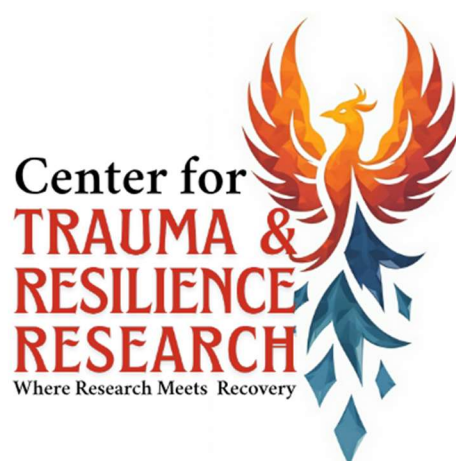


The Costs and Benefits of Jealousy

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Abstract

Jealousy is a complex emotional phenomenon often regarded as toxic, yet recent interdisciplinary research suggests it can serve adaptive and even prosocial functions. Drawing on perspectives from psychology, philosophy, evolutionary theory, and cultural critique, this paper examines the dual nature of jealousy, exploring its costs—such as emotional distress, violence, and relational dysfunction—and its benefits, including increased relational investment, motivation, and creative energy. While jealousy may facilitate protective behaviors in romantic and professional contexts, it also risks fostering envy, aggression, and mistrust. The essay discusses the role of dispositional mindfulness, self-efficacy, and cultural values in moderating jealousy's effects. Findings suggest that a nuanced understanding of jealousy, including its counterpart—compersion—can enrich relational ethics and emotional well-being.

Keywords: jealousy, compersion, romantic relationships, mindfulness, workplace emotions, evolutionary psychology, emotional regulation

The Costs and Benefits of Jealousy

Jealousy is often categorized as one of the "ugly" emotions—a reactive state born of insecurity, fear, or perceived loss. Yet, scholars like Toohey (2014) challenge this reductionist view, asserting that jealousy is a deeply human and culturally embedded emotion that, while harmful in some contexts, also holds transformative and protective potential. From ancient philosophy to modern psychology, jealousy has been explored not merely as pathology but as a mirror of values, desires, and vulnerabilities. This essay explores jealousy's costs and benefits through multiple lenses, arguing that while jealousy can be corrosive, it also has motivational, evolutionary, and cultural utility.

The Costs of Jealousy

Psychological and Relational Harm

Jealousy's most immediate cost lies in its destabilizing emotional impact. Emotional, cognitive, and behavioral forms of jealousy—such as rumination, suspicion, and surveillance—are linked to relationship dissatisfaction, increased conflict, and even abuse (De Cristofaro et al., 2023). Aracı-İyiyaydın et al. (2020) found that anxious attachment and cognitive jealousy were predictors of psychological and cyber dating abuse, especially among emerging adults. In this context, jealousy becomes a gateway to controlling behavior and relational harm.

Jealousy can also be socially toxic. Sahadev et al. (2024) demonstrated that workplace jealousy, often rooted in perceived injustice, negatively affects job performance among frontline workers. This connection between jealousy and reduced productivity shows how the emotion can disrupt team dynamics, morale, and institutional trust—especially in hierarchically rigid environments.

Mental Health and Digital Behavior

Jealousy can exacerbate mental health conditions, especially when amplified by social media. Vaillancourt et al. (2024) developed a scale for measuring social media friendship jealousy, finding strong correlations with internalizing problems such as anxiety and depression. Younger women reported the highest levels of social media jealousy, which also predicted declines in friendship quality and well-being. These findings illustrate jealousy's pervasive influence in digital culture, where perceived comparisons and exclusion are magnified.

The Benefits of Jealousy

Evolutionary and Motivational Functions

Despite its negative connotations, jealousy may serve adaptive functions. Arnocky et al. (2024) demonstrated experimentally that jealousy arising from imagined partner infidelity increased intentions toward mate retention behaviors. From an evolutionary standpoint, jealousy may serve to protect valued relationships and enhance reproductive success through behavioral regulation (Krems et al., 2022). Jealousy thus becomes a signaling mechanism—prompting attentiveness, action, and commitment.

Creativity, Identity, and Social Comparison

Toohey (2014) argues that jealousy is central to creativity and cultural achievement. Far from being a purely reactive emotion, jealousy motivates comparison, competition, and self-enhancement. Kampen (2025) expands on this view in her study of “discipline envy” among researchers, where jealousy acted both as a barrier and a stimulus to intellectual innovation. This duality mirrors Chesterton's (2023) poetic lament for jealousy's loss in the modern world, where envy of excellence once inspired reverence and now evokes indifference.

Emotional Depth and Moral Insight

Jealousy, when not excessive, may represent a form of moral sensitivity. Simon (2025) critiques the cultural shift toward emotional detachment in romantic relationships, arguing that the absence of jealousy may reflect an impoverishment of emotional intensity. In this view, jealousy signals emotional investment and existential vulnerability—evidence of deep care, not just control.

Alternatives and Moderators: Mindfulness and Compersion

While jealousy may be inescapable, it is also modifiable. Dispositional mindfulness has been shown to reduce the intensity and frequency of cognitive and behavioral jealousy (De Cristofaro et al., 2023). Mindful individuals tend to exhibit higher self-esteem and relationship satisfaction, pointing to the utility of self-regulation and emotional awareness.

An even more radical alternative is compersion, or joy in a partner's happiness with others. Balzarini et al. (2021) and Brunning (2020) show that compersion can coexist with or even counteract jealousy, especially in consensual non-monogamous relationships. While some argue that compersion is unnatural or ethically suspect, others see it as a cultivated virtue—redirecting possessive instincts toward empathetic flourishing.

Conclusion

Jealousy is not merely a symptom of insecurity or sin—it is a deeply human emotion with both corrosive and constructive potential. It can ruin relationships, degrade work performance, and incite violence, but it can also signal emotional investment, spark creativity, and safeguard valuable bonds. Through mindfulness, cultural reflection, and emotional education, individuals can learn to recognize, manage, and even transform jealousy into insight. Future research and

ethical practice should aim not at eradicating jealousy, but at redeeming its most human elements.

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