

Never Measure Yourself against Perfection

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was in high school, one of the happiest kids I knew was an excellent athlete whom I'll call Bill. He was very intelligent and always had the best looking girlfriends. He eventually ended up marrying his high school sweetheart.

Bill was from a relatively small town in Michigan, and he ended up going to our private boarding school, where he was surrounded by a lot of very high achievers. I think the type of people he met there really must have changed his perspective. Some of the kids he played baseball with in high school went on to play baseball in college. Some of these kids went on to Ivy League schools and planned on doing things like becoming doctors. I remember one of his friends went to Stanford. I don't think Bill went away to college and he stayed home and attended a local community college for a year or two. After high school, his life did not appear to blossom the way the lives of others around him did. That's not to say there was anything wrong with his life – he just didn't appear interested in taking over the world.

When I'd first met Bill he'd been among the happiest people I had ever known. His happiness was very pure and deep. But something horrible happened to him, and I will come back to that in a moment.



What I am about to share with you is one of the most profound ways I know to look at the world and your place in it. If you consider yourself even slightly motivated, this may be one of the more useful things you will ever read. What you are about to read could change your life forever, and it could even save your life.

A few years ago, I was at a Tony Robbins conference in Palm Springs, California. Tony told a story about how his stepson had attended one of the most prestigious boarding schools in the world. An important person from the Middle East was apparently so happy with the assistance Tony had provided him that he told Tony he would get his stepson into this ultra prestigious school, which was in Switzerland, as a gift. Tony accepted the offer and sent his stepson off to the school.



Tony made the point of saying

before sending his stepson to the school, he'd been a very fit kid, and was also extremely happy. The boy had a positive disposition and lots of friends. He never seemed to care what other kids around him were doing and was mainly interested in just enjoying his own life.

Although Tony didn't know it, once his stepson started going to this school, he started requesting thousands of dollars a month in spending money from his mother. Apparently he felt he needed new clothes and various other things to *keep up* with the other kids at the school. These kids were the sons of prime ministers and princes from Europe, famous actors, and other titans of industry – the children of some of the most important and well known people in the world.

After Tony's stepson had been at the school for about six months, Tony traveled to Switzerland to visit him. He immediately noticed his stepson had gained at least 30 pounds. He hardly recognized him. His stepson insisted they go to a certain [sushi restaurant](#) for lunch, and the bill was several hundred dollars. Before, his stepson had never been concerned about restaurants and spending a lot of money. Aside from this, what Tony noticed most about his stepson was he now seemed very unhappy. He kept comparing himself with the people around him, and did not seem to feel good about himself.

His stepson had started comparing himself to others and felt like he came up short in every category. The boy simply did not feel good about himself or his family any longer. As Tony was speaking with him, the boy would say things like:

-This person was better than he was in this category.

-This person was better than Tony in this category.

-This person had a newer this or that.

-This person had more important parents.

-Tony was "new money," and this was not good.

-This family was better than his because of this reason.

According to Tony, it was as if the school had given his stepson reasons to no longer feel good about himself. He compared everything in his life against something or someone else. Consequently, the boy gained tons of weight and became very unhappy with himself. Tony felt the damage was so severe he pulled him out of the school a short time later.

When you've achieved a high level of success and are around people with the most privileges and advantages, you often find the people who are the unhappiest with themselves. I think there is some truth to the idea the most successful people are often the unhappiest. The reason this may be true is they constantly measure themselves against ideals they simply cannot attain.

People who want to get very good grades may say to themselves, "nothing less than an 'A' is acceptable." When they fail to get an A grade, they feel badly about themselves. Even if they get all As, if they get one A+, they might feel angry their other grades are not "A+" as well. A thinking process geared towards an ideal leads people to see they are failing to be "perfect", and to meet a certain ideal in numerous other areas of their life:

-Their relationships with others

-Their wealth

-Their athletic ability

-Their health

-Their attractiveness

-Their popularity

-Their material possessions

-Their social status

-The social status of their parents

-Their weight

-Their natural intelligence

-Their talents of every kind

This list could go on and on. When people see others who are better than them, they often feel a sense of inferiority.

When many of us hear about stars overdosing on drugs or having other severe problems, the reaction often is, "Why would someone with so many advantages do this?" Stars are so programmed to achieve success, they often simply feel they do not measure up in a variety of areas. In many cases, it is the people closest to the star who make the person aware he or she does not measure up.

When I started seeing headlines about Britney Spears hanging around with Paris Hilton, I knew it would not be good for Britney Spears, and instinctively knew Britney was likely to start having severe problems. Paris comes from a different background than Britney, having grown up among the upper class, and she has an awareness of society I am sure Britney lacked at the time. In short, Paris' insight into society could surely make Britney feel as if she were not measuring up, despite her massive fame and fortune. Paris knows what it is like to be *from* money; Paris knows about the social pecking order better than Britney.



Sure enough, very shortly after the two were announced to be friends and were seen frequently together, all sorts of horrible things started happening to Spears, which were of her own making. She shaved her head, was carted away to a psychiatric ward on a stretcher, and more. I am sure a lot of what happened had to do with Paris showing Britney how she did not measure up. Paris' influence on Britney might not have been direct, but the effect occurred nonetheless.

