



The Comparison Trap

Measuring your insides against everyone's outsides · Recovery in Focus · Session Packet

Human beings compare themselves to other people. We have always done it, and we cannot fully stop doing it. Clinicians call this habit **social comparison**, and it has a healthy version: you see someone doing well, and it motivates you to work toward the same thing. But comparison also has an unhealthy version, and early recovery runs into the unhealthy version at the worst possible time. Early recovery is a season of starting over. You may be behind where you used to be, behind where your old classmates are, and behind the timeline you once imagined for your life. A person in that season, looking at other people's lives, can conclude in minutes that they are too far behind to bother trying.

That conclusion matters in this room because of the feeling it produces: shame. Unhealthy comparison does not produce motivation. It produces the thought "everyone else figured life out and I wrecked mine," and shame like that is a known relapse emotion, because the oldest escape from shame is drinking and using. There is also something you need to know about modern comparison: it is unfair by design. You are no longer comparing yourself to a few people you actually know, bad days included. You are comparing your ordinary Tuesday to hundreds of strangers' best moments, filtered, posed, and sorted by an app that shows you the most impressive posts first. That math can never come out fair, because the two sides were never measuring the same thing. This session is about catching comparison when it happens, understanding why the modern version is unfair, and switching to the only fair measurement there is: comparing yourself today to yourself at your worst, with proof in hand.

What is in this session?

This session has four parts, usually covered over two group meetings:

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|----------------|--|---|
| CLASS 1 | 1. Everyone Compares | 2. Why Modern Comparison Is Unfair |
| CLASS 2 | 3. Comparison, Shame, and Relapse | 4. The Fair Measurement |

After this session you will be able to

- Catch yourself comparing, including the quiet kinds of comparing
- Explain why comparing your life to social media is unfair math
- Trace how comparison turns into shame, and how shame points toward relapse
- Measure yourself the fair way: against your own worst day, with real proof

What will be asked of you?

Honesty about the comparing you do in private. That is some of the most private material there is. The payoff is a way of measuring your life that stops feeding the part of you that wants an excuse to

give up.

Part 1: Everyone Compares

WAIT, REALLY?

Comparing is **automatic**. In studies, people rated themselves against others even when researchers told them not to, even against total strangers, even when the comparison meant nothing. You do not decide whether to compare. You only decide what to do after the comparing happens.

Comparing goes in two directions. Comparing UP means measuring yourself against people doing better than you. It can motivate you, or it can crush you. The difference is whether the gap feels like a path ("that could be me someday") or a verdict ("that will never be me"). Comparing DOWN means measuring yourself against people doing worse. It can produce gratitude, or it can produce a cheap feeling of superiority that does not last. In recovery rooms, comparing down shows up as a special poison: ranking recoveries. Counting whose clean time is longer, deciding whose sobriety is more real, judging who is doing recovery the right way. Every room has felt it. It helps nobody, and it is the same comparison trap happening inside the one place built to be safe from it.

EXERCISE 1

Answer yes or no:

1. I have measured my whole life against someone else's in under a minute. ☐ Yes
☐ No
2. When I compare, the gap usually feels like a verdict, not a path. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I have compared clean time or ranked recoveries, mine or someone else's. ☐ Yes
☐ No

EXERCISE 2: MY COMPARING HABITS

Check the comparisons that actually run in your head:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Old classmates' careers and houses | ☐ The version of me before all this |
| ☐ Siblings or cousins the family measures me against | ☐ Other people's recoveries |
| ☐ People my age with families and mortgages | ☐ Exes and their new lives |
| | ☐ Strangers online I will never meet |
| | ☐ Other: _____ |

The comparison that cuts deepest: _____

Part 2: Why Modern Comparison Is Unfair

Your grandparents compared themselves to maybe a hundred people they actually knew, and they saw those people's bad days too. Today you compare yourself to thousands of people who show you only their peaks: the engagement, the promotion, the vacation, the before-and-after photo. Posted at the best angle, run through filters, with the divorce, the debt, and the miserable Tuesday left out, because nobody posts those. Then the app sorts it all, and the posts that rise to the top are whatever keeps you scrolling, which is usually the content that makes your own life feel small. Knowing all this does not make you immune. The comparing still happens automatically. But knowing changes what the comparison means. If you know a carnival game is rigged, losing at it stops meaning you are bad at games. One more thing your grandparents did not have: you get to choose what you look at. Every follow, mute, and unfollow decides what your automatic comparing gets fed.

EXERCISE 3

Answer yes or no:

1. I have felt worse about my life after scrolling, even though nothing in my life actually changed. ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. I have posted a happy-looking photo while having a terrible day. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. There are specific accounts that reliably make me feel behind in life. ☐ Yes ☐ No

EXERCISE 4: CHOOSE WHAT YOU LOOK AT

Two accounts, feeds, or sources that reliably make me feel small (I will mute them this week): _____

One account that actually motivates me (feels like a path, not a verdict):

Proof from my own posting history that people only post their best moments:

End of Class 1. Talk it out:

- Which comparison cuts deepest, and how old is it? For most people it started long before smartphones.
- Think of a happy post you made on a bad day. What does that tell you about everyone else's posts?

