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Fall 2009

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# Vanity or Biology?

By Dr. Ihab Matta



It's a funny thing... when patients are in my office and they talk about doing a cosmetic procedure, they often say, "I don't want to be vain but...". It's almost as if they feel guilty for trying to look better or fight Father Time. They somehow think that their desire to look better has been created by the society they live in, with images in the media portraying young (usually) women and men. We're often told by psychologists that we should accept ourselves for who we are and that society puts too much pressure on women and emphasis on physical appearance.

It's not unusual that I'll actually see a psychologist in the office for a cosmetic procedure and they will say something to the effect of "I feel guilty for being here because I'm usually telling women to be satisfied with who they are but..."

The discussion of our "obsession" with beauty and youth being biological versus socially created can go on for days, but I thought I would just touch upon some of the relevant points and share some of my experience.

When I was younger, I would have been one of those people who thought that cosmetic procedures were vain, which is one of the reasons I never did them. As I've matured (my polite way of saying aged), I understand why man and womankind have been trying to find the fountain of youth for the last 5000 years. It's not really a matter of vanity. People want to look in the mirror and see someone that represents the way that they feel inside, not someone twenty years older than they are, and most people in their 40s plus are feeling vibrant and alive. So when they see someone that looks old or, more commonly,

tired, it depresses them and doesn't represent the way that they feel.

We know in medicine that physical appearance is directly related to mood. Patients in hospital benefit from hair styling and makeup to cheer them up and when the brain is happy, the body is happy. It surprises people that some of the most basic things will actually help with the healing process. Therapeutic touch, conversation, laughter, pets, and so many other simple things make us feel better as people and since the brain controls the body, these positive aspects will strengthen our immune systems and help us either heal or at least improve our prevention of disease.

After practicing medicine for 18 years and seeing patients with "real disease" and patients who come in for cosmetic procedures, it may surprise you to hear me say that they are both important. The older I get, the more I believe that we are biologically driven to try to look good. Animals primp themselves to attract the opposite sex. Looking good relates to the vitality of youth which probably has its basis in the biological visual connection to fertility. Once we are past our fertile prime, biology is not so concerned about keeping us around, we've overstayed our purpose. One of my patients said it very well, "I used to hate it when men used to look at me...Now I hate it that they don't look at me". I may not be very politically correct in mentioning this in the article, but many patients, men included, feel very similarly to the sentiment above.

The unfortunate reality as well is that people who look good generally succeed more in life, whether that's higher paying jobs, or easier ability to find a mate or other social measures of success. I often have men in their 50's or 60's

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who lose their jobs and need to "look young" to compete with other men half their age. A prospective employer may look at a guy in his 50's and see him as "tired" even though he may be the best man for the job.

We all have a tendency to judge people based on non verbal cues. Most people make a decision as to whether they "like someone" or not within the first 3 seconds of seeing their face. This is why Botox is so popular, it reduces the

frown lines above the eyes, which reduces the unwelcoming look that makes people think you're angry, when you're not. Patients will often say to me that people think that they are always angry when they are not.

Socialization has done a lot for us, but it has also made us lose our biological instinct and we don't realize that a lot of decisions we make are based on our biology and not our higher intellect. Since a youthful appearance is biologically connected to fertility, it is likely that humankind will never stop searching for the fountain of youth.

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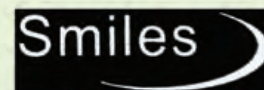
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