


Status Games
Why We Play and How to Stop



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Preface

How I Stopped Selling

Many years ago, I saw the words “Brand You!” on a magazine cover. The article promised success if you think of yourself as a brand and diligently sell your brand. I hated this idea. My definition of success was being able to stop selling.

I had the same problem with romance. I saw people selling themselves to new partners all the time. My idea of love was being able to stop selling. I did not want the kind of love that requires constant monitoring of the marketplace and supplying what the market demands.

I thought something was wrong with me because of my discomfort with selling. But in time, I realized that everyone hates it. So why does everyone feel pressure to do it? We tend to blame society and our families for this thought loop. We tend to think we can’t escape it until we create a utopia where everyone feels valued all the time without having to do anything for it. I searched for that utopia and didn’t find it.

But I found something better: the facts about how our brain creates these feelings. In the state of nature, social comparison has life-or-death consequences, so natural selection built a brain that responds to social comparisons with life-or-death brain chemistry. Animals have strong feelings about their social position, and we have inherited the brain system that creates these feelings. I relaxed when I understood the origins of my feelings. You can relax too. Nothing is wrong with us. We’re mammals!

You have surely heard of Lake Wobegon, “where all the men are tall, all the women are good looking, and all the children are above

average.” I grew up in Lake Woreoff, where everyone felt short, ugly, and stupid. I thought the way to be happy was to move to Lake Wobegon. But when I got there, I realized that people are all the same. We all fret over social comparison because we’ve all inherited a limbic brain that does that. Fortunately, we have power over these emotions when we know how we create them.

Introduction

Why We Care about Status

This book shows how status stimulates the good feeling of serotonin, and how you can enjoy serotonin without endless status games. This is a different way to look at life; but once you know the facts, you will enjoy a new sense of calm. Anyone can do it, in three simple steps:

1. Recognize your mammalian urge for social importance instead of believing what your verbal brain tells you.
2. Replace your old serotonin habit with a new one that puts you up without putting others down.
3. Repeat this new thought loop for six weeks, so the new pathway feels as natural as your old one.

This is hard because the verbal brain doesn't understand the mammal brain it's attached to. Your verbal brain says, "I don't care about status" even as your mammal brain cares with a neurochemical sense of urgency. In the modern world, acknowledging your animal urge for social importance is taboo. It's more socially acceptable to talk about your sex life than to admit that you care about status. But once you get real about your inner mammal, you have power over it.

IT'S NOT EASY BEING MAMMAL

Humans are status conscious because animals are status conscious, and we've inherited the brain structures that motivate them. This may be hard to believe since we're told that animals are cooperative and "our society" causes status seeking. But a close look at the status games of animals reveals patterns we know well from daily life. Mammals strive to one-up each other with all the energy they have left after meeting basic needs. Mammals cooperate when it helps them raise their status, and they compete when that yields more status. They do this because the mammal brain rewards you with a good feeling when you dominate and alarms you with threat chemicals when you submit.

We have inherited this brain chemistry. It gives us life-or-death feelings about status despite our best intentions. When you know how your mammal brain does this, you can enjoy the world as it is instead of feeling threatened by status games. You can't control the world, but you can control your brain more than you realize.

Researchers have studied the status distinctions in mammalian herds and packs and troops for over a century. We know that mammals who raise their status are more able to spread their genes. They don't think consciously about genetics, of course. They just do what feels good, and natural selection built a brain that rewards them with a good feeling (serotonin) when they raise their status. And it alerts them with a bad feeling (cortisol) when they see a threat to their status. Humans have the same chemicals, and we control them with the same brain structures (the amygdala, hippocampus, pituitary, etc., collectively known as the limbic system). So our strong feelings about status are not a mystery.

Humans differ from other animals because of our big cortex, which gives us language and awareness of the future. The animal brain cannot process language or think about the future. This is why the animal brain inside you cannot tell you in words why it feels good or bad, and why it does not care about the future consequences of the things that make you feel good today. Your animal brain just strives to repeat behaviors that trigger happy chemicals and avoid behaviors that trigger unhappy chemicals.

You don't think this consciously, of course. Your limbic brain and your verbal brain are not on speaking terms. This is why you can long

for the good feeling of social importance while saying you do not. Status games result.

To make life even harder, serotonin is quickly metabolized. The good feeling soon passes, then you need another moment of social dominance to enjoy more of it. This is why status games are so relentless.

