

Applied Positive Psychology
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Week 2

Lecture 7: Interventions for promoting positive emotions and happiness 2: Social comparison and happiness

I welcome you all to Lecture Number Seven of this course. This is part of the second module, Module Two, where we are discussing positive emotions and happiness. This is the fourth lecture of this module, and overall, it is Lecture Number Seven. Today's lecture is titled "Interventions for Promoting Positive Emotions and Happiness." Lecture Number Six was also an intervention strategy that we discussed for enhancing positive emotions and happiness.

Today, we will also be talking about another concept related to interventions for happiness. Primarily, we will be discussing the concept of how social comparison influences our happiness levels. It is an intervention in the sense of understanding the effect of social comparison and how it influences our happiness. We can have some interventions regarding how we compare ourselves with other people.

So, this is the main aspect that we will cover in today's lecture. Before we talk about today's lecture, let me give you a brief recap of the last lecture. In the last lecture, which was Lecture Number Six, we discussed two specific interventions related to enhancing happiness and positive emotions. These are all positive intentional activities that we are talking about, which are evidence-based, research-based findings on certain concepts and interventions that were found to have a positive impact on our well-being and happiness. In the last lecture, we discussed the concept of gratitude.

We discussed how gratitude influences our emotional life and in what ways we can use it more and more in our lives. That was the idea in the last lecture. We discussed how gratitude is important in terms of understanding and enhancing our sense of well-being

and positive emotions in our lives. We also discussed a variety of findings that show how gratitude is strongly related to many well-being indicators. We discussed why gratitude promotes well-being, what the mechanisms behind it are, and how it influences our mind positively. We also discussed specific exercises related to gratitude that we can include in our daily activities or in our daily schedule, where we can incorporate conscious intervention in terms of practicing gratitude. We also talked about the concept of savoring as an idea—how we can redirect our attention to the positive events and happenings in our lives, either in the past, in the present moment, or in the future, to enhance the frequency and intensity of positive emotions in our lives. Research shows that savoring, as a concept, has many benefits in terms of positive emotions and other well-being indicators. We also discussed the important factors that influence savoring, and what events and incidents actually lead to higher savoring compared to other causes.

At the end, we discussed some of the research-based tools by which we can intentionally practice enhancing savoring and so on. These are some of the things that we discussed in the last lecture. Today's lecture will focus more on the concept of how social comparison is connected to the concept of happiness and how we can use it as an intervention strategy in terms of understanding its impact and applying it. We will talk about social comparisons, what their main functions are, and the processes involved in social comparison. We'll also talk about social comparison and how it influences our self-evaluation, and in that sense, how it influences our concept of self, self-esteem, and so on. We'll also talk about social comparisons and how they are connected to the concept of happiness. At the end, we'll discuss how social comparison nowadays has become more prevalent in the online context of social media and so on, and how that influences our happiness levels. These are some of the things that we will be talking about in today's lecture. Let's start today's lecture.

If I ask you this question: Do you compare yourself with friends or colleagues on things like money, success, achievements, and so on? Most of us, if this question is asked of all of us, do some sort of comparison. Social comparison is something unavoidable. Sometimes we do it consciously, and sometimes we do it unconsciously because we live in a society or social setting where we meet and interact with other people in every part

of our lives. Social comparison thus becomes very evident. Sometimes, consciously or unconsciously, we compare ourselves with the people around us or the people with whom we are related, and then we see how we are doing in comparison to them.

So, this is something very universal—we all tend to compare ourselves to others. However, we will see the different aspects of social comparison and how it impacts us emotionally. That will be the focus of today's lecture. Now, when we talk about social comparison, it refers to a tendency. It is a tendency within all of us to compare ourselves to others on a wide variety of dimensions.

This tendency is inherent in all human beings. Naturally, as we live in society and in relationships with other people, we tend to compare ourselves with others. This comparison can be made on a wide variety of dimensions. It could be anything—it could be related to academic achievements, sports achievements, professional life, family life, and so on.

Social comparison provides us with useful guides for our behavior, and it may also have emotional consequences affecting our self-esteem and happiness. Social comparison provides us with a guide for our behavior, and we tend to see how we are doing. Are we doing better than others, or are we doing worse than others? This comparison guides us in understanding how we are doing and positioning ourselves in comparison to other people. However, this positioning and comparison also has emotional consequences. It can affect your self-esteem, your sense of happiness, positive emotions, or any kind of emotion.

