

## I'm so ugly

Some people look in the mirror and think they're facing a monster. This is called Body Dysmorphic Disorder, a curse that's on the rise thanks to new technologies.

By Laura G. De Rivera

Another goddess of beauty assaults you through your smartphone's screen: long legs, flat belly, soft curves, perfectly bronzed skin, perfect complexion, almond-shaped eyes with otherworldly eyelashes, provocative lips, long golden hair, the palm trees of a paradisaical beach in the background. She smiles because she's beautiful, she's lucky. She's the very image of success.

You raise your eyes and see your reflection in the bus window. Your hair's burned at the ends, your dye didn't take as you'd hoped. Your nose is shiny from the natural grease on your face and it's a little too big for your liking. Your thighs hang over the edges of your seat and your pants don't feel that comfortable, but it's better than wearing a dress and showing your knees, which you think are too ugly.

You'll soon get braces to correct those twisted teeth. Maybe one day you'll be able to smile without feeling embarrassed. Just like the fashion influencer, who only helps remind you how much you hate your own body. Without realizing it, while you're browsing Instagram, your repulsion and hatred towards yourself grows because you're not how you "should be". You're not as thin, slender, young, pretty...

It's human nature to compare yourself to your peers. The problem arises when we live under the tyranny of image that makes us hate our reflection in the mirror. It happens when the blueprint we measure ourselves against is an aesthetic perfection that's too rigid and standardized, which doesn't leave room for everyone to be beautiful in their own way. We don't compare ourselves with our friends or neighbors, but with influencers or famous people we don't know in person.

We're competing with unreal images, the fruit of studied poses and systematic retouching through image editing software that trims the outline of a model's hips to make her look like a nymph, erases her wrinkles and imperfections... What's more, this example of perfect beauty and extreme thinness is everywhere: now more than ever, social media and internet have taken it viral. All this would be well and good if it didn't make us sick. Our obsession with achieving this ideal makes us sick. It causes a syndrome that the experts call Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD).

### An obsession with perfection

Something like this happened in Fiji 20 years ago. In 1995, a team from Harvard Medical School, headed by Anne E. Becker, measured changes in body self-image and eating habits after the introduction of television, which hadn't existed on the island until that year. In 1997, after three years of watching TV, 50% of young women from Fiji (who'd been happy with their weight before) considered themselves to be fat. 29% were at high risk of becoming anorexic or bulimic.

"Nowadays, we see an average of 5,000 retouched images a week on social media, which exponentially multiplies the pathological effect of the aesthetic ideal shown in the media," says psychologist Marisol Mora, Director of the Body Image Evaluation and Intervention Unit at the

Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB).

The sensation of dissatisfaction with one's own appearance is present in 80% of women and a growing number of men, according to a study by the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of the West of England. Another study showed that when middle-aged women were asked what they would like to change about their lives, no less than 50% answered, "my weight".

The image we have of our bodies begins to take shape based on other people's judgments or evaluations at about the age of five. Experts say that by the age of seven we become vulnerable to feelings of discomfort about our appearance. The problem reaches a head in adolescence. Half of young women between the ages of 16 and 21 would subject themselves to cosmetic surgery if they could afford it. "Young women compare themselves to portraits they see in the media of happy, popular, successful people whose weight is always well below healthy levels. This causes them to feel very dissatisfied with their bodies," says Marisol Mora.

In the case of men, the distance between aesthetic and medical ideals is smaller, "although the gap is widening all the time, especially in terms of a preoccupation with musculature. A normal man would have to resort to unhealthy practices, such as taking steroids or excessive amounts of physical exercise, in order to get the muscles displayed by male models," she adds.

This discomfort is exacerbated when it takes up your time and energy. Your perception of your body becomes a caricature that fills you with shame and anxiety. You don't like your weight, height, hair, eyes, hands, legs, buttocks, breasts, penis... You don't like yourself. That's what BDD is, when people become obsessed with that imperfection they notice in their appearance. When they look at themselves in the mirror, it's the only thing they see. They magnify it and are certain that others will be disgusted by it, although no-one notices that supposed defect.

How often do you think about your defects?

80% of people with BDD have considered committing suicide and 30% carry it out, according to Dr. Katharine Phillips of Brown Medical School and author of *The Broken Mirror*, in which she gives her conclusions after having studied 900 patients with BDD. "Many of these people resort to cosmetic interventions that don't change the way they see themselves. They convince themselves there's no solution and that makes suicide a real threat due to this illness of imagined ugliness," says Phillips.

"BDD involves a very distorted way of processing visual information, as sufferers obsess over defects that other people often don't even notice," explains Nuria Salgado, who's a supervisor for Psicol, the psychological care service for students at the Complutense University of Madrid, to Tec Review. It tends to appear in adolescence and affects between 1.7% and 2.4% of the world's population, according to the Body Dysmorphic Disorder Foundation.