To complicate life further, each brain seeks status in whatever way it got it before. Neurons connect when serotonin flows, which wires us to expect good feelings in the ways we've already experienced them. You seek recognition however you got it in your past. Conscious thought is not involved, because the electricity in your brain flows so easily into the pathways connected by past experience. The recognition you expect does not always come, alas. Disappointment triggers cortisol, which makes you feel like your survival is threatened. You don't think that consciously, but you can end up feeling very threatened in a life that is vastly safer than your ancestors' lives.

We've inherited a brain designed to monitor threats. Neurons connect when cortisol flows, which wires you to scan constantly for whatever made you feel bad in the past. Your threatened feelings are hard for your verbal brain to make sense of. You don't know how you produce them internally, so you see them as evidence of a real external threat. It seems like others are putting you down intentionally because you don't see your own urge to be one-up.

It's not easy being mammal!

WHY YOU PLAY THE GAME

It feels like you don't have a choice. Everyone else seems to be striving for the one-up position, so your inner mammal knows you'll end up in the one-down position if you don't play the game. You want to ignore these thoughts, but neurochemistry is powerful. Status games keep commanding your attention because:

- Cortisol creates a full-body sense of alarm that's designed to get your attention.
- Serotonin is quickly metabolized, so you always have to do more to get more.

- We interpret these impulses as facts about the external world because we don't know how we produce them internally.

Your coworkers are mammals. Your friends and family are mammals. Your beloved is a mammal. You are a mammal too. We all have ups and downs thanks to the brain we've inherited.

Fortunately, you can build new pathways to stimulate serotonin and relieve cortisol in new ways. But it's hard work. It's like learning a foreign language—you have to repeat a new input a lot to build new wiring. You don't remember the repetition that wired in your native language, nor do you remember the repetition that wired in your old status impulses. But you keep using your old wiring unless you build new wiring.

You won't do the work if you blame the external world for your feelings. So let's look closer at status games in animals. You will see patterns that are eerily familiar.

WHY ANIMALS CARE ABOUT STATUS

Mammals live in groups for protection from predators. Each mammal strives to meet its own survival needs because happy chemicals are released when it does that. It's hard to live cheek-by-jowl with critters focused on their own survival, but a mammal who leaves the group is easily picked off by predators. Thus, the ability to coexist was naturally selected. But that doesn't mean a mammal feels good about its group all the time.

We tend to romanticize animal groups instead of seeing the whole story. We imagine animals having the solidarity and mutual support that we long for. But the fact is that animals one-up their group mates when it promotes their own survival. Conflict is avoided because weaker individuals back down to avoid harm. Natural selection built a brain that constantly compares its strength to others. When it sees that it's stronger, it feels safe to act on the urge to meet its needs. When it sees that it's weaker, it feels unsafe and restrains the impulse. This is not what you usually hear about animals, so we must zoom in closer on the drama of nature.

Mammals inherited the brains of reptiles and then added on. Reptiles don't cooperate in their quest to meet their needs. Mammals developed

the ability to tolerate and even support others when that promotes the survival of their genes.

Reptiles never seek the company of fellow reptiles. When a reptile sees a smaller individual, it tries to eat it. When it sees a bigger individual, it runs for its life. When it sees a same-size critter, it tries to mate it. (This is less true of birds, which were recently reclassified reptiles.) Fine social distinctions are not made by the reptile brain, yet reptiles have survived for millions of years.

Reptiles survive by making babies in huge numbers, so a species survives even though most babies die. Mammals can't do this because it's harder to gestate a warm-blooded baby. Mammals have so few babies that they must keep more of them alive. They meet this survival challenge by seeking strength in numbers. But it's complicated because each mammal has a survival-seeking reptile brain beneath its support-seeking mammal brain. Each mammal is highly motivated to do what it takes to meet its survival needs. Mammals can only live side by side if they can restrain that impulse.

But they only restrain it when it promotes their survival. The harsh fact of life is that stronger mammals steal food from weaker group mates when that is the better survival choice. If the weaker individual resists, it gets bitten. The pain of a bite wires a brain to fear asserting in the presence of a stronger individual. Juveniles have a grace period, but once juvenile markings fade, a young mammal struggles to fill its belly. A struggle for reproductive opportunity comes after that. Each brain is deciding whether to assert or hold back in each moment.

