

Centre stage

You're beautiful, it's true

Millions are spent to find the ultimate beauty treatment. Why are women so unhappy with their bodies?

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Letters like these bring to the fore the daily struggle millions of women face every single day of their lives. Waking up to the of 'being beautiful' can be terribly demoralising. Neha Redkar, 26, software professional, points out, "Everyday I see 'pretty' pictures of 'pretty' women splashed all over. The pressure is overwhelming. It's like fighting a losing battle. I've been working out for over three years now but I can't have that hourglass figure. I diet on just fruit and basic nutrients. If this doesn't work, I'll go under the knife." Her case is not isolated as Sneha Kamath, teaching assistant, says, "I can do anything to feel better about my body. What hurts most is that most people don't even realise it's a serious problem." Decoding this universal epidemic, Dr. Bharat Shah, consultant psychiatrist, Lilavati hospital, says, "Negative body image is when one is dissatisfied and critical about one's appearance. Simply put, it is about feeling less attractive than one actually is, and wanting to look better."

Why does she feel this way?

So why do women head down this path of self-mortification? Snigda Kamath, 24, who has been in a long-drawn battle against her weight, sheds some light. "I started binge-eating and then dieting excessively when I was 18. Everyone around me is stick thin. Till my friends and family encouraged me to seek help, I didn't realise I had a serious problem," she confesses. Explaining the mindset, Dr. Shah says, "Impressionable women are told that success, power, approval, popularity, admiration, intelligence, friends and romantic relationships all require physical beauty, in general, and thinness, in particular. The corollary is also promoted: People who are not thin and beautiful are represented as failures."

What's happening to her?

The direct effect on mental and physical health cannot be disputed. Dr. Maya Kirpalani, consultant psychologist, Jaslok hospital, highlights the fact that in extreme cases, suffering from negative body image can lead to depression and affect daily functionality. "Women put in a lot of effort and money, trying to alter their looks. Being constantly disappointed, they go on changing the methods to achieve their idealised image. But the persisting disappointment caused by underlying unresolved psychological factors trap them to further despair. Sexuality, work and relationships also suffer," elucidates Dr. Shah indicating a vicious cycle. If that isn't worrisome enough, Dr. Ashit Sheth, Professor of Psychiatry, Bombay hospital, highlights an unfortunate trend, "There is a spurt of women, who starve and exercise excessively, also leading to anorexia nervosa."

What should she do now?

Really, is there light at the end of this torturous tunnel? Experts believe so. Dr. Kirpalani claims that healthy feedback helps. In some cases, cognitive therapy such as identifying what makes a woman feel good about herself also helps. Dr. Sheth adds that in cases of extreme dieting, treatment involves cognitive restructuring and forced dieting wherein the woman is made to eat the required intake of calories, under observation.

To cultivate a positive body image

Understand that looks and body size are determined by our genetic make up to a large extent.

Be kind to yourself. Count your assets. Give yourself credit for positive qualities.

Focus on health and a healthy diet, not on thinness. Challenge size bigotry and fight size discrimination.

Remain focussed outwards – on family, friends, and fun – not on appearance.



