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**HEALTH**

## **Mirror, mirror, on the wall...**

*Negative body image affects eight in ten women, often leading to very low self esteem and tremendous emotional distress, writes SAVIA RAJAGOPAL*

That almost 80 per cent of women are unhappy with their bodies should come as no surprise. Directly related to how a woman feels about herself is the concept of 'body image', which refers to how a person feels and thinks about oneself with respect to size, shape and overall appearance. Explains Dr Bharat Shah, consultant psychiatrist, Lilavati Hospital, "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." Adds Dr Ashit Sheth, Professor of Psychiatry, Bombay Hospital, "Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), also known as negative body image, usually revolves around weight, nose, skin and hair, in that order."

Think that 'negative body image' is just plain psychobabble? Take a look at the following: A study conducted by St. George's Hospital Medical School, in London showed that when asked to guess the width of a box, 50 average-size women were correct in their guesswork. But when asked to estimate their body widths, they exaggerated the size of their waists by about 25 per cent and their hips by about 16 per cent! Research merely reiterates what is already common knowledge: most women look into the mirror and are tremendously dissatisfied with their bodies.

### **The culprits...**

Many studies show that compared to women, men do not suffer from negative body image and in some cases, over estimate their attractiveness! Explaining why women are more prone to suffer from a negative body image, Dr Sheth states, "Generally women are more concerned with appearance. Culturally too, it is accepted – a 'pretty' woman is more desirable than a 'handsome' man." Cultural expectations apart, psycho-socio factors also affect a woman's perception of her body. Says Dr Shah, "Impressionable women are told that goodness, 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'." Dr Maya Kirpalani, consultant psychologist, Jaslok Hospital, further adds, "Sometimes women may think they are unattractive and unworthy because of the lack of success and problems in interpersonal relationships. Comparisons within the family can adversely affect their body image."

### **The implications...**

Having a negative body image can be very detrimental to one's health – mental and physical. Dr Kirpalani highlights the fact that in very extreme cases, it could lead to depression and could affect their daily functionality. Dr Shah explains, "Many women put in a lot of effort and money, trying to change their looks. Being constantly disappointed, they keep on experimenting with methods to achieve their idealised image. But the persisting disappointment caused by underlying unresolved psychological factors, traps them to further despair and sadness. Sexuality, work and relationships may also suffer." Needless to say, when a woman suffers from a negative body image, she has a highly warped, unrealistic perception of her shape and size. Dr Sheth further adds, "The woman may attempt suicide. She may go to a plastic surgeon to have the distortion corrected. There is a spurt of women, of late, who starve themselves and exercise excessively, also leading to anorexia nervosa. This affects their periods adversely, and temperature and pulse rate drop, due to too much weight loss."

### **The counter attack...**

To counter a negative body image, Dr Kirpalani believes that successful experiences help to a great extent. In addition, family and close friends should give healthy feedback messages. In some cases, cognitive therapy such as identifying what makes a woman feels 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 forced to eat the required calories, under observation. He also states emphatically that BDD can be a stubborn, persistent illness that takes a lot of time and perseverance to cure.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE:**

**Constantly viewing themselves in comparison to others.**

**Fixating upon and overemphasising certain body parts.**

**Frequently viewing their appearances in mirrors.**

**Exercising and/or dieting excessively.**

**Avoiding social situations due to insecurities and self-consciousness about their appearances.**

### **DR SHAH SUGGESTS THE FOLLOWING WAYS TO COPE AND DEVELOP A POSITIVE IMAGE:**

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

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

**Focus on health and healthy diet and not on thinness. Challenge size-bigothy and fight size discrimination.**

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

