

VANITY or BODY IMAGE PROBLEMS?

I. Introduction

- A. Vanity is not a word you hear about much these days, but you do hear about “body image problems.”
- B. For this workshop, I would like to define some terms, briefly present what the secular psychologist thinks about this issue, what the Christian psychologist thinks, what one Keswick Christian author thinks, and what the biblical counselor thinks. Lastly, I will give you some practical tips on counseling a woman who is vain.

II. Definition of Terms

A. Body Image

Body image is a person's perception of the aesthetics [a branch of philosophy dealing with beauty and the beautiful] or sexual attractiveness of their own body. Research suggests that exposure to mass media depicting the thin-ideal body may be linked to body image disturbance in women.

B. Body Dysmorphic Disorder

Body dysmorphic [malformed or misshapen; pertaining to the shape or size of a body part] disorder (BDD) is a mental disorder characterized by an obsessive preoccupation that some aspect of one's own appearance is severely flawed and warrants exceptional measures to hide or fix it. In BDD's delusional variant, the flaw is imagined. If the flaw is actual, its importance is severely exaggerated. Either way, one's thoughts about it are pervasive and intrusive, occupying up to several hours a day.

Signs and Symptoms

Individuals suffering from BDD tend to preoccupy over minimal or non-existent flaws in their appearance. They may view themselves as deformed or unattractive, generally focusing on the face, hair, and other areas of the body such as the stomach, thighs, and hips.[5] Any area can be the preoccupation, but on average, people with BDD tend to focus on 5 to 7 different body parts.[Examining their appearance multiple times a day is a regular occurrence and can take up to anywhere between 3 and 8 hours on a daily basis. Common behaviors that are displayed include frequent mirror checking and/or avoiding, outfit changing, skin picking, excessive grooming, and restrictive eating. Victims of BDD often identify with feelings of low self-esteem, shame, and unworthiness. Some persons experience delusions that others are covertly pointing out their flaws. But most generally, one experiencing BDD ruminates over the perceived bodily defect up to several hours daily, uses either social avoidance or camouflaging with cosmetics or apparel, repetitively checks the appearance, compares it to that of other persons, and might often seek verbal reassurances. BDD's severity can wax and wane, and flare-ups tend to yield absences from school, work, or socializing, sometimes leading to protracted social isolation, with

some becoming housebound for extended periods. The distress of BDD tends to exceed that of either **major depressive disorder** or **type-2 diabetes**, and rates of suicidal ideation and attempts are especially high.

C. Summary of underlying psychological issues:

low self-esteem, perfectionism, negative body image, childhood abuse, depression, anxiety, self-disparagement, feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness and inadequacy, obsessive compulsive thoughts and behavior between 3-8 hours per day, greatly exaggerate the flaw, one out of three are delusional, high rates of suicide, and suicide attempts, preoccupation with 5-7 body parts, delusions that others are pointing out their flaws, depression, social avoidance, may trace problems to childhood sexual abuse, parental neglect, or being teased or bullied.

D. Secular Psychology Helps

The Body Image workbook by Thomas Cash, PHD

8 step program for learning to like how you look. "Talk therapy does not work, behavior modification does." For people who struggle with BDD, feeling inadequate as a person, low self-esteem, results in feelings of inadequacy, depression, decreased pleasure with sex, self-disparagement.

Living with Your Body and Other Things you Hate

by Emily Sandoz and Troy deFrene.

"How to let go of your struggle with body image, using acceptance and commitment therapy."

E. Christian Psychology Examples

Loving Your Body: Embracing Your True Beauty in Christ

by Deborah Newman, licensed psychologist, published by Focus on the Family.

Focus on the Family did a survey and concluded that the primary reason for women to have a low self esteem is because they have a negative body image. This book helps the reader understand that they are wonderfully and beautifully made in God's image.

F. Christian example with wrong theology.

My Big Bottom Blessing, How Hating my Body Led to Loving my Life

by Teasi Cannon, master's degree in pastoral counseling from Liberty theological seminary.

The author is funny and creative but has been heavily influenced by the Sonship controversy, Keswick view of sanctification, and talking about God in a trite sort of way instead of viewing Him with awe.

G. Biblical Counseling's View

Damsels in Distress by Martha Peace¹

The chapter on "Vanity, the Love of Beauty"

III. Background of Vanity

A. Definition: Vanity is something that is empty, futile, vain, or worthless. Vanity (in the sense of the love of beauty) is an "inflated pride in one's appearance."²

B. Vain women are one sign of a decadent society and unstable women. It is a sign of the disintegration of a nation.³

- The daughters of Zion became like the societies around them.
- The Cananite societies were pagan and carnal.
- The Prophet Isaiah warns the Jewish people of judgment to come. The nation of Judah (the southern kingdom) was about to go the way of the northern kingdom – to be taken into slavery and captivity. The northern kingdom had been taken by Assyria and Judah is about to be taken by Babylon (King Nebuchadnezzar). They have turned from God to serve other gods. One of them is the god of beauty.
- Isaiah 3:16-17
- God's judgment to them was directed straight to their vanity.
- Isaiah 3:18-26
- V.24 – putrefaction – smell of rotting flesh
- V.24 – a plucked out scalp – baldness
- This is not a pretty picture and neither is it pretty to God when we love ourselves and spend inordinate amounts of time, money, etc. on being beautiful and calling attention to ourselves.