It can influence all of these things. From the psychological perspective or psychological literature, the social comparison theory was first proposed in 1954 by psychologist Leon Festinger. So, he was the first psychologist to talk about social comparison from a psychological perspective. He suggested that we have an innate drive to evaluate ourselves in comparison to others; that is, self-evaluation in relation to others. So, there Leon Festinger talked about the innate drive within all of us to evaluate ourselves in comparison to others.

So, the drive is there. One of the main reasons why we engage in social comparison is

that we evaluate ourselves. This social comparison helps us determine how we are doing compared to others. We can compare ourselves in terms of our abilities by comparing with others and considering how we should behave. We also learn how to think and feel by looking at other people.

In our opinion, we also compare our opinions with others and see how we are doing in terms of opinions, abilities, and so on. There can be multiple dimensions of social comparison. Research on social comparison shows that it is a universal concept across all cultures and is evident even in young children. This is a core feature of social evolution. Even young children, the moment their sense of self develops, start comparing themselves with other young children. This is something found in all cultures. It's a universal thing. This is a very important concept that drives human behavior. What are the functions of social comparison? Social comparison seems to be a fundamental human drive, as we understand it, because it is found across all cultures. It serves a variety of functions. Why do we tend to engage in social comparison, either consciously or unconsciously? It is because it serves a variety of functions. Some of these functions are listed here. One reason is that it fulfills affiliation needs. When we talk about affiliation needs, we are talking about a human need to connect with other people and relate to them because we are social animals. We live in a social context in relationship with other people, so there is an innate need to connect with and relate to others. Social comparison serves the purpose of connecting with other people. It is because we connect with other people that we also evaluate ourselves in comparison to them. So, it serves that basic need for connection with other people, and social comparison could be one of the reasons that fulfills that basic need. Another important function of social comparison is that it helps us evaluate ourselves. As we have already discussed, one of the primary reasons we engage in social comparison is that we want to evaluate ourselves. How are we doing? Because we generally do not judge ourselves in an absolute sense, we judge ourselves mostly in comparison to other people. If you are doing better than someone else, you feel that you are doing very well, but in an absolute sense, that may not make much sense. The idea is whether you feel that you are doing better or not. Most of the time, these

kinds of ideas come from looking at other people around us. This evaluation of self is a very important aspect and function of social comparison.

Another function is that social comparison helps us to make decisions in our lives. A lot of decision-making processes are actually influenced by looking at other people—what kind of career one takes, what kind of professions one chooses, and so on. Many times, these ideas come from observing others.

I should pursue this career. I should pursue this profession, and so on. For example, let me give you an example. Many times, these are not original ideas that come to you. Most of the time, we get these ideas by looking at other people who are pursuing certain careers, professions, and so on. Then, you also get an idea of what that person is able to do. Why not? I can also do those kinds of things. Or if that person is doing well, you also get an idea that there is an opportunity in those areas. A lot of decision-making processes could be influenced by social comparison. Many times, these ideas come from looking at other people's lives. Accordingly, we make decisions. Social comparison also serves the important function of being inspired. What that means is that many times we get inspiration by looking at other people's lives. If you see someone very similar to your background who has achieved something great, that gives you the inspiration that you can also achieve such kinds of feats. One main reason is that the person is very similar to you. So we look at the achievements and successes of many other people. Sometimes, looking at the lives of other people gives us inspiration. Many times, social comparison can have a positive impact in the sense that we get inspired by looking at others' lives. Another important function of social comparison is that it can regulate emotions and well-being. Social comparison can influence how we regulate emotions. We also know that, by looking at other people's lives and through social norms and conventions, we cannot just show or express our emotions in a raw form all the time. We observe how other people behave and express emotions, and so on.

All these things help us learn how to regulate our emotions and express them appropriately in different situations. Regulating emotions can also be influenced by social comparison, and looking at other people and well-being will be discussed in detail in this

lecture, focusing on how it influences well-being. These are some of the major reasons and functions of social comparison. These are probably the reasons why people tend to compare themselves with others. Now, let us talk about one of the important dimensions of social comparison. That is, when we do social comparisons, how do we do it? What are the processes involved? What are the mechanisms involved? What are the types of social comparisons that we can make? These processes and mechanisms are very important. We need to understand the possible varieties of social comparison.

