



## Cosmetic Surgery, Self Confidence and Emotional Wellbeing

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Cosmetic enhancement is a growing trend, and it's not just for celebrities any more. In a Psychology Today survey, 56% of women and 43% of men expressed dissatisfaction with their overall appearance.<sup>1</sup> Both women and men are becoming increasingly concerned about their physical appearance. They're joining gyms, trying new diets and seeking cosmetic enhancement. Some people are alarmed by this modern trend, but it's not a new preoccupation.

The ancient Greeks were obsessed with physical perfection. The word "plastic surgery" is derived from the Greek word 'plastikos', meaning to mold or shape. Early archeological records show that the Greeks performed minor procedures like otoplasty (reshaping the outer ear) and scar removal. The Romans performed reconstructive plastic surgery on wounded soldiers and offered cosmetic procedures for the wealthy. Cataract operations were very common in ancient Rome. Freed slaves were known to save up for years to have branding and scars removed.

People want to feel better about themselves, and hope that cosmetic procedures will lead to enhanced social confidence, mood and self esteem. Four decades of studies indicate that most patients who have had plastic and cosmetic surgery are happy with the results.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to physical results, the majority of procedures can be considered a success. This speaks to the level and training, skill and professionalism within the profession.

But it's the psychosocial outcome we're looking at today. Does cosmetic surgery elevate feelings of self worth and self esteem? Can it remove distress and shyness and improve the patient's quality of life?

The Medical Journal of Australia (MJA) compiled the psychological outcomes from 36 major studies, spanning 10 years.<sup>3</sup> What they found was that most studies evaluated very specific procedures, and no long term study covered the broad range of cosmetic procedures. The conclusion of this compilation was that the majority of patients studied did feel better about their appearance after the surgery. There were some complaints of skin tightening after a face-lift, loss of nipple sensation after breast augmentation and remaining scars.

The patient's expectations of the outcome of the procedure proved to be a major factor. Those who had realistic expectations were generally very happy with the results. A perceived impediment had been removed, and they chose to believe that nothing now stood in their way. These patients did feel a surge of fresh confidence, and often this opened new doors in their lives.

Those who held unrealistic expectations based upon external factors, like establishing a relationship, a higher status in their social circle, or getting a job, were often disappointed. The people who viewed the procedure as a panacea for their life tended to have an unsatisfactory outcome.

There was another subgroup studied; those with the psychiatric disorder known as "body dysmorphic disorder" (BDD). These people obsess about any perceived defect, typically for hours each day. Most patients with BDD were unhappy after surgery. The cosmetic enhancements weren't perceived as 'perfect enough'. BDD is a treatable disorder; but with serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and cognitive behaviour therapy, not cosmetic surgery.

In the plastic surgery profession, it is said that the key to a successful surgery is in the head, not the hands. It's generally believed that the surgeon's ability and skill are technical, in the hands. But in reality, the outcome is effected more by planning, decision making and communication. Knowledge, creativity, wisdom and communication are essential. Technically perfect execution of a poor choice will not result in a happy patient.

The surgeon's knowledge comes into play when presenting the right options to each unique patient. Creativity becomes important when facing unique challenges, where previous solutions won't work. And sometimes the practitioner needs the wisdom to step back and not to perform the operation. The most important skill is the ability to communicate with compassion, clarity and truth; so there are no unrealistic expectations.

During the consultation process, there will be patients who cannot be satisfied, and as cosmetic surgeons we do our best to identify these people. There are times when these people do slip through and surgical procedures are completed on patients with very unrealistic expectations. It's not a perfect system.

Successful outcomes are also a responsibility of the patient. One of the most important considerations for someone shopping for a procedure is that all plastic surgeons and practices are not created equal. The levels of training, experience and abilities vary greatly. 90% of plastic surgeons do not specialize exclusively in cosmetic surgery.

People will spend more time looking at the portfolios of tattoo artists than the before and after photos of cosmetic surgeons. Are you considering a facial procedure? The majority of plastic surgeons perform less than 15 facelifts a year. A surgeon who performs over 50 each year simply has more experience. Take the time to view the before and after photos very carefully. Look through the testimonials. Ask plenty of questions.

According to a psychology lecturer at the University of Surrey, Susan Thorpe, "people undergoing plastic surgery just want to look normal – that is, they don't want to stand out in an obvious way or to have features which cause comment or make them feel self-conscious. They also want their physical appearance to be more in line with their personalities and feel that they want all the bits of their bodies to match."<sup>4</sup>

An article in Psychology Today stated that "people who are objectively more physically attractive are not more happy, on average... however, self-perceptions of physical attractiveness do relate strongly and positively to happiness." With realistic expectations, many patients will come away with greater self confidence and a stronger sense of attractiveness and emotional wellbeing.

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1 Garner DM. Body US image survey. Psychology Today 1997; 30: 30-84

2 Edgerton MT, Jacobsen WE, Meyer E. Surgical-psychiatric study of patients seeking plastic (cosmetic) surgery: ninety-eight consecutive patients with minimal deformity. Br J Plast Surg 1960; 13: 136-145

3 Castle David J, Honigman Roberta J, Phillips Katharine A, Does cosmetic surgery improve psychosocial wellbeing? 2002 Vol 176

4 Thorpe Susan, American Psychological Association, Plastic surgery: Beauty or beast? 2005