Navigating this social minefield is the job the mammal brain evolved to do. It releases the stress chemical, cortisol, when it sees itself in the position of weakness. It releases serotonin when it sees itself in the position of strength. *Serotonin is not aggression but a calm confidence in your own strength.* Serotonin creates the feeling that you are safe because you have the capacity to meet your survival needs.

Reptiles are hard-wired at birth, but the mammal brain wires itself from experience. Each serotonin experience wires a young mammal to expect more good feelings from similar situations. Each cortisol surge wires a young brain to expect bad feelings in similar contexts. Thus, without words or curriculum development experts, a young mammal gets wired to do what it takes to keep its genes alive.

For example, a young monkey wakes up hungry each morning and must find food to relieve that internal threat signal. When it sees a piece

of fruit, the little monkey surveys the social scene before taking action. If it sees a bigger monkey nearby, it looks elsewhere. When it finds food near a smaller monkey, serotonin is released, and it feels safe to act. It is able to weigh its relative strength thanks to the activity we call “play.” If you watch young animals at play, you see that they are quite rough. Each brain wires in expectations about when to expect pain, and when to rejoice in its own strength. At puberty, this same guidance system helps a mammal find reproductive opportunity.

The appetite for social dominance is more primal than the appetite for food and sex because it always comes first.

The point is not that we should bite weaker individuals. The point is that our brain makes social comparisons and reacts with strong feelings. We learn to restrain the impulse to grab when we’re young, and we have to restrain it a lot because serotonin feels good. The urge for social dominance is easy to see in others, but when you feel it yourself, you think you are just trying to survive.

We learn to blame the dominance impulse on “the rich” or on people who act “high and mighty.” My professors taught me to blame society, and when I became a professor, I passed this mindset on to my students. But when I learned about the mammal brain, I saw that it was more complicated. Every toddler has the urge to grab and gradually shapes that impulse from its own unique experience. Blaming society for this impulse may please your teachers, but it will not help you understand yourself and your world.

THIS IS NOT HOW I THINK!

You may insist that you do not think this way. Of course, you do not think it in words. You think it with chemicals, and with wiring built from experience.

If you acknowledge your one-up urge, you feel like a bad person, so you focus on the urge in people you don’t like. “They are much worse!” you tell yourself. Moral superiority gives you the one-up position, so it feels good. It’s hard to get the one-up position in other ways, so moral superiority is highly attractive.

But in the long run, you flood yourself with cortisol when you rely on this finger-pointing mindset. You always feel like a little monkey

victimized by bigger monkeys. You think you cannot feel good unless you're a big monkey, and that leads to more cortisol. What's a big-brained mammal to do?

You can recognize the social-comparison thought loops you built in your past, and replace them with healthier thought loops. You can give your inner mammal the one-up position in sustainable ways, and thus enjoy serotonin and relieve cortisol. You can feel good about your strength without being a jerk.

You will keep feeling powerless if you keep blaming the world for your emotions. When you know how you produce your emotions, you can produce something different.

It bears repeating that our goal is not to justify crass competitiveness. Our goal is to explain the gnawing sense of being dominated and transform it into confidence and pride.

You have to recognize your one-up impulse before you can redirect it. We have more words relating to this impulse than Eskimos have for snow. We call it: pride, self-confidence, ego, glory, dominance, power, honor, dignity, self-worth, prestige, prominence, exclusivity, status, social importance, recognition, respect, approval, acclaim, self-aggrandizement, arrogance, assertiveness, manipulativeness, competitiveness, one-upmanship, being special, winning, feeling superior, having class, saving face. We use words with positive connotations for ourselves and those we like, and words with negative connotations for those we don't like.

We need a lot of words for this feeling because our brain goes there a lot. This is not a cosmic flaw. "It's a feature, not a bug" as they say in the tech world. We are alive today because our ancestors did what it took to keep their genes alive in a world of colossal threats. You are not trying to spread your genes, but you have inherited a brain that rewards you with good feelings when you do things that promote reproductive success in the state of nature. That doesn't mean you *should* seek social dominance; it means that you do, and if you hate this impulse, you will end up hating everyone including yourself.

You can learn to manage this impulse instead. By the end of this book, you will manage it better than anyone you know. That's a shameless appeal to your one-up impulse, but you would probably have thought of it anyway!

