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Show me the makeover

Is a media barrage feeding women's anxiety about their looks? Some plastic surgeons and therapists think so.

By Connie Lauerman
Tribune staff reporter

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Tina Cox always said she would never get breast implants. She thought it was ridiculous.

Tall and thin, with, by her description, "no chest," the Dubuque, Iowa, resident said she was confident about how she looked for years.

Then the media monster claimed her. The barrage of sexy advertisements, actresses and models spilling out of their dresses, the television makeover shows that routinely produce Barbie doll lookalikes took their toll.

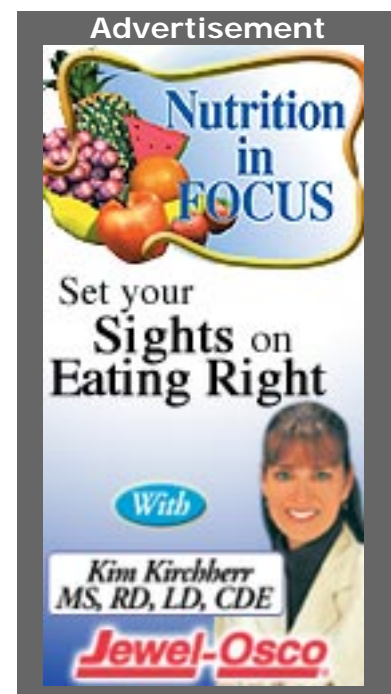
"Victoria's Secret commercials were the final push," Cox, 37, said. "How can a woman compete with all the women in these commercials? With all the entertainers who wear less and less and you read even they had surgery?"

Surgery just seemed to be the easy solution. She got breast implants in April.

"I didn't go obscenely huge, but clothes fit better and I'm not as insecure," said Cox who works in her parents' software business and owns a bead boutique.

Cox went directly to the operating room, but many other women are showing up in therapists' offices to deal with anxiety about their looks. This increased anxiety about appearance, plastic surgeons and therapists said, is fed by an unprecedented media barrage, including scantily clad celebrities and plastic surgery makeover television shows that give women unrealistic expectations.

"We [surgeons] see more people coming in because they've seen these shows," said Dr. Rod Rohrich, a Dallas surgeon and president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. "These patients want more



procedures done at the same time and they have unrealistic expectations. I'm turning away more patients than I have in the past. Surgery is not a cure-all. It's an illusion [promoted by television shows] that making patients look better will make psychological problems go away."

According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, women had 87 percent of the nearly 8.3 million cosmetic surgery procedures performed in 2003--the year "Extreme Makeover" debuted on ABC--up 16 percent the previous year. Two more surgery makeover shows, "The Swan" and "I Want a Famous Face," began this spring.

Robyne Howard, a clinical psychologist at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center who also has a private practice, said she sees younger women entering therapy with appearance being their primary issue.

"They talk about how important it is for them to appear thinner or more attractive, more appealing to men, more competitive with women," she said. "How I hear it, the pressure is not just coming from the media, but it also seems to come from their peers and, I think, more and more from their parents, particularly as their mothers become more concerned about appearance."

Nili Sachs, a Minneapolis psychologist, said her clients talk about inheriting "my mother's genetics. Or they say 'I'm coming from such bad genes.' They say, 'Is there any way I can ever feel normal?' These extreme makeovers on television shows came upon us as if they were the answers to the prayers of women because now they're going to feel 'normal.' But what's normal about that?

"First, we were manipulated by the beauty and fashion industries, now it's TV and friends who show up with new breasts as if they've bought an expensive new purse in a department store."

Surgery on the increase

Once peers start having plastic surgery, it may normalize the idea by moving it out of the realm of celebrities, and lead more women to seek consultation with surgeons, who are seeing an increased interest.

For example, University of Chicago plastic surgeon Dr. David Song said that last year he was seeing 10 patients a month to talk about cosmetic procedures. This year that number has increased to about 25 a month.

"I can safely say that this is not just because my reputation as a surgeon is growing, as I am primarily a breast reconstruction surgeon, but an external factor, such as TV shows, has played a large role," Song said. "Before it was just supermodels changing our standards of beauty. Now it's not just supermodels. It's Jane Doe next door who was the average woman and now looks like a supermodel.

"Women come in with pictures cut out of gentlemen's magazines. I'll give you a perfect example. A woman, who I later found out had gone to see four or five other plastic surgeons, came in with outstanding expectations. She was 5 feet 2 and about 200 pounds and Hispanic and she wanted to look like Pamela Anderson. I would not operate on her and she threatened to call someone. She mentioned

these shows."

