

## MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL...

They are calling it the male menopaunch. You hit that dangerous age and find that your stomach has a presence and a persona all of its own. Wherever you go, it leads and you follow. Just past forty and suddenly I am in that place my father got to and I vowed I never would, where your chest starts to look in need of a good support bra and there's no longer a VWL (visible waist line). And if you are short like me, you take on a sort of unshapely, square outline.

For years the onus has been on women to stay slim, trim, healthy and to keep on looking absolutely fabulous. Women's magazine covers were graced with airbrushed supermodels, making normal woman feel totally inadequate about their bodies but today this same pressure is being exerted on the male gender as well. According to a Men's Health Forum, men are now facing similar pressures as woman to look good, turning to diets, hair-colour products and even, in increasing numbers, as they get older, to cosmetic surgery, in an effort to keep the years at bay.

Reading through some of my daughters' magazines I discovered, according to a specific survey, albeit probably not very scientific one, that one in three teenage boys aren't happy with the way they look, a quarter would consider plastic surgery to look like their idols like David Beckham, Brad Pitt and Usher and three-quarters would use fake tan, hair dye and moisturiser to improve their looks. So while we grew up in a generation that labelled us pansies for any undue attention to personal grooming,, boys are now exposed to this new 'look good' culture at an early age, beginning with the barrel-chested, pumped-up action figures they play with. Before, you ladies had Barbie to live up to while Ken was always considered a bit of a moffie!

Now even he's had a muscular makeover and we've got figurines of wrestlers on TV with arms as big as thighs and rock-hard abs. And just as most women can never achieve Barbie's impossibly hourglass figure, this WCW, GI Joe,, steroid-assisted physique is never going to happen for most men. UCF professor Stacey Tantleff-Dunn says 'The levels of muscularity and attractiveness that are idealized in the media often are not attainable for the average man,.....Men see more of a discrepancy between how they want to look, or think they need to look, and the image they see in the mirror. Such discrepancies can cause the dissatisfaction and low self-esteem that lead to extreme and often unhealthy actions, such as eating disorders, exercising too much and steroid abuse.'

From an early age, male or female, we are taught that beautiful is good and ugly is bad and what conventional beauty and ugliness look like is quite clear as well. In fairy tales that we are exposed to at a very young age evil characters are often described as being ugly. The heroines, Cinderella,, Snow White, Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty, are all unquestionably beautiful, with flawless skin, perfect figures and long, flowing tresses, as well as being goodness personified, while Cinder's sisters and other mean characters such as Rumpelstiltskin are depicted as overweight, stunted, large-nosed and even deformed. The modern exception is that of Shrek which is the reversal of the ugly duckling story - the beautiful swan princess who turns into a dumpy ogress, albeit beautiful on the inside. But that's just Disney trying to make a moral point and a few million dollars at the same time by turning the fairy tale on its head. It's the exception which proves the rule.

Despite my generation's early conditioning to downplay male looks and image, the media has successfully converted us and convinced us of the need to look like a cross between film stars and fitness instructors so that we're now as body-image conscious as the youth and women. In a University of Central Florida research study, 158 male college students were split into two groups, one half made to watch TV commercials featuring cologne and deodorant products, all of which depicted handsome, muscular, sometimes bare-chested, men.

The other half watched neutral ads showing fairly ordinary-looking men aged 30 and over dressed in normal business attire. The studies concluded that the students who were exposed to the muscular ad actors reported feeling more depressed and less satisfied with their body image afterwards, while the other students claimed to feel much less depressed after watching their ads. So trust me, this stuff does get to us.

But what does all this "looking good" really mean, whether you are a man or a woman? Surely we should be asking why we have become so obsessed with external appearances, rather than valuing who a person is on the inside, celebrating the changing lines of age rather than trying to erase them?

Are we growing older gracefully as Henry Fonda and Katherine Hepburn in 'On Golden Pond' or are we like Patsy and Eddy from Absolutely Fabulous desperately deluding ourselves into denying the ageing process? And if that is the way we are going what does it say about us and how do we make sense of it?

The reality is, as shallow as it may sound, looks count and they always will – look at the cruel and insensitive treatment suffered by John Merrick , the Elephant Man, in Victorian England, despite the fact that though outwardly horribly disfigured, inside he was a sensitive, loving person. This discrimination is also manifest in the workplace. First it was the smokers who stopped getting jobs, rejected by employers on the grounds that they were risking their health. Now there is convincing research done in the UK by Personnel Today that overweight workers are also being marginalised and given fewer opportunities than their slimmer counterparts. And there are hoards of research studies that support the notion that the better looking you are the better chances of finding a job and ultimately finding success.

So I am completely justifying my rigorous 5 days at the gym routine per week, the adhoc botox treatment and the occasional liposuction for those hard-to-reach places. How could you think it's mere narcissism? There's a serious shortfall in rich princesses around to support us so all of us downsized Shreks need to survive in the cut-throat, image-conscious, modern job market. And as nobody would want to employ an aging consultant with a paunch and wrinkles so I for one am not averse to a couple of surgical shortcuts to achieving those eternal, external smooth contours. 'Ah, vanity, thy name is man'!