Quest for Serotonin

Most of what we hear about serotonin is filtered through the disease model. It suggests that serotonin flows effortlessly in “normal” people, and if you lack that effortless flow, you can get it from the health care system. The disease model ignores the natural job of serotonin. Research on serotonin in monkeys suggests that:

- Serotonin evolved to motivate survival action, not to flow all the time for no reason.
- Serotonin produces a calm feeling when an individual sees itself in a position of strength.
- The good feeling prevents conflict by calming those likely to win.
- Neurons connect when serotonin flows, which wires an individual to expect the good feeling in ways that turned it on in their past.
- Serotonin is released in short spurts, so you always have to do more to get more.
- The brain habituates to rewards you have, so a “new and improved” moment of strength is needed to stimulate it.
- When the quest for social dominance is disappointed, cortisol makes it feel like a survival threat.
- Our brain is designed to avoid threats, so it is highly motivated to avoid anything linked to the one-down position in the past.

The disease model creates the illusion that other people are getting serotonin all the time. It seems like “big shots” get it easily, and you are shortchanged. This is false. There is no royal road to serotonin. If you were king of the world, you would not enjoy serotonin every minute. You would worry all the time about losing your status. Kings and emperors always lived in fear of plots against them. Movie stars live in fear of upcoming stars. If you had a spot on the billionaires list, you would fear losing that spot. Cortisol creeps into every life, and it spirals unless you learn to redirect it.

Furthermore, the brain habituates to existing rewards, so any status you have loses its thrill. No matter how high you are, you are still a mammal.

The mammal brain evolved to crave that next serotonin squirt. You think you will be happy forever if you get it, but it is soon metabolized.

Natural selection built a brain designed to keep motivating you. The tabloids hold proof!

Social media is now blamed for these natural impulses. We are invited to blame it whether or not we use it. If you use social media, you are told to blame corporations for making it addictive. If you don't use it, you may feel superior; but when you feel left out, you blame social media for that.

But long before modern technology, humans competed for social importance with whatever technology was available. As soon as a new technology appears, it gets embroiled in the mammalian quest for status. Our ancestors sought "likes" in whatever ways were possible, and probably annoyed their friends and family as they did.

It's hard to get real about your internal process when everyone else blames externals. Opinion leaders court your support by appealing to your one-down feelings and blaming accepted targets. But if you keep blaming externals, you risk having a tabloid life: miserable on the way up and miserable on the way down. You are better off accepting your inner mammal whether or not others get it. Status games are natural. Fear of losing status is natural. But you can be "super-natural" by making peace with your inner mammal.

DIFFERENT GAMES FOR DIFFERENT BRAINS

You may associate status games with fancy watches and fancy titles. You may equate social dominance with people who talk loudly, or get into bar brawls, or visit their money in Switzerland. But status games come in myriad forms because each brain seeks whatever got recognition in its own past. Following are several familiar examples. They will help you see the universal one-up impulse beneath the verbal brain's trappings.

My Car Is Better Than Your Car

Cars, jewelry, artworks, sports equipment, and designer clothing are popular status objects. People want status objects because they feel respected when they display them. This expectation builds because you yourself respect people who have that object. When you acquire the

object, you feel good for a while, but soon you notice better objects around you. Now you're one-down, and cortisol tells you to "do something" to relieve it. So you seek the one-up position in the way your brain knows: another status object. Where I live, people with status objects are despised, but that's just another status game, which we might call . . .

My Ethics Are Better Than Your Ethics

Condemning the ethics of others is a convenient way to gain the one-up position. It's free and doesn't waste resources. Best of all, it's low risk because you get to decide who wins. You can always find ethical shortcomings in others and applaud your moral superiority. The serotonin is quickly metabolized, of course, so you need evidence of your superior ethics again and again. "Holier than thou" is the traditional name for this status game. Ironically, moral superiority often goes with self-destructive habits: "I drink because I'm so sensitive to the pain of others." You can justify any addiction by pointing to your concern for the greater good. It's not surprising that so much conversation revolves around the ethical failings of others. We bond with those who share our ethical judgments because it gives our inner mammal the recognition it is looking for. But the more you judge, the more you feel judged. So as ethical as you are, sometimes you long for a more visible manifestation of your superiority, such as . . .

