The Invisible Wall

My Journey Beyond Comparing Out

Experience, Strength & Hope · The Recovery Files

A powerful exploration of comparing out in recovery-building walls of difference brick by brick.

THINKING PATTERNS · COMPARISON PATTERNS · INTERMEDIATE

When I first walked into the church basement for my initial recovery meeting, I didn't expect to stay. I was there on a halfhearted promise to my sister after a particularly disastrous weekend—the kind that ended with missing car keys, a mysteriously cracked phone screen, and the fading memory of angry words I couldn't take back. I sat in the back row, arms crossed, jaw set, already cataloging all the ways these people weren't like me.

The man sharing at the front was talking about losing custody of his children during his addiction. I never had kids, I thought dismissively. The woman after him spoke about living in her car for six months.I've always maintained a stable home, I mentally noted, further evidence that I didn't belong here. When someone mentioned their struggle with heroin, I nearly rolled my eyes. I only drank alcohol, sometimes too much on weekends. These people have real problems.

> *With each story, I constructed another brick in the invisible wall between myself and everyone else in that room. I didn't recognize it then, but I was engaged in what I would later learn had a name: "comparing out."*

Then a middle-aged woman with carefully applied makeup and an expensive-looking watch began speaking.Finally, I thought, someone more like me. She spoke eloquently about her successful career, her beautiful home, her outwardly perfect life. Then she said something that pierced through my wall of comparison: "But none of that mattered, because inside I was dying. I was waking up every morning hating myself, promising today would be different, and ending every evening with the same broken promise. The details of our stories might look different, but that feeling—that despair, that self-hatred, that inability to stop despite desperately wanting to—that's the same for all of us."

© The Recovery Files

> *Something inside me went very quiet. I recognized that feeling. It was the one I'd been running from, the one I refused to name, the one that woke me at 3 AM with a racing heart and a sense of dread.*

My sponsor, when I finally got one about three months later, named what I was doing. "You're comparing out," she said matter-of-factly after I'd explained, yet again, why a particular recovery concept didn't apply to me because my circumstances were different.

"You're focusing on all the ways your story differs from others instead of finding the common threads. It's like having a garden full of flowers and only noticing that they're different colors and shapes, missing entirely that they're all flowers with the same basic needs—soil, water, sunlight."

> "*You're supposed to listen to the message, not fixate on the messenger. When someone shares about losing everything, you don't need to have lost the exact same things to understand that feeling of loss.*"

My breakthrough came unexpectedly during a weekend recovery retreat, about six months into my sobriety. A man about my age described his rock bottom not as a dramatic external event but as a quiet Sunday morning when he realized he hadn't had a single honest conversation with anyone, including himself, in years. He talked about the exhaustion of maintaining different versions of himself for different audiences, the loneliness of being surrounded by people who knew only carefully curated fragments of his reality.

His words bypassed my comparing mind and landed directly in my heart. I couldn't dismiss his experience by focusing on external differences because he was describing the internal landscape I inhabited but had never fully articulated. The particulars of his life looked nothing like mine, yet he was somehow speaking my truth.

> *That night in my journal, I wrote: "Maybe it's not about whether our external circumstances match but whether our internal experiences connect. I've been so busy comparing the packaging that I've missed the contents.*"

© The Recovery Files

My sponsor introduced me to another concept that helped tremendously: "If it doesn't apply, let it fly." This simple phrase gave me permission to acknowledge when certain specific experiences or suggestions genuinely didn't resonate with my situation, without dismissing the entire message or the person delivering it. I could discern what was helpful while letting the rest go, without judgment or defense.

The most profound shift occurred around my eighteenth month of sobriety when I was asked to speak at a meeting. To my surprise, many of the insights I now considered most valuable had come from people whose experiences appeared vastly different from mine on the surface—people I would have "compared out" from entirely in my early recovery.

