

PRINCESS DISEASE

Constant exposure in social media means that 'ordinary' women increasingly suffer from what traditionally affected princesses and others in the media spotlight: the urge to be 'perfect'. We train more than ever, are conscious of eating right and attach great importance to maintaining the right online image. But excessive focus on health can also be harmful in the long run. ELLE investigates the new factors influencing today's 'thin trend'.

Body ideals, to which we all aspire, have always existed. The rule is simple: the more difficult the ideal is to achieve, the better – whether it be the 18th-century's rounder forms or the 1950s' wasp waist. So today's skinny ideal is not a new phenomenon – the problem is that it won't go away. Studies show that today's models weigh 23% less than the average woman, as compared to 'only' 8% less 25 years ago. Today it is difficult to find a well-known actress or model that doesn't aspire to the ideal. It was sad to see the stunning 'plus size' model Crystal Renn, who once suffered from eating disorders, initially become famous for her curvy shape, only to lose all the weight and become super skinny.

Fortunately, it seems as if something is beginning to shift in the fashion industry. Advertising campaigns are being studied and major fashion magazines such as Vogue have launched innovations such as 'The Health Initiative', which works for better conditions for models and for a healthier body ideal. But, although the media and fashion industry is undoubtedly partly responsible for today's ideal, we cannot put all the blame on them as we witness the emergence of new reasons why 'thin' holds sway – notably the idea that thin is a symbol of status.



“If you put all the blame on fashion and media industries, you do not see the big picture,” says the internationally renowned Danish future trends forecaster Anne Lise Kjaer (Kjaer-global.com), who has more than 20 years’ experience in trend research. She says today the body has become a kind of investment, one she calls ‘body capital’. She says: “Our body is something that we increasingly can control, and it has become a way to signal personal wellbeing. We see our body capital as a way to ensure the right job or partner – a way to signal progress.”

And, bearing in mind how positively our society seems to look at attractive people, it is no wonder that many of us strive to be perfect. “Research in the U.S. shows that, when it comes to pay, the top third most attractive women earns 8% more than women with a more ‘average’ appearance, while the least attractive earn 4% less than the average. But the real problem occurs when society or people begin to use ‘body capital’ as a measure of self-esteem, control and social status in life,” says Anne Lise Kjaer.

Carolina Lunde, a researcher at the Department of Psychology at University of Gothenburg, agrees: “A ‘toned’ body may signal that we have time and money to take care of ourselves and are disciplined enough to do it, whereas an obese body is considered to signal ‘sloppiness’ and a lack of self-control. Indeed, control is key; it’s about a feeling we have mastered life through control of the body. Since we rarely get full control over other areas, such as relationships and jobs, all focus is on the physical self. Using food and exercise, we try to create the ‘perfect body’, in the expectation that it will make our lives easier.”

Healthy is Trendy

“Today we are fighting against food, when not so long ago it was a struggle to get enough of it. Being plump signalled wealth and high social status, yet today it is associated with poverty and low social status,” says Anne Lise Kjaer. As a backlash against unhealthy lifestyles, we are witnessing a trend focusing on maintaining ourselves in peak physical condition. We eat organic, go to yoga several times a week and buy our morning coffee with skimmed instead of full-fat milk. We have watched yoga centres and raw food restaurants spread, even during a financial crisis. It’s simply become trendy to be healthy.

This is all well and good, provided a healthy lifestyle increases people’s well-being. But is this always the case? According to Dr. Phillippa Diedrichs, researcher in health psychology at the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of the West of England, it all depends on our relationship with exercise and food: “Often people say that their reason for exercising is to feel good, when actually it’s more about changing or maintaining appearance. It becomes dangerous when ‘healthy’ becomes a mania – the central driving force behind our sense of self-worth as a person.”

We all have a friend who scrupulously avoids carbohydrates in favour of ‘healthy’ salads, or the colleague at work who repeatedly refuses chocolates. And of course it is better to eat salads than to wallow in chocolate, but in the long run too great a focus on looking good can lead to stress and create anxiety. “Maintaining personal appearance can be bad when it becomes a chore,” says life coach Anna-Lena Tegebra (Coachkonsulten.se). She points to the long-term negative consequences, such as muscle tension and decreased concentration and memory. There are also negative emotional reactions, such as irritation, fear, anxiety and guilt. And, as we all know, in the worst-case scenario, stress such as this may also lead on to illness, including eating disorders and depression.