In social comparison, there are two main aspects. One is the selection of the comparison target. Who is the person with whom you are making a comparison? How are you selecting the comparison targets? The selection of the comparison target can lead to two types of targets. One is which can lead to something called an upward or downward social comparison, depending on who the target person is. Another important dimension is the consequences of this comparison or your relationship with that person. What is the relationship, and how is this comparison going to influence the consequences? One way we can determine who the target is and what our relationship with the target is comes from the concept of assimilation versus contrast. Let us examine these two concepts in detail to understand these processes. The first question is, who is the target of comparison? Based on that target, there can be two types of social comparisons. One is called an upward social comparison and another can be called a downward social comparison. Now, what is upward social comparison? It basically occurs when comparing oneself with someone better or superior who has positive characteristics. So, whenever we make a comparison with others, we compare ourselves to another person whom we perceive as superior to us, or someone better than us, or someone who has more positive characteristics compared to us. So the idea is that upward social comparison happens when you compare yourself with another person who is perceived as superior to you or better than you in any dimension, whatever dimension you are comparing. So that will be called an upward social comparison. The most important thing in this concept is that when you make social comparisons, whether someone becomes a superior person or an inferior person, it is about your perception. So if you perceive that person as superior to you or better than you, then it becomes an upward social

comparison. Actuality may not be that important a factor because it is what you perceive that will determine your behaviour. So, if you think that person is superior to you, then that person becomes a target for upward social comparison.

In the psychological world, perception matters more than actuality. That is one aspect of social comparison, in which we often engage in upward social comparison. Downward social comparison, on the other hand, is just the opposite. It occurs when we compare ourselves with someone who is perceived as inferior or who has negative characteristics. Whenever we compare ourselves with someone whom we think is inferior to us, or someone who is not doing as well as we are in certain dimensions, or may have some negative characteristics, we perceive that person as lower on the ladder. That is called a downward social comparison. In that comparison, you are perceiving another person as inferior or having less capacity or skill, whatever it is.

Upward social comparison is generally a common concept. We'll see the nuances later. Upward social comparison generally causes people to feel inadequate, have poorer self-evaluations, and experience negative emotions. However, sometimes it may inspire people to become like the target. Generally, when we make upward social comparisons, we compare ourselves with someone who is perceived as superior. We generally feel that we are inadequate compared to that person, have a poor self-evaluation, and experience negative emotions. We may feel sadness, jealousy, or whatever it is. Sometimes, when we do upward comparison, it may also inspire, as that person is better and I look up to them. On the other hand, downward social comparison generally means that most of the time it causes improvement in emotions and self-evaluation, so when you compare yourself with someone inferior, people generally feel good about themselves, thinking, "I am better than this person." So, it kind of makes them feel better in terms of self-evaluation. However, sometimes it may make people feel negatively because it reveals how things could be worse. Sometimes, downward social comparison can have a negative impact, especially when you feel that the person is inferior or in a position that is much worse than yours.

It may make you feel bad also because, you know, you think that I could be there sometimes or you feel bad about that person and so on. So, that is another possibility. Now, why does this difference in impact happen? One of the reasons is basically what your relationship is with the target? So, there comes the concept of assimilation versus contrast. So, this will determine whether upward or downward social comparison leads to a positive impact or a negative impact. Now, when we talk about assimilation and contrast, we are basically talking about what your relationship is with that target.

When you are comparing someone, either superior or inferior, how are you connected to that person? What is the relationship or sense of connection with that person? So when we do social comparison in an assimilative fashion, it refers to the comparer's self-evaluation changing towards that comparison target, which basically means assimilation occurs when individuals perceive themselves as similar to the person or group they are comparing themselves to. This leads to a sense of alignment or identification with the target of comparison. This basically means that when you compare yourself with someone where there is a sense of assimilation, a sense of moving towards the person, a sense of identifying with the person, and a sense of liking towards the person or group with whom you are comparing your group versus another group or yourself as an individual with another individual. That is called assimilation. You tend to assimilate or connect with that person, like that person. So, that is called an assimilation. So, assimilation occurs when individuals perceive themselves as similar to that person. So, there is a positive relationship with the target. So, there is alignment; there is identification with the target. So, such a kind of social comparison will be called assimilative comparison. On the other hand, there can be a comparison called a contrast comparison. It is just the opposite of assimilation in the sense that it refers to comparing or self-evaluating away from the comparison target. Contrast occurs when individuals perceive themselves as different from the person or group they are comparing themselves to. This leads to a sense of separation or distinction from the target of comparison. In the case of contrast comparison, you don't have a tendency to move toward that person. There is a sense of dislike, probably a sense of disidentification, distinction, and separation from that person.