My Abs Are Better Than Your Abs

Animals judge the appearance of others in order to predict their strength. Your mammal brain is always judging the appearance of others, and you presume they are judging you as a result. Each generation finds its own way to keep score. Being fat was a status symbol in the world of food scarcity, and being thin is a status symbol in our world of abundance. Soft hands were a status symbol in the world of manual labor, and now muscles are a status symbol in a world of desk-sitters. Being in better shape than others is a time-honored source of pride. This status game can help us make healthy choices, but it can also lead to harmful extremes, like the tight corsets of earlier generations. When people do stupid things for status, you might prefer the game of . . .

My Intelligence Is Higher Than Your Intelligence

You can rate your own intelligence, but real-world feedback is part of the equation. In the past, intelligence was conveyed by learning Greek and Latin plus another language or two. Today, we define it in many ways, from “street smarts” to coding data-compression algorithms. Test scores and diplomas get attention, but you can find a way to feel smarter than others no matter what your credentials. The good feeling soon passes, alas, so you keep catching others being dumb to keep feeling it. But sometimes you catch yourself being dumb, and your cortisol surges. You feel crushed by smarter people. You urgently look for a form of status that you can control, such as . . .

My Desk Is Neater Than Your Desk

My pie crust is flakier. My batting average is higher. My crops are plowed in straighter rows. These status games are easy to ridicule in others, but taking pride in something you have control over is a useful strategy. Whether it’s your well-tended home or your well-tended computer or your well-tended altar to the deities, it’s nice to have a reliable source of pride. But the slightest thing out of order triggers one-down feelings when you have this mindset. You urgently look for a way to catch up, and your brain relies on the neural pathways it has. This is why we return to the skills we take pride in, despite the diminishing returns. You may feel like you’re on a treadmill, so you long for other ways to feel good. You might notice the ever-popular . . .

My Partner Is Hotter Than Your Partner

It’s adolescent, but neuroplasticity peaks in adolescence, so the status games of high school have a big impact on adult emotions. Adults don’t like to acknowledge the way they compare partners, but the thought loop is almost irresistible to a brain designed to spread its genes. You evaluate your partner with neural pathways built from your own past experience, so different hotness indicators emerge. When your partner ranks highly, you feel good, as much as you hate to admit it. When they don’t measure up, you feel bad, and you may blame them for your bad feeling. You may look for other status games to relieve the tension, such as . . .

I Can Hold My Liquor Better Than You Can

People often take pride in skills that are bad for them. Maybe you can jump from higher cliffs. Maybe you have the best drug dealer. Maybe you pride yourself on how long you can go without sleep. Why would a brain that evolved for survival take pride in skills that are bad for survival? Because social approval promotes survival. If an unhealthy skill won approval in your past, your brain expects a good feeling when you repeat that unhealthy skill. When you try to stop, the loss of social approval feels like a survival threat. It's not surprising that people look for something safe. Perhaps . . .

My Family Is Better Than Your Family

Coming from a “good family” gives you status without lifting a finger. Today, we tend to sneer at this mindset, but if you are honest with yourself, you may notice that your ears perk up when you hear that someone is related to a famous person. Every generation defines status for itself, so the child of a rock star may count as royalty today. Countries with political revolutions typically give status to the children of revolutionaries, thus perpetuating the aristocracy game. It all makes sense when you know that animals compete for partners with good bloodlines. If your family doesn't score on any indicator, you long for a different status game, like . . .

My Hardships Are Harder Than Your Hardships

This status game is ubiquitous today. On the surface it seems strange that a brain designed to seek strength would base status on weakness. But this makes sense from an animal perspective. The size of your social alliances determines your strength in the primate world. Big alliances build when mammals fear a common enemy. In the modern world, thought leaders build big alliances by blaming your hardships on a common enemy. You want to feel oppressed by that enemy so you can be part of the dominant alliance. It's a double bind, alas, since you have to keep feeling bad in order to feel good. You might try to relieve your pain with another status game, such as . . .

My Impact Is Bigger Than Your Impact

Humans are aware of their own mortality, and we terrorize our inner mammal with this knowledge. We relax a bit when we create something that will survive, which is why we long to “have an impact.” It takes a lot of self-assertion to have an impact, and that brings the risk of conflict and failure. It’s easier if you do it in the name of others. Thus, appeals to the greater good are usually part of the quest to have an impact. The more people you claim to help, the more status you get, which makes this strategy quite appealing. The result is enormous competition to have an impact. If you’re exhausted by the competition, you might focus on something tangible, like . . .

