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Social Ladder

Many of you will remember the television show, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," hosted by Robin Leach. The show depicted many lavish locations and material goods. Could it be that watching television shows such as this is bad for our health? Stay tuned.

Extensive research has established that there is a relationship between objective socioeconomic status (SES) and health. SES is typically measured by income, education, and occupation. On each of these dimensions, more is better when it comes to health. Although there is some evidence that ill health can contribute to a person falling down on the socioeconomic hierarchy, there is much stronger evidence for the impact of SES on health. There are a number of reasons for this, including differences in opportunities and environments associated with income, education, and occupation.

Interestingly, where people perceive themselves to be on the socioeconomic ladder has an even stronger relationship to their health than does their actual standing on income, education, and occupation! Nancy Adler, a University of California (San Francisco) health psychologist, asks individuals to respond to the following instruction: "*Think of a ladder with 10 steps representing where people stand in our society. At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off, those who have the most money, most education, and best jobs. At step 1 are the people who are worst off --- those who have the least money, least education, and the least respected or no job. Where would you place yourself on this ladder?*" This is how subjective socioeconomic status is measured.

How can one's place on the subjective social ladder affect health? The perception of low social status can increase the experience of inequality, deprivation, or having little control, which in turn contribute to the chronic stress that damages health. On the other hand, persons perceiving themselves to have higher social status may have stronger feelings of control and security, which tend to be health-protective.

Relative socioeconomic status appears to matter to people, in that we tend to prefer to be higher on the ladder than people to whom we compare ourselves. Economists Sara Solnick and David Hemenway surveyed Harvard students, faculty, and staff. Respondents were asked to choose between a) earning \$50,000 when most people earn \$25,000; or b) earning \$100,000 when most people earn \$200,000. A majority of respondents chose "a" --- they would prefer to make less money but be in a higher relative position than to make more money but perceive themselves to be lower on the subjective socioeconomic ladder.

One conclusion of such research would be that avoiding upward social comparison (comparing ourselves to those higher on the socioeconomic ladder) is good for health. However, that is essentially impossible to do. There are numerous factors in life that prompt upward social comparison. Nonetheless, it makes sense to not accentuate our attention on those higher on the ladder. A steady diet of "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" does not appear to be a recipe for good health.

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