This syndrome is present in one of every fifty people, according to estimates by Dr. Bruce Clark, Director of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in the United Kingdom. It has a prevalence similar to other body image alterations such as anorexia (1 to 3%) and bulimia (1 to 2%). An expert on the subject, Clark says that he need only ask four questions to detect the disorder: Are you very concerned about the appearance of some parts of your body that you consider particularly unattractive? Is your main concern with your appearance that you aren't thin enough or that you might become too fat? What effect has your preoccupation with your appearance had on your life?

How much time do you spend thinking about your defects per day?

BDD is a very debilitating condition. "It stops you getting on with things. You isolate yourself because you don't want anyone to see you, because you think your loved ones are lying to you when they tell you you're not ugly or that the defect you see isn't important," says Eva\*, a 19-year-old who's suffered from the disorder since she started adolescence. It all started at the age of 13, when someone in her class teased her about her appearance.

"I started looking at myself in the mirror more," confesses Eva to The Guardian. "I wanted to get rid of my defects. I didn't want anyone laughing at me." When she turned 17, she hadn't left the house in three months. She'd even stopped studying. She broke several mirrors and burned her brown skin with acids to bleach it. She hid her face beneath a headscarf. Then, she presented her mother with a list of all the surgeries she needed: liposuction, ear and chin alterations, knee surgery. This situation led her to a suicide attempt at the age of 19, when she was finally diagnosed with the condition. "I knew that nobody would ever love me because of my ugliness. I didn't want to carry on living," she says.

There are solutions

All body image disorders stem from "the overvalued belief in the importance of image in their surroundings. Their distorted perception therefore combines with a fear of rejection due to this defect. This leads them to avoidance behaviors, escaping from social relationships and falling into anxiety and depression," says psychologist Nuria Salgado. In her opinion, "today more than ever, self-esteem or the concept we have of ourselves is based on physical image. They think: if I don't look pretty, I'm worthless. I can't have normal relationships."

Bulimia, anorexia, and BDD are classified as image disorders. The Body Dysmorphic Disorder Foundation estimates that 20% of people receiving cosmetic surgery suffer from the condition. One very illustrative example of this obsession for undergoing surgery is Michael Jackson, who could never have enough interventions to change his image. Uma Thurman, Tallulah Willis (daughter of Bruce Willis and Demi Moore), Brittany Snow, Kim Kardashian, and Sarah Michelle Gellar are the most famous of those who've publicly acknowledged having suffered from BDD. "When we're obsessed with something and it causes a great deal of anxiety, we feel that we have to do whatever it takes to resolve it. But the problem is they're never going to see that defect in a good light, however many surgical alterations they have. The only solution is by working through that fear, that obsession," says Nuria Salgado.

The British video artist Leigh de Vries, who'd suffered from the condition for years, couldn't summon up the courage to leave her house because she had a distorted image of her face. That is, until she decided to confront it. With the assistance of a makeup artist who specialized in special effects, she designed a mask of how she saw herself, put it on her face, and went out into the street. In *Exposure: The Broken Reality Tunnel*, a documentary of her adventure, she observes the reactions of the people she comes across. An insistent internal monologue is repeated throughout the film, echoing her thoughts: "Don't look at me. I am grotesque. I am sad. I want to hide. I can't let anyone see me looking like this. I am a monster."

One key part of treatment is "helping them to face their fears. For example, we have them look in the mirror with their clothes on and naked, as a form of gradual and repeated exposure so that they

reduce their anxiety levels and they can see themselves with more objectivity,” says Marisol Mora, of the Autonomous University of Barcelona. However, treatment often requires medication with antidepressants such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors.

It’s difficult to treat because it’s a slippery mental problem. According to the US National Institutes of Health website, many patients “are reluctant to reveal their symptoms due to shame. Furthermore, they don’t tend to recognize that their beliefs about their appearance are deformed due to a psychiatric disorder.” Which is to say that they don’t believe they’re mentally ill: they just think they’re ugly. “It’s much easier to go to a plastic surgeon than a psychologist,” points out Nuria Salgado.

The risk factors are low self-esteem, a high level of perfectionism, having suffered bullying or harassment, or having an upbringing that overvalues physical appearance. It’s also a genetic disorder, as has been demonstrated by one of the leading specialists on the topic, Dr. Katharine Phillips. 20% of sufferers have a relative with the same problem. Moreover, “the condition has a neurological basis and is not a mere reflection of vanity. There are abnormalities in visual information processing that mean they tend to focus on small details and have more difficulties in seeing an image as a whole,” says the psychiatrist.

#### Improving self-esteem

The documentary *Miss Representative*, by Jennifer Siebel, explains that women’s self-objectification or the tendency to contemplate bodies in terms of their sexual attractiveness makes us participate less in politics, make less of an effort to advance professionally... it renders us incapable of making important decisions. It makes us depressed.

