life. “Harmful views directed to us by parents or other influential caretakers are internalized to make up our self-image” (PsychAlive, 2014). If your parents supported you to be confident and spoiled you as a child, you are prone to become more self-assured about who you are and do not think negatively about your actions as much. Since the strongest memories and ideals are what makes who you are today, your parents, or a significant guardian, who has been with you for most of your childhood, are most likely to be very influential to who you are to become. These memories are accessed by the CIV and are set forth to become a guide to how to live.

The earliest research of these symptoms were performed in the mid 1800’s through inquiries by a great Danish philosopher who was widely known to be the first existentialist philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. The *Sickness Unto Death*, published in 1849, introduced the idea of being “in despair” (Storm, 2011). He differentiates between *psychological* despair and the *existential* despair we tend to feel that is in ourselves. The distinction Kierkegaard makes between *psychological* despair and *existential* despair is that *psychological* despair is based on the potentials of *existential* despair. This means *psychological* despair is an add-on of *existential* despair, being less destructive, but is based more on the situation one is in. When we are in *psychological* despair, “it is always on account of a definitive life-situation,” where a problem from our surroundings influence us in a negative way (The "Despairing Self," 2013). The emotions we portray are linked to the specific occurrence that arises in someone’s life. On the other hand, *existential* despair is constituted with the “darkness and futility within the structures of the self” (The "Despairing Self," 2013). People begin to wonder within themselves: Why am I alive? Why can’t I do anything right? What is my purpose for existence? All the desperation we face in *existential* despair happen within our self. It is when we try to search for answers of unanswerable questions about our self, leading us to a defeat and realize there is no answer.

Kierkegaard’s rationalities go more in depth with *existential* despair, acquiring a definition by which he states, “... the self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation” (Storm, 2011). Kierkegaard’s definition of

desperation may first be confusing and somewhat humorous, but it simply means you can find your true identity from the failures and despairs you tackle within yourself. When Kierkegaard says, “a relation that relates,” it means you are made by the tensions formed by opposites. In other words, it means you are made up of the self-qualities that you believe you are, whether it is positive or negative. Desperation is caused when you begin to compare yourself to things that are not compatible to yourself. The tensions you create that form opposites can be attributes that are antonymous to each other, like attractive and unattractive. When someone thinks they are unattractive and then compare themselves with someone who they think is attractive, it is the relation relating itself, which is telling you you are worthless. There are two reactions to this, which is 1) ignore the problem and believe everyone is unique in their own way or 2) become vulnerable and insecure of your appearance. The second option is usually what causes to be in despair, in which you start to believe that you are ranked lower than others because they are “better” than you. Whatever our mind chooses to compare and act with ourselves and/or with others is what makes us vulnerable and trapped to a specific viewpoint.

Desperation is sought if the relation’s relating is not balanced. If the relation’s relating is, per se, comparing itself from necessities and freedom, there can be a disturbance between these two relations. If someone is carried away with fantastical forms, such as wanting to live in a utopia, they can become isolated from the real world. Their liberated thoughts of these fantastical forms soon can become necessities in the person’s thoughts and take over their whole life. Instead of these ideas becoming free-formed thoughts, they become necessities, soon leading them to crave for more, wanting these fantastical dreams to become real. For example, if you keep thinking of becoming rich and famous but you live in a low-income household, and is impossible to live a luxurious life, it can harm you psychologically. Once you hold onto the idea of fame and fortune, you begin to realize it will never happen to you because you are not compatible for this lifestyle. This can cause the person to be in a state of despair because this dream could never become a reality for them.

Being in despair is something that comes freely to most everyone. There is no exact form or shape that we are confronted with, and sometimes we are usually unaware of it. Since every human being is built in a different and unique way, people experience different kinds of desperations.

Kierkegaard also states, “... the discrepancy is that the ethical self should be found immanently in the despair, that the individual won himself by persisting in the despair” (Sherzai, 2014). Although being in despair may be a negative aspect in life, it can be both an advantage and a disadvantage. Desperation can lead to something positive in the near future. Once someone can come out from the state of despair, they unknowingly gain intelligence and learn a lesson from that experience. However, it can be a misfortune as well because of the negativity it brings to the present moment. Some people who are unconsciously in despair can also never come out of this state of mind.

