

PUT THAT RESENTMENT TO GOOD USE

Envy is rampant, thanks to social media. But with the right approach, it can be a great motivator

BY JENNIFER BREHENY WALLACE

FACEBOOK NOW boasts more than a billion users—and it isn't the only one boasting. With posts showing off work promotions you didn't get, fun parties you weren't invited to and exotic vacations you can't afford, Facebook and other social-media websites have become huge generators of modern envy. In the process, they're providing researchers with a unique platform for examining those feelings.

It isn't always a friendly picture. A study published last August by the journal *Plos One*, led by researchers at the University of Michigan, found that the more people used Facebook, the less satisfied they were with their lives. In another study last year involving almost 600 Facebook users, German researchers say they witnessed the "rampant nature of envy" on social-networking websites.

So modern envy seems to be bad—but it doesn't have to be. Researchers are finding that, if approached the right way, there can actually be an upside to this deadly sin.

Psychologists classify envy in two ways: malicious and benign. With benign envy, you are motivated by another person's success and strive to emulate it. With malicious envy, you want to cut the advantaged person down so you look better by compari-

son. Let's say you feel pangs of envy after your rival at another firm gets promoted. Malicious envy might drive you to undermine his success, but benign envy would inspire you to work harder and get promoted, too.

Studies show benign envy can be a great motivator. In a 2011 study published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, researchers in the Netherlands conducted a series of experiments with more than 200 university students. Researchers found that

when they triggered feelings of benign envy—as opposed to admiration or malicious envy—in the students, it drove them to want to study more and perform better on a test measuring creativity and intelligence. While ad-

miration may feel better, the researchers found, it doesn't motivate performance like the pain and frustration of envy.

Psychologists and other experts aren't immune to these feelings either. "There's a man in my field who has made a big name for himself by so brilliantly promoting his work," says executive coach Marcia Reynolds. "Whenever I hear his name, I feel something in the pit of my stomach." But instead of dismissing her envy, she reflects on it and asks herself, "What's holding me back? Can't I play at his level too?"

"Those painful pangs of envy are there for an evolutionary reason,"

Envy can even improve attention and memory.



says Texas Christian University researcher Sarah E. Hill, "alerting us that someone has something of importance to us." Building on this theory, Dr. Hill and others conducted a series of experiments, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, to test whether envy improves attention and memory—the tools needed

to copy a rival's steps to success. In one experiment, half of the participants were asked to recall past feelings of envy; the other half weren't. The two groups were then shown mock interviews of fictitious peers. The group primed with envy paid closer attention and better recalled details about the interview subjects.

In other words, envy made them more astute. Not only can envy motivate us to reach for higher goals, it may even give us the cognitive push to get there.

Envy works at the office, too. In a 2010 Harvard Business Review paper, business school professors Tanya Menon and Leigh Thompson examined workplace envy through the lens of hundreds of executives over a 10-year period. While the case studies showed that unchecked envy can damage careers and organizations, the authors also found that envy can be put to good use. Your "envy reflex," they write, can point you in the right direction, focusing your time and attention on the areas that are important to you. "Think of it as data on what you value," they add.

To guard against falling into the malicious-envy trap, the professors suggest taking stock of your own achievements when faced with envy. In an experiment, they asked people to prepare for a task in which they had to evaluate a rival's latest idea. They asked half of the participants to list their own accomplishments or values before the task; the other half weren't asked to do so. The affirmation group was willing to spend 60% more time learning about the rival's plan than the control group. If employees were encouraged to follow similar thinking, they wrote, "the impact could be huge."

Envy that.

Ms. Wallace is a freelance writer in New York.