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WEEKEND BREAK

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BEYOND COMPARISON

Rating your life and experiences against others' hurts your mental health

By ED HUNT
For The Daily Astorian

*"Comparison is the Thief of Joy."
—Theodore Roosevelt*

Expectation is the cruelest demon, able to trick us into missing the good that is all around us.

When life fails to live up to our expectations — to what we think it should be — we can end up mourning our victories as if they were tragedies.

I thought about this as we pulled our little camp trailer down the highway one last time before the summer sun set. Already October, we had traveled more than 1,200 miles dragging this 47-year-old trailer behind us to adventures in the Columbia River Gorge and Washington State Fair.



When we told the girls we were getting a camper this year, I think they expected something modern with white fiberglass and slide outs that stretched — like the accompanying monthly payments — off into the horizon.

Instead we went frugal and bought something old and dented and small enough to easily park and maneuver in our limited driveway. A 1973 Prowler isn't quite old enough to be "vintage" in the trendy sense of the word. Many of those campers from the 1950s and '60s are being restored by adventurous souls into fine displays of mid-century Americana. The so-called "Glampers" are decked out in retro style with an artist's attention to detail.

Ours is clean and dry and works.

Our little Prowler won't be on anyone's Pinterest board anytime soon. I don't think of it so much as a restoration but a resuscitation. When we brought it home it was primer gray on the outside and untouched oil-embargo early-malaise '70s on the inside. It came with holes in the sheet metal, a broken water heater and bald tires.

The girls were not impressed.

My older daughter refused to even go in it. My happy camper younger daughter piled up the disappointing comparisons between what we bought and what we "should" have brought home.

No sense crying

Undaunted, I began a long list of repairs starting with the most essential and practical things needed before our first summer adventure. It was a Maslow's hierarchy of needs — shelter, warmth, running water, tires and a battery. My wife, Amy, set about plans to reupholster cushions. I put the girls to work spray painting the exterior in a brilliant blue so that it looked a little less like a forlorn mushroom in our driveway.

In just a few weeks we had it safely-pinned and duct-taped together enough to camp in as the girls got out of school for summer. With each adventure we found some new thing that leaked, or broke or needed to be repaired. It felt like a B-17 bomber returning from bombing runs over enemy territory with holes blasted in its side. On one trip, the bumper started falling off. On another, a full quart of milk fell out of the refrigerator and spilled and sloshed over every inch of the floor.

No sense crying. Camp on.

Through it all, we were warm and dry and almost always surrounded by newer, nicer RVs.

It is amazing how content one can be when you refuse to compare yourself to others.

We didn't expect to have our camper Pinterest-perfect in time for summer. We didn't compare ours to others except with a laugh and a smile.

Such comparisons are far too easy to come by these days.

We live immersed in a wallow of social media — of Facebook and Instagram and Pinterest boards soaked in filtered photos and plucky performative ambition.

However, I am old enough to remember the days before the internet when glossy magazines were just as effective at raising our expectations and lowering our self-esteem. I still have well-worn Wooden Boat and Flying magazines. I recall the projects of my 24-year-old self. My landscaping didn't look like Sunset Magazine. The Adirondack chairs I built used wood screws a millimeter too long such that they poked into my back when I sat on them.

Bad mental hygiene

In today's world we share "our story" online each day — pictures that are the cropped and filtered highlight reels of our life. Now that we don't have to send film to the Fotomat to be developed, we are free to take countless photos of every good thing



Ed Hunt photos

The Hunts' 1973 Prowler when the family first brought it home. They had a lot of work ahead of them.



Grace Hunt, foreground, and friend Jordan Clarke give the Prowler a good shot of rattle can.



From left: Lindsay, Grace and Amy Hunt.

that happens in our life — sharing only the very best with family and friends around the world.

This is not a bad thing unless you look at these photos and adventures and compare your own life unfavorably to those around you. It is when we compare ourselves to others, or to our own cursed unrealistic expectations of what "should be," that we get into trouble.

Researchers have found that social media can accelerate this common bad habit of mental hygiene. As David Baker a researcher at Lancaster University who studied social media use in 14 countries explained to Broadly magazine, such comparisons can increase anxiety and feelings of depression and decrease self-esteem. Another bad habit is overthinking what you post. "Rumination — meaning you spend a lot of time overthinking your experiences online" — also can cause anxiety and increase depression, Baker explained.

Yet social media interactions could also be a force for good when it is used to connect

us with others around the world, share positive ideas and celebrate good news. Fire can keep you warm or burn your house down. Like any tool, it is neither good nor evil. Its benefit depends on how it is used.

Too often, however, we unfairly compare these highlights with ourselves. Or we compare our experience to our unrealistic expectation of that experience. We can never measure up in our imaginations. This creates resentment toward others and our own circumstances. These comparisons only serve to distract us from the meaning and experiences in our own lives.

Life is unpredictable

I work in an Emergency Department in a tourist town near the ocean. No one plans a visit to the ER as part of their dream vacation.

Unfortunately, I see many of the moments that don't make it onto Instagram feeds.

One summer day, years and years ago, a beautiful couple from Korea was married.

On the first day of their honeymoon they flew to Portland, rented a car and drove to the Pacific Ocean. They arrived at the jetty and looked out over the crashing waves of the mighty Pacific.

In that picture-perfect moment a nearby fisherman arched back his pole to cast and hooked the young bride in her nose. When they arrived in the ER, I was stunned by the beauty of the couple, they looked like supermodels in their tailored clothes. They could have been on the cover of a fashion magazine — save for the hook in her nose with the bait still attached.

Life is unpredictable.

It almost never matches our expectations or well-laid plans. We find ourselves in places we would never have imagined — and, sometimes, even better than we imagined.

We do well to make the best of what life throws at us, to smile and laugh and remind ourselves to be first and foremost thankful for what we have.

And that it could be worse.