IV. How to Overcome Vanity

A. Read the following signs of vanity and mark the ones you know you are guilty of (or your counselees).

- I am overly concerned about how I look.
- I am unable to graciously receive compliments instead of graciously saying "thank you," I become embarrassed or angry at that person.
- I feel depressed or anxious because "I'm fat."
- On a quest for thinness that sometimes results in abuse of my body through bulimia or anorexia.
- I overspend on clothes, hair, makeup, etc.

¹Martha Peace, *Damsels in Distress* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010).

²*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Boston:Mass: G.K. Hall and Co., 1977), 981.

³Adapted with permission from sermon material by Howard Dial at Beracah Bible Church, Fayetteville, GA.

- I compare myself to others and how they look.
- I say things to elicit compliments from others.
- I refuse to have sex with husband because “I feel ugly or fat.”
- I often apologize for how I look.
- I find myself thinking about my body flaws often.
- Dress in a sensual or immodest manner.
- I go back to the mirror again and again to see how I look.
- I withdraw from social situations because I feel self-conscious about how I look.
- I feel anxious or depressed about how I look.

B. What the Scriptures have to teach us about Vanity

- **The Old Testament emphasis** – “beauty is vain.” Pro. 31:30
 - Vain is futile, worthless, nothing, useless, mere breath.
 - Ps. 4:2 “How long will you love vanity (what is worthless)?”
- **The New Testament emphasis** – She is to be adorned with proper clothing (modest and discrete), her good works, and her “gentle and quiet spirit.” 1 Tim. 2:9-10 ; 1 Peter 3:3-4.
 - **Proper clothing:** most of the styles these days are immodest. They show cleavage, bellybuttons, and various and sundry outlines of “private parts.”
 - **Good works:** Most good works are done behind the scenes. Few people if any know about them. This is the woman who quietly works in the kitchen to cleanup after the church picnic or she sits by the bed of a friend who is recovering from surgery. She takes meals to the sick or cleans the house of a woman in her church whose husband is dying. She goes to a nursing home and faithfully visits ladies from her church. She is like the woman, Dorcas, in Acts chapter nine who was “full of good works and acts of charity.”
 - **A “gentle and quiet spirit”:** 1 Peter 3:3-4 A gentle spirit means you accept God’s dealing with you as good. You do not resist nor dispute with God. A quiet spirit is peaceable and tranquil, not given to anger or fear.⁴
 - **The biblical view of vanity:** not grateful (1 Thes. 5:16-18); not content (1 Tim. 6:6); a lover of self; (Romans 12:3, 2 Tim. 3:2); Lust for beauty (James 1:14-15), not motivated by love for God or others but by the love of self and others’ approval (1 John 2:15-17)

C. Instead of being jealous, we should be glad to others if they are more beautiful. 1 Cor. 13:4.

⁴Martha Peace, *Becoming a Titus 2 Woman* (Bemidjii, MN: Focus Publishing, 1997).

- D. Learn to accept compliments graciously (believing the other person was sincere, do not judge their motive). Phil. 4:8; 1 Cor. 13:5 (“Love is not rude”).
- E. Realize that true beauty lies inside not outside. It is “precious in God’s sight.” 1 Pet. 3:3-5.
- F. Look to Sarah as an example. She was beautiful but it is said to her that later on (and we know she was really old) she adorned herself by being submissive to her husband. She is further described as a holy woman who hoped in God. 1 Peter 3:5-6.
- G. Another example is the Lord Jesus Christ. We know He was not a handsome man (Isa. 53:2). Yet David wrote of the Lord’s beauty and the “beauty of His holiness.” (Ps. 27:4; 29:2).
- H. Scriptural warnings regarding vanity:
- Beauty is vain. Pro. 31:30. It is a depressing pursuit, ultimately hopeless, empty.
 - Beauty is one of the ways the adulteress draws her prey. Pro. 6:25 (the young man is warned not to seek her beauty in your heart).
 - Jerusalem trusted in her beauty (God had bestowed splendor on her) and played the harlot. Ezek. 16:15
 - Satan’s heart was lifted up because of his beauty. Ezek. 28:17
 - Do not be legalistic about dress and make up, but enjoy the freedom the Lord has given you. 1 Pet. 3:3 “Do not let your adornment be *merely* external...” It is OK to have some external adornment. Stripping oneself of all make up and wearing only plain, drab clothing does not make a woman more pleasing to God. If she thinks it does, she is “delighting in selfabasement.” Col. 2:18. It is a “matter which has, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and selfabasement...but is of no value against fleshly indulgence.” Col. 2:23
 - Outward beauty without inner beauty is a monstrosity. Pro.11:22
- I. Scriptural Characteristics of a Vain woman:
1. a lover of self, a form of pride (Ro.12:3; 2 Tim.3:2)
 2. not content (1 Tim.6:6)
 3. not grateful (1 Thes. 5:16-18)
 4. lust for beauty (James 1:14-15)
 5. not motivated by a love for God and others but by the love of self and others’ approval. (1 John 2:15-17).
- J. Turn your passion **from** loving self and calling attention to self or avoiding people **to** a passion for God and serving Him regardless of what you look like. You must thank God for what you look like, to be grateful no matter what, grow old graciously and leave a legacy for her daughters and the younger women in her church that the Lord Jesus is what mattered to her. Romans 12:1 (not live as a vain, proud woman but as a “living and holy

