

Think You're Fat?

For Most, the Mirror's Reflection Misrepresents Reality

By Jennifer Wake

It is likely that most of us have taken time to look in a mirror recently, either to check whether a tie is straight or if our hair is styled properly. But recent research shows that the majority of women (and a smaller fraction of men) are unhappy with what they see in a mirror's reflection.

Orinda resident and psychiatrist Dr. Harvey Widroe believes part of the reason is a potent combination of cultural and psychological development factors, citing a 'Thin Is Beautiful' societal drumbeat. Widroe has spent the past 25 years working with people battling image distortion problems and has written several articles tackling the subject.

"Look at any magazine, newspaper, TV or Internet advertisement. No plump bodies urge us and our impressionable daughters to be like them. No 'Hefty is Beautiful' messages entice us to buy products to adorn the overweight body. We see only painfully thin models," Widroe wrote in a recent American Reporter article entitled, Eat or Die.

The National Institute on Media and the Family states that by age 13, approximately 53 percent of American girls are "unhappy with their bodies," with this number increasing to 78 percent once girls reach 17 years of age. And the media effect is not limited to teens. A report by the Social Issues Research Center (SIRC) revealed that nearly 80 percent of women over-estimate their size when looking in a mirror.

"Increasing numbers of normal, attractive women, with no major weight problems or clinical psychological disorders, look at themselves and see ugliness and fat," the SIRC report noted.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the average young person views more than 3,000 ads per day on television, on the Internet, on billboards and in magazines. Ads are also creeping into schools, where marketers have cleverly placed them in "educational"

posters, textbook covers, bathroom stalls, scoreboards, daily news programs, and bus radio programming.

Research found that subjects became significantly more dissatisfied with their own appearance after being shown TV ads featuring exceptionally slim and beautiful people, while control groups shown non-appearance-related ads did not change the rating of their own attractiveness.

"For most adolescent girls, becoming 'thin' becomes a major pre-occupation," Widroe said. "Some give up quickly, and jealously watch their peers from the sidelines of dieting. They secretly aspire to achieve the 'Thin Is Beautiful' goal, but, after a few failed tries, realize they aren't real contenders. Luckily, most are spared the dangerous pathways of anorexia or bulimia."

Fortunately, men generally have a much more positive body-image than women, with many men over-estimating their attractiveness or not seeing flaws in their appearance when looking in a mirror.

"As adolescent boys developmentally shift from parental nurture to gang allegiance, the set of values pushed by our society's advertisers has nothing to do with 'Thin Is Beautiful,'" Widroe explained. "Male adolescents most often value the macho images typically accepted by the guy groups in crude, simple, caricatured versions. Young males, though hardly exempt from adolescent problems, are usually spared the eating disorder that 'Thin Is Beautiful' values foist on adolescent girls."

And for girls, reaching this "ideal" is nearly impossible. Less than 5 percent of the female population could achieve the ideal in terms of weight and size, and only 1 percent of women could ever attain the ideal shape, face, etc., projected by the media.

Fortunately, there has been a recent drive by some media personalities to present more realistic body images on TV and in magazines. The success of actresses like

America Ferrera, Queen Latifah and Beyonce – who are beautiful ambassadors of the more curvaceous figure – as well as the recent More Magazine photo shoot by Jamie Lee Curtis and the shift of some modeling agencies away from the ultra thin, is a step in the right direction. But there is still a long way to go.

"Searching for identity beyond childhood, teens mimic the cultural imagery they are constantly exposed to," Widroe stated. "Variations of 'Thin Is Beautiful' become a group chant; and after enough repetitions this evolves into an individual mantra, and finally an internalized version of what was only a seductive TV message."

