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Size and the Female Form

Embracing today's flawed systems of size and self-image can wreak personal havoc

by Julia Browning & Kathy Grey

There is a sickness affecting females everywhere. American women are especially at risk. But it's little talked about. Oh, there are whisperings and clandestine chats among small groups of trusted friends, but the illness is pervasive, and so deeply ingrained in the "feminine mystique," it has become an affliction as seated and unavoidable as the menstrual cycle. Yet, though it's an ingrained part of us, it has no biological roots. No link to ancestral DNA. It's a brain affliction, really, one that holds our happiness hostage because we can never be at peace with ourselves when we have learned to despise our bodies.



THE SUBSTANDARD STANDARD

In subliminal ways, women, and more sadly, young girls, receive the messages daily. We're not thin enough or pretty enough. Our hair is too thin or too curly. We have blemishes or hate whatever color skin we're in. We're too tall or too short.

The infiltration of mass media had a lot to do with that pervasive self-loathing. Basically, women who didn't measure up to the public female standard of excellence passed that subconscious, substandard measurement on to her daughter, who passed it on to her daughter, and so on and so on. Eventually, substandard phobia became an inborn, inherited virus so strong, even if there were a cure, no woman thought she needed it. The cure for substandard-itis is the pursuit of perfection.

THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

Women around the world fall victim to the thin ideal, internalizing messages from media and peers that rail thin is beautiful. Alarming, a 2018 study by the Cleveland Clinic revealed that this ideal is most pervasive in the United States. Internalizing a negative body image puts women at risk of depression, anxiety, eating disorders and body dysmorphia, the study found.

Given today's rampant use of social media, there are more avenues for image comparison than ever before, leading to abusive internal monologues such as, "You're obese, ugly and disgusting," and "You could probably benefit from an eating disorder." To justify anorexia, size-obsessed women have reported thinking, "At least I'll look thin in my casket."

A 2011 *Glamour* magazine survey reported that 97% of women have similar thoughts daily.

SIZE MATTERS

Most women conceal their clothing sizes like dirty secrets. They'll bring a size 8 dress into a fitting room, knowing a 10 or 12 would look and feel better. (Then they conspire with a sales associate to bring the larger size.)

There's much ill-fitting psychology behind women's clothing sizes, the root of which is shame. And despite pressure to shrink down to a sample size, the International Journal of Fashion Design, Technology and Education reports that the average American woman in 2020 wears between a size 16 and 18.

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REALITY CHECK

Women's bodies have changed over time. Women today are larger, and most don't like knowing "their number" is in the double digits.

According to a Slate magazine report, a woman who had a 34-inch bust and a 25-inch waist in 1958 wore a size 12, as did Marilyn Monroe, the era's "ideal woman." Today's size 12 fits a woman with a 39-inch bust and a 32-inch waist. And what was a size 12 in 1958 is now a size 6 or less.

Another truth: There's vast unpredictability in sizing, and there are no rules governing clothing sizes. Manufacturers can label a size 12 dress a size 6, much to the delight of buyers who must have that little-sized garment, whatever the price.

Merchants caught on, knowing that women wouldn't buy sizes if they didn't like the sound of the number. Thus, "vanity sizing" was born, a design practice that adds inches of fabric while lowering the size.

PLUS IMPERFECT

Shopping in this incongruous system is maddening for women, particularly those who fall into the plus-size range. Plus-size sections carry limited inventory, typically with muted patterns and fabrics that "give."

You'll often find these sections in the back corners of stores, if they exist at all. In the world of high fashion, segregation is very real for women of substance.

Plus-size discrimination came to the public's attention last year when retailer Forever 21 shipped Atkins bars with online orders. The brand was blasted on social media by plus-size customers who were less than thrilled to receive their orders with a diet bar on the side.

Forever 21 released a statement explaining that the diet bar was a promotional item included in all orders. Still, the side-of-Atkins gimmick left a bad taste in the mouths of shoppers of all sizes.

DEMOCRATIZING SIZING

Innovative retailers predict that the solution to sizing issues is to do away with sizing altogether.

On the CNBC program, "Mad Money," Levi Strauss CEO Chip Bergh proclaimed, "Sizes will go out the window 10 years from now. Everyone can do their own body scan on a camera."

That's the idea Ronen Luzon, CEO of retail measurement technology company, MySizeID (MySizeID.com), shares. His company works with retailers to "democratize" sizing options.

"It's not always about eliminating sizing, but rather making it more inclusive and personalized so that a woman can feel confident in clothes that fit her properly," he says. "When a customer uses technology that generates their unique size, it eliminates that 'guessing game,' and instead, they're able to make informed decisions based on their specific body measurements."

The technology scans the size of the user and creates an exact measurement for the supplier. If it catches on and becomes widespread, it could provide a win-win for shoppers and sellers: less fitting room shame for buyers and fewer returns and profit losses for suppliers.

MITIGATING HARM

Fixing the issues with sizing will only do so much to help women who negatively perceive their bodies (most of them) and yearn to look smaller, even beyond healthy ideals.

Psychologists involved in the Cleveland Clinic study concluded that media-literate women can better interpret subliminal mass messages and distinguish between healthy thin and deadly thin. It was recommended that programs be launched to educate girls to interpret such messages.

Deemed a public health initiative, retouched commercial photos in France must be labeled as such, an attempt to nullify unrealistic body comparisons and assuage false impressions among women and children, in particular.

Some national brands with a dedicated young-women audience are doing their part with advertising. Beauty conglomerate, Dove, launched its Campaign for Real Beauty more than a decade ago, and has since influenced

the global conversation on real beauty, with studies on women's body images and ads that depict diversity in women.

More recently, the #AerieReal campaign set the bar high for diversity in underwear advertising with concepts rarely represented in the media. Not only does the brand feature models of diverse cultures, women of substance and varying abilities feature prominently in the ads. In one, a woman wears a colostomy bag, another has a prosthetic leg and one poses with her seeing eye dog.

THE END?

Advertising and media giants are stepping up, it seems, taking some responsibility for the damage done by themselves and by decades of their predecessors.

Will the size paradigm come to an end? Will society let up on the pressure? Will women ever feel content with the bodies they're in?

Time will tell. Maybe females will, one day, stop dreaming the impossible dream and start living life comfortably within their authentic selves.