Similar to Kierkegaard’s theory of despair, another great philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, once stated, “life begins on the other side of despair” (Onof, C. n.d.). He is saying, in order to understand life, you must go through a process, usually with various difficulties, problems, and even despair. Even if you think that your life is going the way you like it to be, it may not be the greatest life you can live because of the social and economic position you are in which makes your life-decisions for you. In order to live a life that is beneficial for you is to get out of the situation that makes your decisions for you and start deciding the life for yourself. Through this process, you begin to believe there is nothing out there for you, feeling as if your life is

meaningless. However, the life after the desperation one experiences is what Sartre emphasizes the most on. He believes the despair one experiences helps one rethink about their life and become a new person. For example, someone is going through a rough time at work and are constant depressed and stressed all the time, so they quit. After they quit, they may search for what they are truly passionate for and pursue that dream of theirs.

As these ideas about desperation evolved through time, a recent study describes of these hindrances. This was first created to represent one's emotions and activities when in a state of discomfort, which is now called the "self-discrepancy theory" (SDT). Developed in 1987 by Professor of Psychology at Columbia University, E. Tory Higgins, the self-discrepancy theory is a "general theory relating different patterns of self-beliefs to different kinds of emotional motivational predispositions" (Higgins 1987). These "motivational predispositions" are when people compare themselves with people who they think is "better" than them. It is when people tend to compare themselves with various internalized standards called "self-guides" that cause discomfort in one's emotions (Doyle 2013). For example, comparing yourself to a Victoria Secret Model – you may be compatible to this comparison but it is highly unlikely that you are. The standards are often unrealistic and unreasonable to one's capabilities, creating an undefeatable gap between your true self and your ideal self.

The SDT was created to predict which types of inconsistent emotions would affect which kinds of negative feelings. Over the years, there have been many theories of "self-imaging" identified, but there has never been a systematic framework that revealed the interrelations among different self-states. The self-discrepancy theory is made up of two parts, the domain and the standpoint. There are three basic domains of the self, which represents the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you actually, ideally, or ought to possess – the actual-self, the ideal-self, and the ought-self. The difference between the ideal-self and the ought-self is that the ideal self is conflicted more on a hero's "personal wishes," which the ought-self is more focused towards the "sense of duties" that you must accomplish in order to satisfy yourself (Higgins 1987). Standpoints allow a set perspective in which you can be judged that reflects a variety of attitudes and values. There are two standpoints – your own personal standpoint and the standpoint of some significant other. By combining each of the domains with each of the standpoints they create six basic types of self-state representations – actual/own, actual/other, ideal/own, ideal/other, ought/own, ought/other. The actual/own and actual/other are self-concept representations while the other four states represent self-directive standards and acquired guides for being self-guides. These guides are what creates ourselves, directing us the way we act and represent ourselves. It is the way our mind is organized that makes us perceive certain ideas in certain ways.

As humans, we have the need to reach a condition where our self-concepts match our personal self-guides that we set upon ourselves. Each discrepancy that occurs reveals a particular type of negative psychological outcome that is also associated with a specific emotional state of mind. Your actual/own self-state tends to be the one that encounters problems with the other self-states, (actual/own vs. ideal/own, actual/own vs. ideal/other, actual/own vs. ought/own, actual/own vs. ought/other) (Higgins, 1987). By comparing your actual/own self-state to other self-states, you are presented with negative outcomes or absented of positive outcomes. The presence with negative outcomes is agitated-related outcomes, like fear, guilt, self-contempt, and anxiety. These feelings widely occur when you are comparing yourself with an ought/other or ought/own because you are compared by something you should be. This allows oneself to feel resentment or worthlessness because they believe they have strayed from their personal accepted

moral standards. The absence of positive outcomes are associated with dejection-related emotions, like disappointment, frustration, and shame. These feelings widely occur when you are comparing yourself with an ideal/other or ideal/own state because you are compared to hopes and wishes that you would like to obtain. If you are associating yourself with an ideal/own state, you may feel frustration from unfulfilled desire, while if you are associating yourself with an ideal/other state, you can feel shame in not living up to one's ideals and become concerned in losing affection or esteem in others.