There is a real danger in the way most of us have been taught to think about ourselves and the world. This way of thinking about ourselves and others never allows us to measure up. Instead of appreciating where we have come from and what we have achieved, most of us compare ourselves to an impossible ideal. All around us there are ideals we think we need to measure up to. We never can.

I want to propose a way of looking at the world and your place in it that will virtually guarantee you happiness and success throughout your life: you will never achieve the "ideal" in anything. You can keep trying, but you will never, ever be the best at everything. There is always going to be someone better than you.

Compare yourself only to the person you were before. Measure yourself against your own progress in various categories and do not compare yourself to others. *Forget about others.*

If you can understand this idea and apply it, your life will be changed forever. When you measure yourself against where you have been in the past, you are always going to feel a sense of progress. Each new success you achieve is going to give you a greater sense of satisfaction and push you forward with more positive energy. You can always improve on where you have already been, and what you have already accomplished. If you want to make improvements in any area, write down where you are right now and set out to improve. Measure yourself against where you have been, not where others have been.

Our brains like to set goals. Goals are absolutely necessary to drive us forward and make us achieve in life. But we cannot measure ourselves against others. We need to measure ourselves against ourselves, and gauge our progress in that fashion.

People who measure themselves against an ideal always feel disappointed. It is impossible to achieve every single goal you set for yourself. When you do not reach your ever-elusive goals, you end up feeling like a loser. You cannot possibly achieve every goal you set for yourself. What you can do, however, is constantly improve. This way you will continually feel a sense of victory as you move forward in life.

For example, if your goal is to lose weight, you can look at the scale a week from now after dieting and see that you have lost some weight. You have achieved something and have a reason to celebrate. This small victory will improve your self esteem and help you feel better about yourself.

Now, if you want to weigh 115 pounds like a star you read about in *US Magazine*, the reality is that you might never be able to achieve this. This is not how you should measure yourself.

I am sure you love watching television as much as I do, but most of the time what we are seeing is not the way the world really is. Nevertheless, many people are led to believe that the outside world is very similar to what they see on television, or read about in books and gossip magazines. There is an ideal that everyone aspires to attain. This ideal is a fantasy that simply does not exist. Comparing yourself to a fantasy world is a recipe for disaster and continual frustration.

Many people believe they can only be happy if their lives match a blueprint of what they believe a perfect life should be. When you really think about this, it is their model of the world that consistently makes them come up short. You need to compare yourself to where you have been and not where you think you should be.

You will start to feel fulfilled when you start comparing yourself to where you have been. You will be experiencing the life that you want. You deserve to feel fulfilled in life and to feel good about yourself.

Growing up, I had the privilege of having relatives who lived out in the country on farms, who did things like [drive trucks](#) for a living. In spending time with this family, I also met many of their friends who had far different expectations for their lives than

the sort of people you meet in big cities. The people I met from the country typically had very low expectations for themselves and their lives. They were mostly concerned about things like putting food on the table and having a family. They did not believe they would ever be rich, or their children should be attending important schools. This simply was not part of their blueprint.



These were also some of the happiest people I ever met. The fact their expectations were so low meant there was very little to disappoint them. Things we might take for granted (like new tires on a car, for instance) were things that gave these people a great deal of satisfaction.

Conversely, I also grew up with people who had extremely high expectations for themselves. These were the people who went to the private high school I attended. Some of them were continually disappointed in themselves and the world around them, and they often turned to drugs in order to feel better about themselves and their lives. These kids were very intelligent and extremely capable. Many of them ended up going to the very best colleges and today are living in big cities, doing things like working for investment banks. They are also still very unhappy.

One of the kids I went to school with was Bill – the baseball player I mentioned at the beginning of this article. He was from a small town background of lower expectations, like my relatives, or even Britney Spears, who grew up in rural Louisiana. This young man was thrust into a high-expectations environment of a private school, where I am sure he learned to compare himself to numerous ideals:

- It is important to have parents who are rich.
- It is important to drive a nice car.
- It is important to get into the best college.
- It is important to get the best and highest paying job possible.
- It is important to score in the top 10 percent on your SATs.
- It is important to be the best athlete.
- It is important to impress others.

He was a happy kid when I first met him. After college, his first day of work in an "official job" was going to be for his wife's father. That night, he went to sleep with his wife just like any other night. At least, that's how it appeared to his wife. In the morning, she woke up and did not see him anywhere. A short time later she checked the basement and found him hanging by his neck from a noose. He had committed suicide.

Who knows what was going on inside his mind or why he ended up killing himself? No one around him ever expected anything like this would ever happen. When I think about this, I bet the young man simply did not measure up to his ideals, or whatever he thought he should be doing with his career. There must have been something in his mind that made him feel like he did not belong on this earth and that he wanted to escape.

You have already achieved so much, and you will continue to achieve great things in your life, step by step. Let yourself be carried forward by the knowledge you have improved and are continually improving. Use your past as a yardstick, and never use an ideal. You are capable of greatness. Just be patient and let your life unfold – and enjoy the process.

THE LESSON

Use your past, rather than some unattainable ideal, as the yardstick for measuring progress in your life and career. The most successful people are also often the most unhappy, because they measure themselves against impossible ideals, which causes a constant sense of inferiority. There will always be someone better than you, and there are ideals all around you against which it would be unrealistic and stupid to measure yourself. Instead, compare yourself only to the person you were before; measure yourself against your own progress, and forget about others.