sacrifice.”) Vain, proud women can go one of two ways: flaunting how you look to call attention to yourself or obsessing over your body flaws and being depressed and anxious.

- K. It's important to have high view of God. Do a good study of His attributes such as *The Attributes of God* by A.W. Pink.
- L. Engage in the “put-off” and “put-on” concept by doing a “self-talk log” and then put on “setting her mind on the things above.” Col. 3:1

V. Vanity, a Self-Focus Mind Set on the Things Above, a God Focus

Vanity, a Self Focus	Mind Set on the Things Above, a God Focus
“If I could just be ten pounds lighter then I could be satisfied.”	“I have freedom in the Lord to diet and lose ten pounds but whether I do or not, Father help me to be like Paul and “learn to be content.” Phil.4:11
“I wonder if that young man noticed me.”	“I am going to serve the Lord with gladness whether that young man ever notices me or not.” (Ps.100:2)
“I cannot go to church because of this scar on my arm. People will notice.”	“I can go to church and I will because the Scripture says to. (Heb. 10:25). I am going because I love the Lord and if I have to feel uncomfortable, I will just have to feel uncomfortable.”
“She was looking at me. She thinks I'm ugly.”	“I have no idea what she is thinking. Only God knows. I am going to give her the benefit of the doubt and I will smile at her and say ‘hello’.” 1Cor.4:5
“My thighs are misshapen.”	“Well these are the thighs that God gave me. They look like my Mother's. Thank You God that no matter what they look like, I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” Ps. 139:14
“I hate what I look like.”	“Lord forgive me for being so self-focused and ungrateful. I am praising You for what I look like.” Ps.150:6
“Why did God grace her with such beauty and made me look like this?”	“Lord I am glad for her that she is so pretty and I am going to tell her so.” 1 Cor. 13:4

“I’m too tall. I hate being tall.”	“Lord thank You for making me tall and giving me life. Help me to focus on showing love to others instead of thinking about myself.” Matt. 22:39
“I can’t stand it when I look in the mirror.”	“Actually the truth is I can. Instead of inspecting all of my flaws, I am going to sing a psalm of praise and thanksgiving to God when I look in the mirror.” Eph. 4:19-20
“I confess that I check my body flaws many times per day. I even have a particular order – my neck, my hips, my thighs, my ankles, etc.”	“Father forgive me for being obsessed with my body. Help me to remember when I am tempted to turn to You in thanksgiving and praise.” Ps.100
“I have tried to lose weight. Everyone says I am too thin, but they are just trying to be nice. I can see what I look like.”	“They may be right, these are what the Bible calls “the wounds of a friend.” Pro.27:6. They are trying to help me. I will thank them, pray and ask God to show me, and go to the doctor and let him evaluate if I am medically too thin.”
“My husband wants to have sex, but I can’t bear to let him see my body.”	“Lord, help me to minister to my husband in this way. Help me to concentrate on pleasing him.” 1 Cor. 7:5
“A friend said I looked pretty at church but I know that’s not what she was really thinking.”	“I was rude and unloving when I did not simply and graciously say, Thank you.” “Only God can know what she was thinking.” 1 Cor. 13:5
“I cannot afford to have plastic surgery but I’m going to anyway and charge it.”	“I am reminded that the ‘wicked borrows and does not repay.’” Ps.37:21 “Forgive me Father for thinking such a thing.” 1John 1:9

VI. Conclusion

We live in a vain, narcissistic society. We are just like the Jewish women in Isaiah's time, the daughters of Zion. We biblical counselors can help them turn from their vanity to setting their mind on the things above. They can learn to be content and be beautiful in God's sight.

“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.” 1 John 2:15-17