

comparative suffering □

These are unprecedented times, and with that comes anxiety, panic, stress, and an onslaught of negative, fear-based emotions. What doesn't help? Comparing our pain to others.



feeling bad about
feeling bad

So...2020...

This is definitely not going down in the books as the best year ever. In America, at the time of writing this, we've got the most Covid-19 cases, the most deaths, divisive and contradictory leadership, and many states' health care systems (and soon to be school systems) that are on the brink of overwhelm. The economy is in shambles, divorce rates are up, and we're all so busy arguing about masks we forget about the mess of an election coming up in November.

Things are rough for most people right now, myself included. But somebody (cough Brazil cough) always has it worse.

This is an example of comparative suffering, and it isn't just unhelpful, it's quite harmful. Comparative suffering is when you look at someone having a hard time and minimize their feelings or experience by comparing it to the difficult time somebody else is having. We've all said it, and we've all had it said to us, "well at least you're not ____" "it's better than being ____" "It could be worse, you could be ____"

The person saying this usually has the best of intentions, even if it's you talking to yourself in your head (or out loud, no judgement). It's telling that person that their own pain is insignificant compared to the pain of somebody else. I grew up using comparative suffering so much that as an adult, it became one of my primary tactics for numbing my own pain.

My mother grew up being abused and molested, her own father comparing his daughters' worth to the pigs on their farm. My father grew up in Detroit with rocks thrown at him in school and being called a Nazi after moving here from Stuttgart when he was 8. My sister suffers from what we thought was bi-polar disorder, but may actually be aspergers.

And I was an straight-A student who excelled in most of what I did. I had a killer wardrobe, two varsity letters, and lots of friends. In my mind, I had no reason to feel anything but gratitude and happiness.

But comparative suffering taught me that my feelings were "wimpy" and "overly sensitive" and that my pain was less important than others who were "worse off" than me. It taught me to

compare my grief and anxiety to others' and if my hurt didn't measure up, it wasn't valid. I viewed painful feelings as bad, wrong, and did whatever I could to get rid of them, be it drinking, overworking, running away from them, or unloading them on those around me; whatever was required to not acknowledge them.

This, ladies and gents, is comparative suffering, and let me tell you, the more you use it, the harder the habit is to break. So during this pandemic (and always) let's stop comparing our pain, our friends' pain, other countries' pain, etc. because when you're dealing with your own hurt, disappointment, and heartache, knowing somebody else has it rough doesn't do a damn thing to help you heal.

If those around you use comparative suffering to invalidate your pain, whether it be intentional or not, there are ways to politely ask them for empathy instead. "I understand that the pandemic is scary in other parts of the world, but that doesn't make it any less scary to me, here, now." This helps the person realize what their words are implying, and hopefully encourages them to listen rather than judge.

Because really, that's what comparative suffering is; when somebody (or yourself) judges you for feeling pain they don't think you should feel, or shouldn't feel as intensely.

These are scary times to say the least, and your feelings are valid. As Sven the reindeer says in Frozen II (my kids will be so proud of me), "You feel what you feel, and those feelings are real." You don't owe anyone an explanation. Own your feelings, acknowledge them, and give yourself permission to really truly feel them without judgement from others or yourself.

Until next week, stay safe and stay intentional everyone!

with much gratitude and grace,

becky

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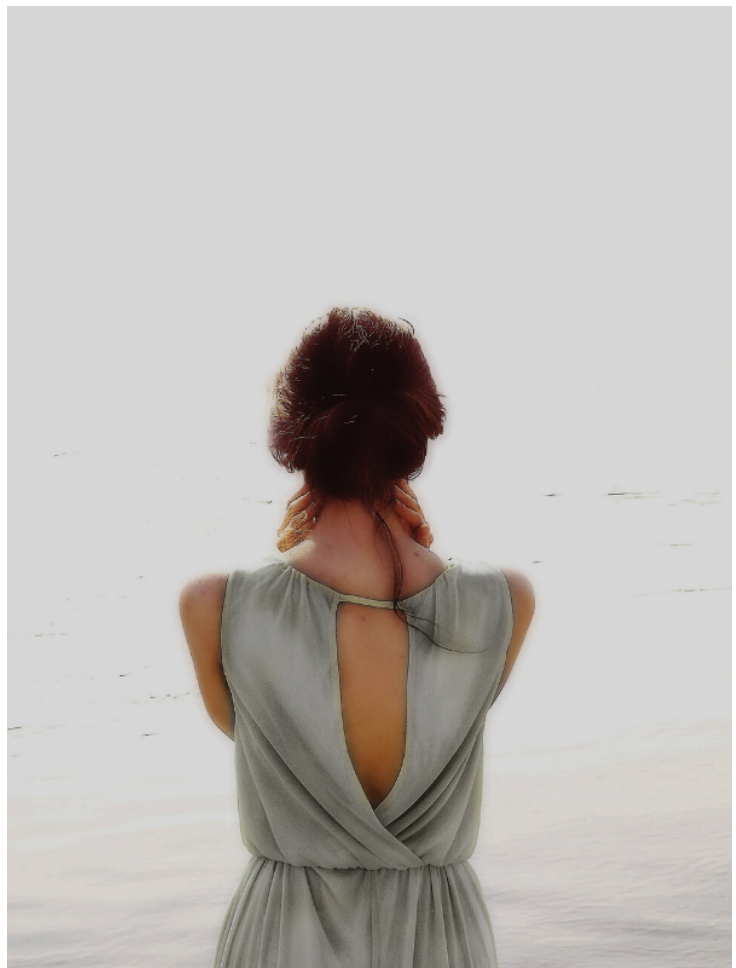
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