

# Guardians of Self-Esteem

Plastic surgeons have a unique responsibility

by Frederick Lukash, MD

**S**elf-esteem. We hear this expression over and over again. By definition it is the high regard (esteem) for the essential person (self). This is a very positive concept made up of a constellation of variables ranging from physical appearance to personal achievement. Parents, doctors, and educators strive to help people develop it. Self-esteem is necessary for one's confidence and it allows a person to progress in our world and make valuable contributions.

When a person lacks confidence we say that individual has low self-esteem. This appears to be an oxymoron—giving oneself a low high regard. Nevertheless buzz terms like “low self-esteem” have taken hold in the American public as week by week and television program by television program we become voyeurs to those who appear to lack this high regard for themselves.

We can count on *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, and *I Want a Famous Face* to reinforce that those less endowed with physical beauty are inferior. Along with this philosophy comes the supposition that there are physicians who possess the gift of instant transformation to affect a more positive ego.

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As plastic surgeons we know, or have learned the hard way, that our most successful outcomes are in those patients who are already generally happy with themselves. These patients live well in the world and strive to accomplish at work, school, or play. That does not mean that they are not bothered with certain perceived physical flaws. It does mean, however, that the basic sense of positive self is present and the correction or improvement of the “flaw” increases their happiness. It most certainly does not create their happiness.

Our obsession with beauty is not new and not in itself unhealthy. Beauty may be interpreted as intellect, athletic prowess, artistic or musical ability, or even devotion



to a cause. This is beauty that is developed and nurtured and should become a motivator for self-improvement on all plains including the physical. It is part of achieving a personal best. Isolated desire for physical beauty is narcissism and the desire

for someone else's beauty is a dangerous form of transference.

It is a fool's errand to believe that fashioning a celebrity's body on another individual is anything more than a replication of that structure. It is not an open door to that celebrity's life. Each person exclusively owns his or her life. It cannot be mirrored by physical transformation. It cannot be passively transferred by merely going under the knife. Achievement that engenders admiration comes from active personal effort.

We as plastic surgeons have been placed in an unusual position. In some ways we have become guardians of self-esteem—psychological surgeons. This is

an awesome responsibility. We can take children with birth defects who in the past would be societal outcasts and place them into the mainstream, allowing their own talents to be explored. We can take adolescents with “beyond the bell curve” issues like prominent ears, big noses, asymmetrical breasts, or even breasts in boys and bring them back to “normal.”

We can take happy and healthy adults who have aged physically beyond how they feel and help them achieve balance within themselves. But we can also fall prey to those whose expectations exceed reality—even to the point of body dysmorphic disorder or idol worship.

Today more than ever the environment has made beauty and celebrity public property. It becomes incumbent on us as members of the guardians of self-esteem to be reasonable, logical, thoughtful, and careful in whom we select as patients. We want to be *part* of the process that helps individuals achieve their own personal best and maintain self-esteem. ■

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