> *The homeless veteran who taught me about surrendering control. The teenage heroin user who articulated emotional sobriety better than anyone else I'd heard. The elderly woman whose spiritual awakening contained universal truths about connection and purpose that transcended our different belief systems.*

Speaking at that meeting, I found myself saying: "I spent my first months in these rooms building walls of difference, desperately trying to prove why I didn't belong here, why your experiences couldn't possibly help me. What I eventually realized was that comparing out wasn't protecting me from anything except recovery itself. Every brick in that wall of differences was keeping me isolated in my suffering."

After the meeting, a newcomer approached me—arms crossed, standing slightly apart from the group, with the same wary expression I recognized from my own early days. "I related to some of what you said," she admitted reluctantly, "but my situation is different because..."

I smiled, recognizing the comparing out pattern so clearly because I had lived it myself. Rather than arguing or trying to convince her of our similarities, I simply said, "That makes sense. We all have unique journeys. If anything I shared resonates with you, take that part. If it doesn't apply, let it fly. The only question that matters is whether you find something useful for your recovery."

> *What I've come to understand is that comparing out isn't really about other people at all. It's a strategy for maintaining separation, for protecting a self-concept threatened by the implications of genuine connection.*

© The Recovery Files

The irony, of course, is that this protection comes at an enormous cost—the loss of the very connection, wisdom, and support that make recovery possible. By maintaining the illusion of fundamental difference, comparing out keeps us isolated in our suffering, convinced that no one else could possibly understand.

Today, at just over three years sober, I still catch myself comparing out occasionally. The tendency didn't disappear completely; it just lost its power to isolate me. When I notice it happening, I can usually redirect my attention to potential connections rather than differences.

> *The most beautiful paradox of recovery is that our healing often comes through the very connections we resist most strongly. When we finally allow ourselves to see beyond the superficial differences to the common humanity beneath, we discover that we were never as alone as we thought.*

I still attend that same meeting where I first sat in the back row, arms crossed, building my wall of differences. But now I arrive early to help set up chairs, greet newcomers, and listen for both the unique details of each person's journey and the universal themes that connect us all. I've found that the most powerful moments in recovery often come not when someone's story perfectly mirrors my own but when an unexpected connection emerges across apparent differences—a flash of recognition that reminds me that regardless of the specific paths that brought us to this church basement, we are all, in our own ways, finding our way home to ourselves.

© The Recovery Files

THE MATCHED SELF-ASSESSMENT

Comparing Out in Recovery Assessment

This self-assessment helps identify patterns of "comparing out"—the tendency to focus on differences rather than similarities with others in recovery. When we compare out, we build an invisible wall between ourselves and potential sources of support, wisdom, and connection.

Instructions

For each statement, rate how often it applies to you using the scale:

- 1 - Never: This doesn't apply to you
- 2 - Rarely: This occasionally applies
- 3 - Sometimes: This sometimes applies
- 4 - Often: This frequently applies
- 5 - Always: This consistently applies

Part 1: Obvious Comparison Patterns

Surface-Level Comparison

1. I focus on how my substance use differs from others (type, amount, frequency)
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
2. I emphasize how my external circumstances differ from "typical addicts"
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
3. I mentally catalog ways my consequences were less severe than others'
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
4. I dismiss others' insights because their background or lifestyle differs from mine
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
5. I believe my addiction was fundamentally different from others in recovery
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

Social Comparison

6. I separate myself physically from others at recovery meetings or events
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
7. I avoid fully participating in recovery activities because "I'm not like them"
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
8. I believe I have less in common with others in recovery than with people who still use
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
9. I feel uncomfortable identifying myself as a person in recovery to others
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
10. I maintain a sense of being "different from" or "better than" others in recovery
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

© The Recovery Files

Experiential Comparison

11. I believe others' rock bottoms were more extreme or legitimate than mine
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
12. I think others had "real addiction" while mine was just a bad habit
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
13. I feel my reasons for using were more justified or complex than others'
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
14. I believe my recovery journey needs to be different because my situation is unique
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
15. I think, "That would never happen to me" when hearing others' experiences
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

Intellectual Comparison

16. I analyze others' shares to find logical flaws or inconsistencies
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
17. I dismiss recovery concepts as simplistic or not sophisticated enough
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
18. I believe my intellectual understanding exempts me from emotional work
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
19. I use my education or knowledge to create distance from others in recovery
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
20. I reframe recovery concepts in my own terminology to maintain separation
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