You are making a comparison, but you don't have a positive connection with that person. You want to dissociate yourself and separate yourself from that person or the group with which you are comparing. That's called contrast.

We can have four possible types of social comparison: an upward assimilative social comparison, and I will show the details in the next slide. We have upward, we have downward, we have assimilation, and we have contrast. So, what will happen if we combine all four possibilities? We can have four possibilities: upward assimilation, upward contrast, downward assimilation, and downward contrast. There are four possibilities in terms of social comparison that can occur. In all four of these possibilities, there are going to be different outcomes in our self-evaluation. It will influence us in very different ways in all four possibilities.

Let us see how these four social comparison processes can lead to different outcomes for our self. Here it is given in detail. We can have an upward assimilative social comparison. How will this influence our self-evaluation? When we do an upward assimilative type of social comparison, that means you are comparing yourself with someone superior, or better than you, but your relationship with that person is assimilative, meaning you have a tendency to like that person, identify with that person, and feel a sense of similarity with that person. There is a sense of positive connection or positive liking for the person. In such cases, a positive self-evaluation can occur when we make such a comparison. You are comparing yourself to someone superior, but you are not feeling bad because you have a positive identification with that person. For example, a junior employee compares themselves to a successful manager and feels motivated to develop similar skills. This is an example of upward assimilation: the person has a positive relationship with the target. The person is not disliking the target; instead, the person wants to assimilate or identifies with the target. Therefore, such comparisons are more likely to lead to positive self-evaluations, and you are more likely to feel good about yourself. I feel good when such comparisons are made. This is called an upward assimilative comparison. This is one possible case in which we can engage in social comparison. Another possibility is called upward contrast. Here is upward contrast social comparison. This is a typical case of social comparison that we mostly engage in: when

you compare yourself with someone superior to you, better than you, but there is a contrastive relationship with that person. You don't have identification with that person. You don't feel a similarity with that person. You tend to move away from people. There is a sense of dislike, disidentification, and separation from that person. In such cases, we generally feel bad and experience a negative impact on ourselves. You see someone doing well, and you feel inadequate yourself; you feel you are not as good as that person, so you feel bad about yourself. A negative self-evaluation occurs. Typically, most competitive upward comparisons are contrastive; upward contrastive social comparison occurs, and it has a negative impact on us emotionally in terms of self-evaluation, self-esteem, and so on. For example, a musician may compare themselves to a world-famous artist and feel inadequate about their own talent. Let's say a musician in the field of music compares themselves to a superior musician and feels inadequate, thinking, "I'm not good enough compared to that person." That person will feel inadequate, and sadness and other negative emotions may arise. Upward contrastive social comparison is very prevalent in society and has a lot of negative impact on individuals. A lot of envy, jealousy, and similar emotions arise from upward contrastive social comparison.

The third possibility is called downward assimilative social comparison. In this case, you are comparing yourself with someone who is perceived as inferior to you, but there is a positive liking and connection with that person. There is assimilation—a sense of moving toward the person and identifying with the person. This happens when you compare yourself to people who are very close to us, maybe our siblings or our parents, or anyone with whom there is a positive relationship, a sense of identification, compassion, or empathy. Generally, in such comparisons, there can be a negative self-evaluation or some sense of negative impact simply because you see someone with whom you identify, someone with whom you have a positive relationship, in a bad position compared to yourself. With a sense of empathy and compassion, you feel bad about it. This can happen in very close relationships when someone very close to you is not doing as well as you. You may feel bad that the person is not doing as well as you, or you may feel a sense of sadness about that. So, in that sense, it can have some negative self-evaluation impact. For example, a healthy person comparing themselves to someone with a chronic