My Portfolio Is Bigger Than Your Portfolio

A big asset portfolio can give you a feeling of strength, even if it’s private information. You may hate people with assets, and even people who just use the word “portfolio.” But stockpiling is a natural survival strategy. Starvation was a real risk for most of human history. In the days before railroads, food was hard to transport so you had to rely on local resources. Our ancestors stockpiled food in order to survive a huge array of potential threats. The bigger their reserves, the safer they felt. It’s hard work to accumulate reserves, and you may keep fearing that they’re not big enough. So you may be tempted by a time-honored alternative path to one-upness . . .

I Get More Love Than You Get

Everyone compares the love they are getting, as much as we hate to admit it. Children compare the love they get from parents and teachers. Teens compare the love they get at parties. Ancient Roman generals tragically compared the love they got from the public. Punk-music performers compare the love they get to what other punk performers get. You can say you don’t compare, but when others get love, your inner mammal notices. Fortunately, you can define love however you want. You can focus on the love of God or the love of your dog. You may have a long string of exes or an entourage of adoring fans. However you define love, your inner mammal wants more. A frail grandma may be getting more from her flock of grandchildren than you are getting from

your chosen strategy. But the grandma compares herself to the neighbor who flaunts her own flock of grandchildren, and sometimes feels one-down. It's not surprising that past generations sought status by having more children and even more wives. This mode of social rivalry has obvious drawbacks, so it's nice to have alternatives, such as . . .

My Taste Is Better Than Your Taste

You can sneer at the bad taste of others and applaud the superiority of your own taste. You can put yourself above people with money by pointing out that they spend it with bad taste. You feel good for a moment, and when the serotonin is gone, you can find more *faux pas* in their consumption habits. Recently, the word "creativity" has substituted for "taste." You can feel superior about your creativity whenever you feel one-down. The problem is that you're still keeping score. You're still judging others, so you presume "they" are judging you. Another way to lift yourself up is needed, such as . . .

My Friends Are More Influential Than Your Friends

Name dropping is a well-known path to status. Friends in high places can indeed bring rewards, so they naturally get our attention. A friend of a friend of the big kahuna gets attention regardless of their status on other indicators. Courting people with influence is a long-standing tradition. Monkeys groom the fur of higher-ranking monkeys and it indeed promotes their survival. Early humans gave gifts to high-status individuals because reciprocation is expected. The drive to make contacts and rub elbows with power is easy to see today, though we hate to see it in ourselves. If you can't stand this ritual, you can raise your status by thinking . . .

My Joy Is More Joyous Than Your Joy

People are always telling you what a great time they had, and you wonder if you're missing something. Whether it was their great trip, their great sex, or their great meditation session, your brain compares. Advice-mongers tell us that experience is more valuable than possessions, so our social comparisons come to revolve around fun. However

you define it, your brain habituates to what you have, so the same-old thrill loses its effect. It's not surprising that people resort to primal forms of status, like . . .

I Can Control You

Waiting in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles can trigger one-down feelings. No matter how much power you have in the rest of your life, you may feel powerless in that moment. People seek one-up positions in whatever ways are available to them. However, you may have landed in the DMV line because you did something dumb; and that's painful to think about, so you blame your one-down feeling on "them." We are not objective judges of our social environment. It's easy to presume that your waiter is snubbing you when you are feeling one-down anyway. We suspect others of one-upping us because we know the urge so well. Fortunately, you have the self-restraint to avoid escalating to . . .

I Can Inflict More Pain Than You Can

The impulse to win at any price is not socially acceptable. We learn to control that impulse to sustain social bonds. If you grab a toy from another child, you are taught to restrain that impulse. If you bite the child who grabbed your toy, you learn from feedback. Self-restraint must be learned because our brain is inherited from a world in which inflicting pain was the coin of the realm. Thus, we fear the strength of others and long for the strength to protect ourselves. Social norms evolve to manage this impulse, such as: "My lawyer is better than your lawyer." If you don't have the strength to win in this way, there's always the inverse strategy. . .

I Can Tolerate More Pain Than You Can

I need less sleep. I need less food. I need less money. You know this game. I deny myself, and you must deny yourself more or else I win. Of course, it doesn't feel great even when you win, so it's nice to win with a more cerebral strategy like . . .