Through studies examining a diverse range of self-discrepancies that occur within one's self, the topic of body image has been frequently occurred among females. Studies have shown that "women choose a thinner figure" over their current body and also choose a "lower ideal weight than their current weight" (Vartanian, 2012). Women believe being skinny is an ideal standard and they see it to be more attractive than their current body type. Societal perception of body types tell women to uphold a skinny lifestyle, even if it is incompatible to theirs. Most women perceive themselves to be "larger, heavier, fatter, and less attractive than their ideal body" (Vartanian, 2012). Most discrepancies are self-states comparing actual/own versus ideal/own or ideal/other, relating to the actions of negative psychological outcomes. Wanting an ideal body that is thinner can cause body shaming and dejection-related outcomes, leading to depression, low self-esteem, and fear of negative evaluations (Vartanian, 2012). Due to the mass influence from media, like magazines, movies, and other entertainments, that give a perfect idealistic women figure, people have the tendency to compare themselves with media. The great the comparison is, the greater emotional outcome will affect the person. Although one may know they will never be able to reach a goal to have a perfect body like some people on media, they are still impacted by the thoughts of why they are unable to be skinnier than what they already are. Relating back to the Critical Inner Voice and the ideas of the ought-self, the self perceives itself to always become better than what it is, which seems to be a distinctive aspect in self-conceptive body relations.

By the research explained on women's body figure insecurities stated by Vartanian, I decided to construct an experiment with the real world to see if these ideals were true. I created a short survey of how one perceives themselves and their thoughts on self-discrepancy. Through this anonymous survey, people were able to answer these questions honestly. I began with asking the responder to list their true attributes about themselves and then to compare it to the attributes that their parents' ideally thought they should have. Some attributes turned to be similar to each other but most of the attributes compared were usually antonyms with each other. For example, surveyors answered themselves to be quiet and indecisive, and then their parents' ideally wanted them to be outgoing and confident. The question was then asked if they tried to meet their parents' standards. From the data on the right, over half of the responders answered yes. Most believed that they had to be expected to do well in school and become someone higher than they had to be because of their parents' expectations of them. Since most of the surveyors consisted of high schoolers, they experienced constant comparisons made by their parents. As teenagers, many were sought to become something they were not by other people. To see if this was true, I asked if the surveyor ever compared himself or herself with someone who they thought was ever "better" than them. All, but one responder agreed that they sought to compare themselves with others. Answers ranged from comparing to "people who are smarter than me" to "skinnier or more beautiful people on Instagram." The relative pattern of comparison was with their siblings, friends, school peers, and people on social media, whether it was associated with their body figure, looks, or smartness. People believe in order to be successful they must become

either exceed their own standards or become something they are not. They reveal their self/own competing themselves with their ought/own or their ideal/own, wanting to become someone else's standards. To add on to these questions, the last questions I posed to the surveyors was

Have you ever compared yourself with someone who you thought was "better" than you?

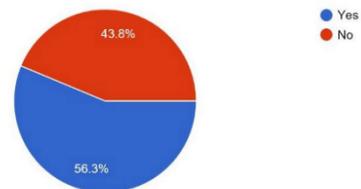


“What makes you insecure, vulnerable and what are your fears and hesitations.” Most of the things people said were the same things they compared themselves with. For insecurities, over half of the surveyors answered “my body.” Relating back to Vartanian’s research, people are more likely to want to change their body image and would choose a skinnier body rather than their own body figure. People’s hesitations

and fears were mostly related with rejection, unacceptance, and loneliness. These fears relate to the vulnerabilities they responded in the previous question, where some of the answers were being honest about their true feelings and being different. One’s uncertainty that leads to comparing themselves with others begin when they are too scared to show their real self to others. Once someone feels as if their ideas or thoughts do not appeal to others around them, they feel insecure and inferior of others. Their self-esteem goes down and they begin to believe that their peers are “better” than them, where then they begin to compare themselves with others.

Everyone yearns for acceptance, but the fear of rejection is what stops it from happening. Whether it is to feel accepted by the smaller or the bigger concerns in life, people are vulnerable to the idea of fitting in and creating bonds between each other. However, sometimes trying to “fit in” leads to living different lives that is not yours. The lifestyle of comparing yourself to others is not the life one should live in. It is not worth the time and dignity to under appreciate yourself for the things you do. Although everyone compares themselves with others in some way, it does not mean they will always find themselves to be unworthy. It is part of us to strive for excellence. Everyone is concerned about the same negativities, so why should we all be insecure about it? We should break these perceptions of perfection and comparisons and lead our own, unique life.

Do you ever have the need to meet your parent's standards?



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