illness might feel overwhelmed by empathy and sadness. Someone who is healthy and sees someone very close to them suffering from terminal chronic illnesses might feel bad because, as compared to them, that person is suffering in life, and so on. Because you have a liking for the person. So there is a sense of assimilation. So you may feel bad about your situation. So that can have a negative impact on you. The fourth possibility is called downward contrast. This is a typical case where you feel good when you see that other people are not doing well. This could also be very common that you feel good about yourself when you see other people are not as good as you in whatever aspects. So that generally leads to a positive sense of emotions that makes you feel good about yourself. There is positive self-evaluation, self-esteem, and so on. For example, a student who failed one exam compares themselves to someone who failed multiple exams and feels better about their own performance. So this could also be one example that I fail only once while that person has failed multiple times. You feel good when you compare yourself to that person. Such things are also very common, where people feel good when they see others not doing as well as themselves in various aspects of life.

So these are four possible social comparison scenarios. And all these scenarios will have different outcomes depending on who the target is and what the relationship with the target is. So, that is something about the processes involved in social comparison. Now let's see what research shows regarding the impact of all this social comparison. The studies indicate that social comparisons are more likely when the comparison dimension is relevant to the self and when the comparison target is similar to the self. Generally, we are more likely to be influenced by social comparison, and we are more likely to compare ourselves with others, mostly in cases when the target person is very relevant to our lives. So they have some relevance in our lives, and the target is very similar to us. People may not compare themselves with someone who is very irrelevant or someone who is in a very different category from themselves, you know, not very similar to themselves. So then it may not have much influence. We are more influenced by comparing ourselves with people who are very similar to us and who are relevant to us, and so on. Like people who are in your peer group, people who are your neighbours or maybe of a similar socioeconomic background, and so on.

Those things will influence you more. However, people can make any kind of comparison. You know, there are no limits to that. People may also sometimes compare with irrelevant targets. So someone who is in the middle-class category may compare themselves to a billionaire and feel bad about it. That is also possible, but those are rare occasions. Mostly we compare ourselves with people who are very similar to us, who are in the same socioeconomic background and so on, who are in the same peer group and so on.

A recent meta-analysis showed that in an offline context, meaning in the real-life context, individuals mostly tend to compare themselves to someone who outperforms them, that is, upward comparison, in a contrastive manner, resulting in lower self-evaluation and an overall lowering of mood, worsening their mood. So research shows that, in general, most people in the offline context, meaning in the real-life context, are most likely to do upward contrastive social comparison, which is that you don't like the person who is superior to you. So there is a sense of contrast. But then the person perceives themselves as better than you. This particular type of social comparison is most common or most prominent among people in real-world settings which can result in lower self-evaluation, low self-esteem, envy, jealousy, and those kinds of things. So this is more prevalent among people, and we can see the impact is very negative. The more we engage in upward contrastive kinds of social comparison, the more we are likely to feel bad about ourselves. We experience negative emotions like sadness, envy, jealousy, and so on. Research shows this is more common than other types of social comparison.

Now, how is social comparison related to happiness? Let us see some of the findings associated with it. Research indicates that happiness depends on relative income, which means how much one earns in comparison to the reference group rather than absolute income. This reflects the influence of social comparison on happiness. Now, when we look at the literature on income and happiness, most of the research shows that people generally become happier when their relative income is higher. That means what? When you see that your income is more than that of the people around you or in your peer

group, it makes those people happier compared to your actual or absolute sense of income. This also shows how our happiness is derived from social comparison. Even though one should be more concerned about their absolute income—whatever they are earning and whether they are able to increase it—people also see how they are earning in comparison to others. This sometimes becomes more important in deciding their level of happiness in terms of income, and so on.

The literature also indicates that social comparison can play a very important role in our happiness. Many meta-analyses reveal that people tend to engage in contrastive upward social comparison in offline settings, which has a negative impact on subjective well-being, as we have already discussed. Since people are more likely to engage in upward contrastive social comparison, this negatively impacts emotional aspects as well as overall well-being, especially for people with an excessive tendency for social comparison.

There can be some individual differences. Some people tend to compare themselves too much to others. People with an excessive tendency for social comparison are more likely to encounter unfavourable comparisons and suffer negative consequences. The more frequently you compare yourself with others, the more likely you are to find people who are superior to you, because all kinds of people are around us. You will always find people who are superior to you, making unfavourable comparisons more likely. And that will negatively impact you. The more you have a tendency toward social comparison, the more likely it is that you will experience negative emotions. Seeking happiness through social comparison is generally difficult because no matter what you achieve, there will always be someone better than you. That creates a kind of vicious cycle. Finding happiness through social comparison is difficult simply because there are endless targets; you will always find someone who is doing better than you, which will impact you. This creates a never-ending cycle. In that sense, finding happiness by comparing yourself with others is difficult, very tough, and generally not possible.