My Predictions Are Better Than Your Predictions

Predicting may not seem like a path to status, but we do it all the time. Whether you predict the stock market, the big game, the election, or the weather, you feel proud when you're right. Predicting is the unique capacity of the human cortex, so we have a deep sense of its importance. Our ancestors survived by predicting the behavior of predators and prey. They strived to predict rain with a great sense of urgency. Today, we strive to predict which start-up will take off, which post will go viral, which athlete or politician will score, and what will happen to life on earth. Gambling, video games, the lottery, chess, and technology forecasting are other popular ways to feel superior about your predicting skills. Dopamine is also stimulated by correct predictions, and the double dose of happy chemicals gives us double motivation for prediction games. If your prediction proves wrong, you can fall back on the most basic of status games . . .

They're All Jerks

Blanket condemnations are a fast, easy way to claim the one-up position. You focus on the flaws of others and pride yourself on your perceptiveness. You enjoy a one-up moment each time you find flaws in those you perceive as stronger than yourself. And when the good feeling passes, you berate them again. This thought loop is widespread, so it's easily learned from others. You are welcomed into the club if you hate the same "jerks" that they hate. Mammals bond when predators lurk, and the mammal brain rewards you with oxytocin when you find social support. Serotonin is added when your alliance is stronger than their alliance. The double reward makes it enormously tempting to bond around common enemies, whether in politics, sports, career, or a daily gripe session. Saying "they're all jerks" is a fast, easy way to meet your social needs.

YOU HAVE A CHOICE

Status games feel like the fault of others because it's easier to see the one-up urges of others than to see your own. This makes it easy to conclude that others are putting you down, so you don't have a choice.

Your brain zooms in on small perceived advantages in others, and cortisol makes it feel like an emergency. Repetition builds a cortisol pathway that helps you slide into this thought loop. Fortunately, we have billions of extra neurons to build new thought loops. The following chapters show you how.

LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Most chapters of this book end with the status games of a famous person in history. I chose these people because I visited their homes and felt their status frustrations while standing in their living rooms. These homes are open to the public, so you can do it too!

The point of these stories is not that fame is good. Nor is it that fame is bad. The point is that everyone has ups and downs because serotonin is soon gone, and we want more. This is the engine of human history.

The status frustrations of other times and places help us see past the status frustrations of our own time and place. When you see the same patterns everywhere, it's easier to see the mammalian universals underneath. This makes it easier to accept yourself and others. You can enjoy the world you live in instead of cursing it and spiraling with cortisol. People have always felt dominated by others and looked for ways to come out ahead. We can learn from the ways others manage this universal frustration.

THE STATUS GAMES OF CHARLES DARWIN

I was thrilled when I learned that Darwin's home is open to the public. I rushed to the London suburb and stared at the desk where he wrote. I walked the path where he took his daily stroll and explored the greenhouse where he fertilized his orchids. All the while, I wondered how he managed the status games in his life.

I knew the familiar story about Darwin: that he was oppressed by religion and triumphed with a merry band of influential pals. It made me think, "where is my merry band of influential pals?" But I kept researching and found that his story was more complex.

Science and religion were not seen as opponents in Darwin's time. On the contrary, Darwin trained for the ministry in order to pursue his interest in "natural philosophy." Darwin's opponents were people whose status was threatened by his work. Darwin was meek and had no stomach for public battles, so his final triumph is quite heartening.

The story begins with the amazing fact that Darwin's grandfather thought of evolution. Erasmus Darwin was a doctor and a friend of Benjamin Franklin. He suggested evolution in the long poem he wrote about reproduction in nature. The poem was considered scandalous. It was popular, but the science world ignored it. Erasmus died before Charles was born, but Charles was expected to become a doctor like his father and grandfather. He was sent to medical school at age fifteen. After watching surgery on a child before the invention of anesthesia, he refused to go to class. He spent his time in the way he always had: by observing nature.

While he was out watching birds, insects, and sea creatures, he met others doing the same. He met a professor, and his knowledge and enthusiasm impressed the distinguished naturalist. That led to his post as naturalist on the *Beagle*.

You may think he had an easy life, but his hardships were severe. When he was nine, his mother died, and his father packed him off to boarding school. His father ridiculed his nature-watching and vetoed the offer to sail around the world on the *Beagle*. When young Charles finally got his father's permission, he faced the true hardship of such a voyage. Darwin was seasick most of the time, and ill for the rest of his life with afflictions believed to have come from the voyage.