"Most women don't go out and get surgery, but these reality shows make me mad," said Priya Khatkhate, 21, of Skokie, who is job hunting after graduating recently from Northwestern University with a journalism degree.

"They are giving women such an unrealistic view of how they should look. What's normal and what's real is completely skewed.

"If you're really confident, I guess you could see it just as some really strange entertainment, but men's views of women and their bodies gets even more distorted as well."

Khatkhate said she knows three young women who have had breast surgery--two augmentations and one reduction. "Since junior high, all the females around me have talked about their bodies in negative ways. Eighth graders talking about if they had the money, they would get breast augmentation or tummy tucks."

Chicagoan Yvonne Daily battled obesity much of her life, finally won, and channeled her personal wisdom into a business, Healthy Images Inc., offering meetings, classes and consultations to other women with weight issues. Many of her clients talk about the celebrities they see on television.

"They compare themselves to images that are not real," Daily, who is in her 40s, said. "When you're sitting watching TV, it's like brainwashing. I have to remind them that a lot of these women don't look that way either. They are photographed with good lighting, airbrushed in magazines, go on crash diets for roles and in between movies you wouldn't recognize them. They have cellulite--all the things we have."

Tamara Sobel, project director of The Girls, Women + Media Project, a New York-based consumer initiative working to promote media literacy and healthier, positive images of girls and women in the media, said the effects of media are greater than ever before.

"The pressure on girls and women to look a certain way has always been around," she said. "What's different now is how many media outlets are part of the pressure. We see the images that create our ideas in such a bigger way because of loads more TV channels, magazines, Web sites and lots more marketing."

Sobel said the message is packaged differently, too. "Now that it is fairly acceptable for girls and women to want `power,' the traditional message is targeted in a clever way to tie in appearance to `empowerment,' success, competition and superiority.

"Also, it's obviously not just about clothes, makeup and hair anymore. Surgery is marketed alongside mascara and halter tops, some of it potentially dangerous, physically painful and, of course, expensive."

Mary Deering Chirello, an outpatient therapist at Advocate Christ Women's Health Center in Tinley Park, has seen clients coming in for counseling about work-related concerns and, as it turns out,

appearance is part of it.

"Women in their 20s and 30s want to maintain youthful appearances," Chirello said. "They feel that's part of being in the corporate world, that if you don't look a certain way, people don't really value what you have to offer."

Women in middle or later career years, she said, feel they must maintain their appearance to be competitive.

"Women mention the media, and they're more willing to contact doctors for procedures," Chirello said. "I have a lot of clients considering surgical procedures."

Impressions formed early on

The influence of the family on what women are willing to do to enhance their bodies is even more troubling than TV makeover shows, said Sachs, the Minneapolis psychologist and author of "Booby Trapped: How to Feel Normal in a Breast-Obsessed World" (Beaver's Pond Press).

"In a household when a mother feels upset or not normal about her breasts, the teenage girl feels her body is just a `fixer-upper,' to borrow a real estate term.

"And the mother and father give the impression to the young boy that attractive women must have very large breasts and therefore a real man must have a woman like that. A young boy picks up on it consciously and unconsciously when he sees his father react to it when they see a neighbor or waitress with large breasts."

Dr. Valerie Davis Raskin, a psychiatrist at the University of Chicago and in private practice in River Forest, said women often expect too much and discount the possibility of bad outcomes. "What I see is women being really surprised at the fact that the surgery doesn't make them feel different on the inside," she said.

"In my practice, I tend to find out about the surgery two days before the procedure, because, I think, they don't want to be stopped."

While allowing that a tummy tuck can be a "small lift" psychologically for women whose pregnancies had a devastating impact on their abdominal area, Raskin said a bad outcome is a double whammy.

"Breast implants and tummy tucks are going to have a lot of impact on your sexual self-esteem, how you feel getting naked, if they go badly. Television programs don't show the bad outcomes."

Michelle Butler, 36, of Chicago, who is struggling with a weight problem, has found a way to inoculate herself against the anxiety-producing media barrage that equates beauty with thinness, blond hair and large breasts.

"I read O magazine and Yoga Journal and the only reality show I watch is `Queer Eye for the Straight

Guy," she said. "That's different. They just say, `Oh, no, honey, don't wear that!'"

AN EXTREME INVITATION

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