While social comparison can increase well-being in certain cases—such as when you engage in downward social comparison—it is still challenging. A growing body of

evidence suggests that this effect is temporary and that frequent social comparison actually decreases well-being. Although you may temporarily feel happy by seeing someone worse than you, someone who is inferior to you, these effects are generally temporary. Too much social comparison ultimately reduces the sense of well-being. Research suggests that individuals who are less happy may engage more frequently in spontaneous social comparison than those who are happier. Research shows that people who are generally happy don't compare themselves too much. Compared to people who are unhappy or have more sadness within them, unhappy people are more likely to compare themselves. This sadness propels people to look at others, and particularly upward comparisons are likely to happen. If people are comfortable and happy, they do not compare themselves much and are not strongly influenced by comparison. For example, some studies show participants identified as happy or unhappy based on certain scores. Some participants scored higher in happiness, while another group generally had lower scores in happiness. They were called the unhappy group and the happy group. These two groups of participants were given a chance to compare themselves with either higher- or lower-performing peers. They made both upward and downward social comparisons as instructed. The results showed that unhappy participants experienced a decline in mood when paired with a better-performing peer and a boost when paired with a lower-performing peer. Unhappy participants were more influenced by social comparison: when paired with a superior peer group, they felt very bad about themselves, and their mood was low. But when they were paired with lower-performing targets compared to themselves, they were very happy. They were more influenced by social comparison than others. In contrast, happier individuals showed less sensitivity to social comparison cues and paid less attention to others' performance. The group with higher happiness scores was not much influenced by whether they knew how they were doing in relation to superior or inferior people.

Performance level can also influence whether someone is more likely to compare themselves to others; this can be a factor as well. This pattern is supported by many other studies, where researchers found that unhappy individuals tend to make more social comparisons. Many researchers also reported that mildly depressed individuals exhibit a

similar tendency. People who are mildly depressed and have low happiness scores are more likely to engage in social comparison compared to other peers.

Furthermore, researchers such as Gibbons and Buunk (1999) observed that a predisposition toward seeking social comparison information is associated with lower self-esteem, depression, and neuroticism. Seeking too much social comparison information about others may lead to lower self-esteem, depression, and neuroticism. Some research also found that individuals who reported engaging in frequent social comparisons are more prone to experiencing emotions such as envy, guilt, regret, and defensiveness, as well as behaviors such as lying, blaming, and having unfulfilled cravings. So too much social comparison research is generally associated with negative consequences. In a follow-up study, police officers who frequently made social comparisons demonstrated a higher likelihood of in-group bias and reported lower job satisfaction. So in terms of professionals, job satisfaction and whether you are biased towards the groups and so on, this was also related to being negatively impacted by too much social comparison. So collectively, this finding suggests that frequent social comparisons are linked not only to lower happiness but also to heightened emotional responses, where individuals generally experience more positive emotions after downward comparison and more negative emotions following upward social comparison. So too much frequent social comparison can make you very unstable in terms of emotional experience. So you may become very happy when you see someone is not doing well and become very sad when you see someone is doing better than you, and so on. So, you will become much more emotionally unstable in that sense. That is what research shows. These are some of the findings related to social comparison. In general, people tend to make upward social comparisons, which have a very negative impact on self-esteem, self-evaluation, happiness, and so on. People who engage in excessive social comparison also experience many negative impacts on their lives in terms of emotions, self-esteem, and other outcomes.

The question is, why do people engage in social comparison? We have seen some of the broader functions. Let us now look at some of the more specific functions. One reason people engage in social comparison is to reduce uncertainty about themselves. We want

to be certain about how we are doing. In terms of self-evaluation, social comparison is an outcome of this process. People often engage in social comparison to reduce uncertainty regarding their abilities, performance, and other socially defined attributes. This basically means we are evaluating ourselves, which we discussed earlier. When we evaluate ourselves, we want to be sure about how we are doing. To reduce this uncertainty, we tend to engage in social comparison. This tendency is particularly strong when individuals rely on external standards to evaluate themselves. When you rely too much on external standards, you are more likely to engage in social comparison. Consequently, those with lower self-assurance or unclear internal standards are more likely to engage in frequent social comparison. If you don't have a clear internal standard, you are more likely to look at external standards in terms of social comparison. Therefore, you are more likely to engage in social comparisons. To reduce these uncertainties, people engage in social comparison.