Darwin's status conflict with the captain of the *Beagle* is a fascinating story. Captain Fitzroy sought a young-gentleman naturalist to share his cabin because protocol prevented captains from socializing with the crew. Fitzroy got lonely and depressed on long voyages, and Charles was destined to be his audience.

But things turned sour because Charles's sisters sent his letters home to London newspapers, which made him an instant celebrity. The news reached the *Beagle* while it was still on the other side of the world! Captain Fitzroy was jealous. He had no home

of his own because he was orphaned in youth and had lived on a ship since age fourteen. So instead of returning to London in two years as planned, he stretched the voyage into five years. Imagine Charles tossed on the high seas in a tiny cabin with this man for five years. To make matters worse, Fitzroy forbade Charles from publishing a trip journal except as a chapter of Fitzroy's journal.

When they finally returned to London, Charles was the toast of society. Everyone wanted to hear about his trip. But Darwin was shy and preferred to live in the country and study the animal artifacts he'd brought home. So he did that for twenty years. He kept thinking about evolution, but never felt that his explanation was ready for public scrutiny.

Then, he was ensnared by one of history's great coincidences. The mailman brought an envelope with an essay from a young man, requesting that Darwin get it published. The essay said precisely what Darwin had been thinking all these years.

What should he do?

If he had tossed the letter into the fireplace, no one would have known, because the young man had no ties to the science establishment.

If he had it published, Alfred Russell Wallace would get credit for the concept of evolution by natural selection, since Darwin had never gone on record.

Wallace was a man who made his living by collecting wild-life specimens from rainforests worldwide and selling them to researchers and collectors. He had a life of extreme hardship but managed to spend a lot of time observing animals in their natural habitat. He drew his own insights and dared to write them down. His historic essay was actually written while he was suffering a malarial delirium in Borneo.

Darwin did the honorable thing—he reported the essay to his friends in the science community. They came up with a plan: a public science meeting where an essay from each man would be presented. Darwin wrote something fast, but on the day of the meeting, he was sadly attending his child's funeral. Wallace was still in Asia trying to make a living. Both essays were unceremoniously read into the record.

At this point, my belief was that Darwin won acceptance because his friends rallied around him. This is what our inner mammal dreams of. But the truth was more complicated. Some of Darwin's alleged friends did not support him, and his biggest supporters were people who were advancing their own agenda and not really friends. Darwin was a mammal among mammals like the rest of us. He hated politics, but he kept working.

Three of Darwin's children died during this work. He blamed himself for this because he had married his first cousin. Such marriages were common before the discovery of DNA, and Queen Victoria had married her first cousin around the time that the Darwins did. But Charles understood genetics because he socialized with animal breeders. He saw the consequences of inbreeding in domestic animals even though he didn't know the mechanism of genetics. He suffered from constant stomach pain and feared that his frailty was inherited by his children.

Darwin kept working despite this hardship and despite his wife's vehement opposition. She cried over his "blasphemy." It would keep him out of heaven she feared, and thus separate them for eternity.

Part 1

**WHY STATUS GAMES
ARE RELENTLESS**



Chapter One

Status Games in Animals

When two mammals meet, one makes a dominance gesture and the other makes a submission gesture. A dominance gesture might be an erect posture with a direct stare. Once one individual asserts dominance, the other must submit or risk a fight. Animals rarely fight because they are good at predicting who would win. The weaker individual submits to avoid injury, typically by lowering its head or body. With that uncomfortable business out of the way, two mammals can avoid conflict and even cooperate.

Animals defer to the more dominant individual when food or mating opportunity appears. Fights over resources are rare because the pecking order has already been established. You may think it shouldn't be this way, but a century of research shows that it is. Countless studies in "ethology" have documented the hierarchical behavior of animals. Today, this research is ignored, and studies purporting to show altruism and empathy in animals are spotlighted. Such studies carve out moments of cooperation and omit the larger context, which shows that animals compete when it helps raise their status.

For example, animals cooperate to take down a more dominant rival. If they succeed, they compete for the rival's position. Cooperation is part of the status game. Animals are skilled at judging the strength of a social alliance in the same way that they can judge the strength of an individual. Humans have used social alliances in this way throughout