Social Media Impacts

A relatively new factor, which may contribute to lower self-confidence and a deteriorating body image, is social media. It is an under-explored area, but studies suggest that Facebook in particular can make people feel less satisfied about their bodies. “A new Australian study conducted among teenage girls shows that those who use Facebook often are more likely to feel dissatisfied with how they look,” says Dr. Phillippa Diedrichs.

According to trend forecaster Anne Lise Kjaer, social media has created a kind of competition among users. “Technical developments have added a new dimension to the ‘body capital’ agenda, as they allow us to assess and even analyse aspects of

our well-being and body image. It's not just about 'tracking progress'; it is also about sharing via the network and this creates a competitive and a status element. Even the 'visual status' aspect of social media has become a highly competitive aspect of personal branding."

It is easy to imagine the negative effect that Facebook can have on people's body image. Confronted with carefully selected information, where users are attuned to showing their best side, you compare yourself with friends and find you don't match up. Sites such as Pinterest, where you can create inspiring collages, have been misused by organisations promoting the 'skinny ideal' using so-called 'thinspo' images of thin celebrities and women with the 'perfect' body. Since many young girls take advantage of social media, this may contribute to an even greater appearance fixation among young people in the future – but it's something that is already a problem. "Studies shows that one in four girls aged 11-16 feel pressured by the beauty ideal, which spreads through the media. I see through interviews for my work that this ideal sticks, and many people go around very dissatisfied with their bodies because their idea of what constitutes beauty is skewed towards skinny," says Anna-Lena Tegebro.



Who can be Affected?

According to Dr. Phillippa Diedrichs, a mix of socio-cultural and psychological factors determine who will be influenced by a negative body view: "In general, it's all about confidence, and how likely you are to experience negative emotions. More specific factors may lead to a poor body image. These include internalising the prevailing

media ideal as your own standard; comparing yourself constantly with others; over-exposure to media that focus on appearance; and participating in conversations where the thin ideal is confirmed with phrases such as: ‘You look good, have you lost weight?’.”

Caroline Lunde believes it can also be a reaction to an early experience of perfectionism in the family environment, which later means people strive to always look perfect. This makes it impossible to accept your body, and no matter how hard you train, or healthily you eat, it will never be good enough. According to Anne Lise Kjaer such problems often occur in people who experience trauma in their early childhood, and later struggle with a poor self-image. She points out that it is vital to teach children not to equate ‘beautiful’ with ‘good’.

How can you Get Better?

We may not be able to change community norms with a snap of the fingers, but there is always something individuals can do to avoid focusing too much on body and looks. This is what our experts suggest.

Carolina Lunde: “Remind yourself that society’s body ideal is constructed, and there is a powerful industry that exists because of our dissatisfaction with our bodies. Notice the negative thoughts when they pop up and challenge them. If you feel that this issue occupies many of your thoughts, then try to avoid appearance-oriented magazines and TV programmes. And if you have more serious problems, seek help and try to sort out your thoughts and feelings about your body.”

Dr. Phillippa Diedrichs: “Change the focus from your appearance to something else that you appreciate in your body. Be present when you exercise, and consider how it feels. Do not get into body-fixated discussions.”

Anna-Lena Tegebro: “Examine thought patterns and be aware of what they are doing to you. Is it the negative thoughts that must be changed, or are you really unhappy with your body? If so, decide what you want to change, and get help to implement it. Make a chart of how your daily life should look. There is a greater chance of success if your whole family is included in the ‘journey’.”

A Brighter Future?

What do developments so far say about the future of our image-obsessed society? With obesity as a growing health problem, will our focus shift – thinking more about health and less about appearance? Anne Lise Kjaer says: “Slowly but surely, we see a shift in attitudes. It is increasingly clear to us that money alone does not equate to

happiness. We value relationships and a sustainable living environment as essential ingredients of a meaningful life. Of course, these assessments are balanced with recognition that a 'healthy lifestyle' and not higher status is the vital component in joy and happiness."

Anne Lise Kjaer also believes in the importance of maintaining a healthy attitude: "I think that the most important thing is to change our focus and to teach healthy ideals. Women often focus on what they do not like about their bodies, and find it difficult to talk about what they do like about themselves. We should celebrate positive stories and beauty ideals linked to health. We also need a more holistic view of what constitutes true 'body capital'."

When and how change will happen, is still uncertain. But until it does, remember that exercise and a healthy diet should feel fun and enjoyable – something you do for your own sake, not a stressful experience you embark on for others.

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