Another important factor that influences social comparison is called objective self-awareness, which basically means that Festinger proposed we engage in social comparison due to an inherent drive to evaluate ourselves. Research also suggests that this evaluative focus can lead to negative consequences. We have already discussed many negative consequences. Social comparison requires an objective view of oneself, treating oneself as an object to be judged rather than as a subject to be experienced. When you view yourself too much as an object, that is called objective self-awareness; you look at yourself as an object rather than as a subject who is experiencing life. When your objective self-awareness is very strong, it may lead to more social comparison. So, you are always looking at yourself as an object to be compared to other things. This objective self-awareness, where attention is directed toward oneself as an evaluative object, is indeed linked with more frequent social comparison. The more you objectify yourself and look at yourself as an object, the more you are likely to compare yourself with others, because you look at others as objects. In that sense, comparison is more likely to happen. Objective self-awareness can therefore lead to more social comparison. This objective self-awareness also tends to increase the frequency of social comparison. Self-focused attention is also associated with negative effects. Too much of it contributes to a cycle of

self-evaluation and dissatisfaction. Meta-analyses also confirm a strong relationship between objective self-awareness and negative emotion.

While social comparison can temporarily reduce uncertainty and impact well-being, these effects are short-lived. Over time, social comparison may reinforce a dependency. The problem is that social comparison can make you dependent on external standards, prompting individuals to engage in more frequent comparisons to feel a sense of well-being. This often leads to attempting to outperform others. Your sense of well-being then becomes dependent on external standards, which is very difficult to achieve, as we have already seen. People who habitually make spontaneous social comparisons are therefore more likely to experience unhappiness and increased vulnerability to emotional swings based on comparison outcomes. Too much social comparison leads to greater instability in terms of mood swings and other effects. This can trap individuals in a cycle of self-focused attention and continual comparison, ultimately diminishing well-being instead of providing better coping strategies. Ultimately, it reduces your well-being.

Now, let us see how social comparison nowadays occurs less in the real world and more in a social media context. Let us examine how this influences us in terms of making social comparisons online or on social media platforms. This is much more of a reality in today's world compared to the offline context in which we live. Social media, such as social networking sites like Facebook or Instagram, provides a fertile ground for social comparison. As people have an enormous amount of information about comparison targets on such sites, we are no longer comparing ourselves with a few people around us. We are comparing ourselves with thousands of people in different parts of the world simply by connecting through social media, such as social networking sites. You are sitting in your room, comparing yourself with thousands of people who are living anywhere in the world. The possibility for social comparison has increased tremendously in today's world, and the impact is also much greater compared to, let's say, a few generations ago.

Users of social networking sites, such as Facebook, are more likely to portray their successes. The reason this has more impact is simply that when you look at how people

post things on social media or social networking sites, they generally post all the good things in their lives, all the successes, and all the achievements in their lives, which is fine. But the problem is that when you look at those achievements and successes in someone's life, you are more likely to engage in upward contrastive social comparison. You may feel that others are doing very well and your life is not going in that direction, which may not be true because they are only selectively showing some things about their life; they don't show all the other problems in their life. This is why social networking sites, where people generally portray successes, achievements, and rosy images of their life, consequently make upward social comparison more likely to take place.

Thus, upward comparison is more likely to happen simply because of the kind of things people post. On social networking sites, people are more often exposed to idealized images of others and share more self-enhancing information about themselves. They will always show that life is all about the best possible things happening and so on. People generally tend to do this as a general tendency among all users, which is okay. But when you look at those things, you may be influenced by them in the sense that you think your life is not that good, and so on.

So you are more likely to have an upward contrastive kind of social comparison, and you may feel bad about yourself. Diverse research studies, including cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental studies on social comparison on social networking sites, indicate that this comparison typically results in a decrease in well-being and happiness. In a general sense, exceptions can always be present. Generally, it leads to decreased well-being and happiness when people engage in too much of such social comparison on networking sites. Recent meta-analyses also indicate that social comparison on networking sites, in general, predicts a decrease in subjective well-being with a small to medium effect size, while upward social comparison predicts a decrease in well-being with a small to medium effect size as well. Most of the research shows a general decrease in the well-being and happiness of people when they engage too much in social comparison in the online context or on networking sites.

