

The Psychology of Cosmetic Surgery

By Matt Shollenberger, Ph.D.

Counselor's Corner

It's no secret that many people are opting for cosmetic surgery these days. Due to the incredible pressure of society for people look good and due to the disrespect for normal aging in America, millions turn to cosmetic surgery each year. Rhinoplasty, liposuction, and breast augmentations are among the most common procedures. For the emotionally stable person, who simply wants to improve their looks, cosmetic surgery can lead to increased self esteem. But for others, cosmetic surgery can lead to more emotional problems. Many surgeons and psychologists agree that there are appropriate candidates for cosmetic procedures, and there are people who are not appropriate for surgery.

There are people in their 50's and 60's who understand that their chances of getting hired for a job may increase due to a more youthful appearance. This is an accepted fact with actors, models, politicians, and on-air media spokes people. These people may be good candidates for cosmetic surgery, provided they have realistic expectations of the surgery's outcome. Broadly speaking, there are two categories of good candidates for cosmetic surgery: The first is the person with a decent self image that wants to improve an aspect of their appearance. The second is a person that has slightly lowered self-esteem due to an obvious negative physical characteristic that they've tried to deal with, maybe since birth.

But there are other people for whom cosmetic surgery may not be a good choice. A common example is the patient who has great expectations of their future appearance and wildly improved social life after surgery. Reality may lead to a severe let down. Sometimes awkwardness and shame about the way one looks can inhibit honest communication to one's surgeon. It is vital that one overcome these feelings and speak candidly to their surgeon. The surgeon can let the patient know how reasonable these expectations are and paint a clear and realistic picture of the surgery's outcome. Some other examples of poor candidates for surgery are:

The Idealist; This person has unrealistic expectations of surgery, like the person who believes surgery will restore their exact youthful appearance, or the person who wants to look like a celebrity.

The Chaotic; This person is in a crisis and needs to be "fixed". Examples of a crisis would be a divorce, rejection, or death of a loved one. All of these are examples of losses. The chaotic believes that cosmetic surgery will heal or eliminate their grief.

The Unstable; This person may present as psychologically unstable, have a severe personality disorder, or simply be psychotic. The surgeon may sense this person to be “odd”, but since a cosmetic surgeon is not trained in psychiatry, a mental health diagnosis may not occur. Fortunately, most surgeons will detect a severe mental health concern and decline surgery until the formal diagnosis can be treated.

The Jumper; This person jumps from surgeon to surgeon looking for the doctor that will tell them exactly what they want to hear. They will not accept the answers they are given by competent cosmetic surgeons so they continue their search. A person who is obsessed with a feature that only they perceive as a defect, will continue to seek out someone who will fix something that is not flawed. Another example would be a person who wants an operation that is impossible to perform, or an operation that would threaten their physical health.

The Pleaser; This is the person who seeks out surgery for someone else. This person hopes that a significant individual will accept them more if they have cosmetic surgery. An example would be a female who’s lover told her he’d find her more desirable if she looked differently. The Pleaser doesn’t understand that surgery will not cause personality changes in their lover. If their lover is not satisfied before surgery, they will probably remain unsatisfied after surgery.

If you’re thinking of improving your appearance, remember; there is so much more to cosmetic surgery than going to sleep and waking up a changed person. Some general topics to discuss with your surgeon are *your personal reason for surgery, what is it you want the surgery to accomplish for you, what to expect physically and emotionally, and what in your life you believe the surgery will change and improve.* Sometimes, potential patients are not honest because they suspect the surgeon might decline to work with them. For example, a person who generally fears rejection may believe the surgeon may reject them if they are honest about their reasons for surgery. Or maybe they believe that if they tell their surgeon that they have difficulty breathing, their medical insurance company will pay for rhinoplasty.

Many people do not know that post-surgery depression is common, particularly with people that have a history of depression. This can occur immediately after the surgery, and sometimes last for many weeks or even months after the surgery. Temporary post surgical effects such as swelling and bruising can contribute greatly to post surgery depression. Many patients look “beat up” and feel physically unwell after surgery. Addictive pain medication can also contribute to post surgery depression. It is important

that the patient have a supportive, non-judgmental care giver to assist them after the surgery.

Sometimes, a cosmetic surgeon will refer their potential client for counseling before they reconsider surgery. A person seeking surgery to replace a loss in their life, such as a divorce, may be a very good candidate for counseling. People who find it hard to talk about the areas of their body they want to have surgery on may feel more comfortable speaking to a non-judgmental and accepting counselor before consulting a surgeon. In addition, cosmetic surgeons may refer their patients to counseling after the surgery if they sense their patient is having post surgery concerns. An experienced and well trained therapist can treat any of the previously mentioned concerns with only a moderate amount of knowledge of cosmetic surgery.

In our society today, outward appearance is highly valued, sometimes at the expense of quality of character. There is no doubt that cosmetic surgery can help us change and improve the way we appear to others. Yet in the final analysis, our self image is not determined so much by how others see us, but how we see ourselves.

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