Temporal Comparison

21. I believe I caught my problem earlier than others, so their experience isn't relevant
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
22. I think my relatively short addiction means I'm fundamentally different
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
23. I focus on not having the long-term consequences others experienced
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
24. I believe I need less time in recovery than others because my problem was less severe
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
25. I think of my addiction as a phase rather than a condition requiring ongoing recovery
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

Part 2: Connection Patterns

Surface-Level Connection

© The Recovery Files

26. I look for emotional similarities rather than circumstantial differences in others' shares
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

27. I focus on common human experiences beneath the details of addiction stories
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

28. I notice patterns of thinking and behavior I share with others despite different substances
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

29. I recognize that external differences don't necessarily mean internal differences
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

30. I can relate to the feelings others describe even when their circumstances differ
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

Social Connection

31. I actively engage with others at recovery meetings or events
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

32. I participate fully in recovery activities even when I feel initially different
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

33. I build relationships with people in recovery despite surface differences
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

34. I comfortably identify as a person in recovery when appropriate
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

35. I approach others in recovery with curiosity rather than judgment
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

Experiential Connection

36. I validate the significance of my own recovery journey without comparing to others
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

37. I recognize addiction as a spectrum rather than requiring specific consequences
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

38. I see similarities in the emotional drivers of addiction across different circumstances
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

39. I adapt recovery principles to my situation without rejecting their universal aspects
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

40. I remain open to learning from experiences different from my own
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

Intellectual Connection

41. I listen for wisdom in others' shares rather than analyzing for flaws
○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

© The Recovery Files

42. I appreciate the depth beneath seemingly simple recovery concepts
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
43. I balance intellectual understanding with emotional and spiritual growth
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
44. I use my knowledge to deepen my recovery rather than separate from others
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
45. I translate recovery concepts into personally meaningful terms while preserving their essence
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

Temporal Connection

46. I recognize that the timeline of addiction doesn't determine its impact or recovery needs
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
47. I acknowledge that early intervention doesn't make my recovery less legitimate
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
48. I appreciate that avoiding certain consequences doesn't mean I wouldn't have faced them eventually
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
49. I commit to recovery based on my needs rather than comparing my timeline to others
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
50. I understand recovery as an ongoing process regardless of addiction duration
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

© The Recovery Files

Reflection Questions

Understanding Your Comparison Patterns

1. When you find yourself "comparing out," what specific differences do you most often focus on?

2. In what specific situations or with what types of people do you find yourself most strongly comparing out?

3. What emotions arise when you hear stories that seem very different from your own experience?

4. How has comparing out served as a protection mechanism in your recovery?

5. Can you identify any experiences where comparing out prevented you from receiving helpful insights?

Exploring the Roots of Comparison

6. How does your sense of identity or self-concept contribute to comparison patterns?

© The Recovery Files

7. What core beliefs about addiction and recovery might be reinforcing your tendency to compare out?

8. How might perfectionism, shame, or fear of vulnerability influence your comparison patterns?

9. What role does pride or the need to feel "special" or "different" play in comparison?

10. How does comparing out relate to your comfort with emotional intimacy and authentic connection?

Building Connection Despite Differences

11. When have you experienced unexpected connections from someone whose story seemed very different?

12. What specific practices help you move beyond surface differences to find common ground?

13. How do you balance honoring your unique experience while remaining open to universality?

© The Recovery Files

14. What recovery principles have helped you develop greater connection despite differences?

15. How might "If it doesn't apply, let it fly" help you navigate differences without dismissing wisdom?

Moving Forward

16. What specific comparison pattern would most benefit from your immediate attention?

17. What concrete practices could help you shift focus from differences to connections?

18. How might you respond differently next time you notice yourself comparing out?

19. What recovery supports could help you navigate discomfort as you challenge comparison patterns?

20. How might awareness of comparing out strengthen your unique recovery journey?

© The Recovery Files

Your scores, and what they mean, are in the app.

© The Recovery Files