So typically, one of the reasons is that people in the online context also tend to do more upward contrastive social comparison. Just like in the offline context, the online context provides a fertile ground for such upward contrastive comparisons because people generally showcase only the best aspects of their lives, making it an upward target. This can have a negative influence on you when people tend to compare themselves too much on those sites. However, there can obviously always be exceptions. On social networking sites, comparison can sometimes lead to a positive impact, and happiness can also increase when your comparison process is a little different. Social comparison on social networking sites may not be associated with negative emotions when the comparison is focused on opinions rather than abilities.

So when you don't compare yourself in terms of abilities with other people, but rather with their opinions, it doesn't have much influence. When there is a downward social comparison, you may also find yourself comparing with people on the social networking site who are inferior to you. Then you may also feel good on social networking sites. Also, when you engage in assimilation to an upward social comparison target, it can lead to more inspiration and positive outcomes. That can also happen when you engage in assimilative upward social comparison and look at people who are superior to you, but then you get inspiration from them.

If you make that kind of social comparison, it can have a positive impact. But these are exceptions. People generally make upward contrastive comparisons, which leads to a negative impact on them. People generally don't do these things. They are more likely to engage in upward contrastive social comparison. So researchers actually noted that the positive consequences of social comparison on networking sites are exceptions rather than the rule. The rule is that, for most people, social comparison decreases happiness and well-being. Some exceptions exist where people may experience increased happiness. Overall, online social comparison generally has a negative impact on subjective well-being, as revealed by studies, meta-analyses, and other research.

The last important aspect we need to address is how to avoid social comparison. We cannot completely avoid it, nor is it necessary to do so. However, the frequency of social

comparison should decrease. Too much social comparison can lead to significant negative impacts, as research has shown, particularly upward contrastive comparisons, which are highly detrimental.

Philosophically, some statements illustrate how social comparison can be harmful. For example: *“If one only wishes to be happy, this could be easily accomplished, but we wish to be happier than other people, and this is always difficult, for we believe others are happier than we are.”*

This statement highlights that achieving happiness is actually simple, but the problem is that people want to be happier than others. This is difficult because we tend to overestimate how happy others are, creating an endless, unachievable pursuit. As Roosevelt famously said: *“Comparison is the thief of joy.”* Excessive social comparison removes joy from our lives.

So, how can we reduce social comparison? One important step is to be aware of its negative consequences. Too much social comparison, particularly upward contrastive comparison, is bound to lead to negative impacts. It is important to be conscious of how such comparisons are affecting you. Ask yourself: *Is it worth comparing yourself to someone whose life is very different from yours while they are simply living their own life?* Often, this leads to unnecessary feelings of sadness. Being aware of the negative consequences of unnecessary social comparison is the first step. While some social comparison may be necessary for evaluation, most people engage in it unnecessarily, which can make them insecure, emotionally unstable, and vulnerable.

One effective strategy is practicing gratitude. By being grateful for what you have, you are less likely to compare yourself to others. Gratitude fosters satisfaction and happiness and reduces envy and jealousy—negative emotions that often accompany social comparison. As discussed in the last lecture, gratitude can be a powerful antidote to these tendencies.

Another approach is to use social comparison as a source of inspiration and motivation. Comparing yourself with someone better than you doesn't have to make you feel bad—it

can motivate you to improve. The key is your attitude: choose to let comparisons inspire you rather than diminish your self-worth.

Additionally, consider self-evaluation based on internal standards. Often, we compare ourselves with others to evaluate our abilities or achievements. Instead, you can set your own goals and measure progress against your standards rather than others'. For example, instead of thinking, *"I need to be a better speaker than X or Y,"* you can say, *"I want to improve my public speaking skills to reach my own target."* This approach allows you to bypass social comparison entirely and focus on personal growth.

By practicing gratitude, using social comparison positively, and setting self-defined standards, you can significantly reduce the negative effects of comparison. These strategies help you make social comparison a constructive process rather than a source of stress.

Understanding and applying these concepts can enhance the quality of your life. With this, I will stop here. Thank you.