

The importance of your subjective feelings on your sense of self

Research has shown that the way someone *feels* about their appearance has far more influence on their quality of life than how physically attractive they are to others. Thus, an individual who is extremely disfigured can have a good quality of life and an individual who is generally considered attractive may be deeply distressed and have a poor quality of life. The examples of Katherine and Tom, described below, illustrate either end of this spectrum.

Katherine

Katherine's face was severely disfigured from burns in a road traffic accident. Most people would rate her appearance as unusual and would not have come across someone who looks so visibly different in their everyday experience. To start with, after the accident, Katherine was shocked by her appearance, and failed to recognize herself in the mirror. After a period of rehabilitation, she is now familiar with her new looks, accepts that no amount of surgery is going to restore her previous appearance, and has rebuilt her self-esteem by acknowledging all her talents, abilities and skills. She is a good partner and parent and a full member of the community, functioning well in society. Sometimes the questions and curiosity about her story get her down, but generally she has learned to manage other people's curiosity and is confident and at ease in social situations.

Tom

Tom is someone who most people would agree now has a reasonably attractive appearance. However, he was teased and bullied as a child about his acne and has carried the feeling of being insecure and conspicuous into adult life. He believes that others will be critical of him and blames his appearance for his lack of confidence. He repeatedly checks his facial appearance in mirrors and avoids a wide range of social situations and intimacy because of his fear of being humiliated. Like many people with body image problems, he believes that if he could change what he looks like he would feel more confident and be more successful, both in his social life and in close relationships.

I am not saying that individuals who are disfigured do not experience problems or that an attractive person does not have an advantage in life — but I am saying that people's quality of life does not depend on their objective appearance. What makes the difference is how you think and act about your appearance. For instance, Katherine knows that she has a disfigured appearance but she also recognizes that this is only a small part of how she is perceived by other people — particularly those who know her best. Tom, however, sees his appearance as the major factor defining who he is and how he relates to others. But rather than changing his appearance, the key to changing his quality of life lies in changing the way he thinks and acts. This is the key to understanding and changing all body image problems. I understand that this is not going to be easy, as these patterns of thinking and behaving have often built up over many years, but many people have succeeded in overcoming body image problems using this approach.