“Fashion houses, the diet and food industry, fitness and physical exercise businesses, mass media, advertising, and pharmaceutical and cosmetics companies combine efforts, perhaps without realizing it, to create a climate in which we feel that our bodies aren’t good enough, that we should change them,” reports Susie Orbach, British psychotherapist and active feminist. For Marisol Mora, “women have always been socialized to gain acceptance from others through their appearance, which makes us more vulnerable.”

“Comments that other people make about your body, above all if they’re teasing or criticism, influence you much more than seeing your objective reflection in a mirror,” says Mora. Part of the treatment she gives young women with image alterations is to demonstrate this distorted shape that they perceive. “We ask them to draw what they think their silhouette looks like. Then, they stand with their backs to the wall, next to their drawing, and we trace the outline of their real silhouette. Sometimes, there are brutal differences between what they imagine and the reality,” she explains.

How do you avoid getting BDD? Prevention starts with “promoting self-esteem and self-image that are independent of external opinion and standards of beauty, which reside in other areas besides the physical. It’s OK to want to have a good appearance, but you can’t let that lead to an unhealthy relationship with your body,” advises Salgado. At the same time, she recognizes that “fighting against the model promoted by consumer society is difficult. However, boys and girls should learn to accept their bodies from an early age and understand that their appearance can’t make them feel less worthy, under any circumstances.”

## A FEMINIST ISSUE?

Statistical records show a high level of interest in cosmetic surgeries from women. However, many experts agree that an increasing number of men are consulting plastic surgeons.

86% of cosmetic surgeries worldwide are performed on women.

80% of women say that photos of other women in mass media make them feel insecure.

42% of girls in 1st and 3rd grade want to be thinner than they are.

8% increase in cosmetic surgeries to the face and body in 2016.

7% increase in surgical procedures to the face and body in 2016.

## SELFIE SYNDROME

For those suffering from body image alteration, selfies lead to “a constant search for validation or comparison, which always produces a depressive effect,” warn psychologists Anisha Khanna and Manoj Kumar Sharma in the *Industrial Psychiatry Journal* (2017). For his part, psychiatrist David Veal says in “The ‘Selfie’ Obsession” (2014) that two out of every three patients he sees with BDD have a compulsion to take selfies. According to Mental Health America, social media can bring the condition on when people are genetically or psychologically susceptible and can worsen the symptoms of those already suffering from it.

## VICTIMS OF BDD

This disorder occurs in any type of person of any social or economic status. It’s believed that the following famous people suffered from it.

### 1883-1924 FRANZ KAFKA

In his works, you can read how the author of *Metamorphosis* hated himself and his physical appearance. It’s said that he was even afraid of mirrors, because they showed him an “inevitable ugliness”.

### 1928-1987 ANDY WARHOL

This pop artist was obsessed with the daily reddening of his nose. He went to a plastic surgeon to have it “sanded”. His preoccupation can be seen in his work *Before and After*.

### 1958-2009 MICHAEL JACKSON

This singer became as famous for the number of cosmetic treatments he underwent to change his biological appearance as for his dancing and music, above all for bleaching his skin.

### 1980 KIM KARDASHIAN

In 2017, this US celebrity declared that she suffered from dysmorphia and felt that people are always looking for any opportunity to shame her.

## “IT’S A CONDITION THAT SHOULD BE TREATED BY A PSYCHIATRIST”

The market for cosmetic surgeries in Mexico has grown for several reasons. One is that there’s more competition between plastic surgeons. Another is that this type of intervention has been socially demystified. What’s more, the male market has grown. That’s how it’s explained by Dr. Rodrigo Merino, a specialist in plastic, cosmetic, and reconstructive surgery, who works at the TecSalud Institute of Surgery at Tecnológico de Monterrey. “Before, the market for men seeking cosmetic surgery was 1 or 2 percent. Now, it’s between 15 and 20 percent in Mexico,” he says. There’s also been an increase in demand from young people, who see surgeons with their parents, bringing information they’ve found on social media with them.

How do you know when a patient displays pathological behavior?

Generally, they’re patients displaying Body Dysmorphic Disorder. These are patients who see themselves abnormally, who don’t see themselves as they really are. It’s a condition that should be treated by a psychiatrist, not by a plastic surgeon.

What causes this syndrome?

It’s usually an emotional disorder related to depression and anxiety disorders. It’s not unusual for patients to be going through a divorce and enter into a process of clinical depression that manifests itself in this way. There are also other types of disorder that manifest in an inability to see oneself properly in the mirror.

What do you do when you see a patient with this profile?

I try to explain it to them. Carefully and tactfully, I suggest professional help. I get them to understand that it’s not a good time for surgery because they have other personal problems. Then, I recommend that they visit a psychiatrist or a psychologist.

\*The real name is Zoe.