Part 3: Comparison, Shame, and Relapse

Here is the chain this session exists to break. Step one: on a vulnerable day, you compare yourself to someone and come up short. Step two: the comparison turns into shame, the feeling of "I am behind because something is wrong with me." Step three: shame makes people want to hide, and for anyone with a using history, the oldest hiding place is drinking and using. The most dangerous moment in the chain is a specific thought: **"what's the point."** As in: everyone is so far ahead of me, the gap will never close, so what is the point of the meetings and the small paychecks and the slow rebuild. When that thought shows up, call it what it is. It is not a true insight about your life. It is the end result of unfair math, done with rigged numbers, on a bad day. The answer is not to pretend you are not behind on some timelines. You might be. The answer is to refuse the comparison itself: other people's timelines were never the measure of your recovery, and the only timeline that belongs to you is your own.

EXERCISE 5: MY CHAIN, TRACED

The comparison that starts my chain: _____

The shame sentence it produces ("I am..."): _____

Where it points next (isolating, "what's the point," thoughts of using):

The earliest place I could break the chain: _____

Nina

Nina, seven months sober, is having a decent Saturday until a wedding album shows up in her feed. It belongs to a girl from her high school class: big house in the background, two kids in matching outfits. Nina's comparison arrives uninvited: we are the same age, and I live in sober housing with a CNA textbook and a bus pass. By evening, the "what's the point" thought is getting loud, and Nina knows where that thought wants to take her. What breaks the chain is a good habit: her regular Saturday call with her sponsor. Her sponsor listens to the whole thing, then asks one question: "Seven months ago, at your worst, what would you have given to be a sober woman with a textbook and a plan?" Nina cries a little, then laughs, then finishes the chapter she was studying. The girl from high school was never actually competing with her. Nina was the only one keeping score.

EXERCISE 6

1. Trace Nina's chain: the comparison, the shame sentence, the dangerous thought:

2. The sponsor's question changed what Nina was measuring against. From what, to what? _____

3. At your worst, what would you have given to be exactly where you are sitting right now? Write it honestly.

Part 4: The Fair Measurement

There is only one comparison that was ever fair: you today, against you at your worst, with proof. Three habits make it work. **First, measure backward, not sideways.** Do not measure the distance between you and other people. Measure the distance between you and the person you were at your bottom. That distance is real, it is yours, and it is almost always bigger than you give yourself credit for. **Second, keep proof, not feelings.** Write down the concrete things: days sober, classes finished, relationships repaired, dollars saved, mornings without dread. On a bad day, shame will argue with your feelings and win. Shame cannot argue with a written list. **Third, say your real numbers to one person regularly.** Measuring alone goes crooked over time. The room you are sitting in is full of people measuring the same honest way.

EXERCISE 7: HOW FAR YOU HAVE COME

Where my bottom was, in one plain sentence: _____

Five concrete things that have changed since then (small ones count):

1. _____ 2. _____
3. _____ 4. _____
5. _____

EXERCISE 8

Answer yes or no:

1. The distance from my bottom to today is bigger than I usually admit. ☐ Yes
☐ No
2. There is someone I could share my real progress with every month. ☐ Yes ☐ No
3. I caught myself comparing at least once just while reading this packet. ☐ Yes
☐ No

SKILL OF THE DAY: CATCH IT AND CORRECT IT

Once a day this week, catch one comparison as it happens and correct it out loud or on paper: "That math is unfair. Here is my real measure: ___" and name one concrete thing from your Exercise 7 list. Catching the comparison is the skill. The written proof is what you answer it with.

Take it to the group

- What is your deepest-cutting comparison, and today, does it feel like a path or a verdict?
- At your worst, what would you have given to sit in your chair tonight?
- Ranking recoveries inside the rooms: where have you seen it, and what did it cost?
- Read one item from your Exercise 7 list out loud.

Session summary

Comparing yourself to others is automatic and cannot be switched off. Modern comparison is unfair by design: you measure your ordinary day against strangers' filtered best moments, sorted by an app. On a vulnerable day, that unfair math turns into shame, shame makes you want to hide, and the oldest hiding place is drinking and using, with "what's the point" as the warning sign. In this session you named your comparing habits, chose what your feed gets to show you, traced your own comparison-to-shame chain, and switched to the fair measurement: you today against you at your worst, with written proof.

Words used in this session

- **Social comparison:** the automatic habit of measuring yourself against other people. You cannot stop it; you can only answer it.
- **Comparing up / comparing down:** measuring against people doing better, or people doing worse. Either one can help or harm, depending on what you do with it.
- **The fair measurement:** you today, compared to you at your worst. The only comparison where both sides are real.
- **Proof list:** the written record of concrete changes since your bottom. Shame can beat a feeling; it cannot beat a list.

Takeaway: You will never stop comparing. You can stop using rigged numbers. Choose what your feed shows you, measure backward instead of sideways, keep written proof, and when "what's the point" shows up, recognize it as the comparison trap talking, not the truth.
