

ONLY SKIN DEEP

By James Schultz

Clothed or not, stand in front of a full-length mirror. Stare at yourself. Are you too thin? Too fat? Not tall enough or too tall for comfort? What about your nose, or chin or torso? How does your lower body rate? Do you like what you see? Or are you like millions of Americans — seriously dissatisfied with some body part, maybe even your entire body?

For the past 25 years, Old Dominion professor of psychology Thomas F. Cash has investigated individuals' attitudes toward physical appearance. Within the last decade, Cash's body-image studies have caught the eyes and ears of the national media, leading to interviews in top magazines and newspapers, appearances on television news programs and documentaries, and to work as a consultant for corporations and professional associations. He has written books and articles, led scores of research programs and counseled hundreds.

The reason he has stayed so busy, Cash says, is that most of us living in the developed world have plenty of opportunity to find fault with our bodies. Despite wide variety in body morphology, many women and men feel that they must conform to an unattainable physical ideal. For men this currently translates to a sinewy muscularity and, for women, a slender but bosomy physique.

In 1985, Cash helped organize a national study on body image for *Psychology Today* magazine. More than 30,000 subscribers responded; of those, 2,000 were chosen as a representative sample of age and gender distribution. The results: two of every five women and one in three men were dissatisfied with their overall looks. More recent surveys indicate the situation hasn't improved. Cash says his own studies indicate that discontent with bodily appearance among the American population remains disturbingly high.

"Body dissatisfaction has never been worse," Cash contends. "I see body-image problems that cut across all ages, classes and ethnic groups. Younger European-American females are the most susceptible. It's no accident; they're the ones on the [magazine] covers."



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Don't Look at You That Way

We are all, Cash points out, “embodied.” How our body functions, how it looks, and how others react to our physical appearance determines how we live and work in the world. We have some control over others’ reactions, but ultimately our ease with our physiques depends on our own deeply held beliefs — beliefs that can be altered with work and practice.

“We live in a world that tells us what to think about the body we live in,” Cash says. “I think the goal of human existence is to be happy and productive. If we can’t accept our bodies, that diminishes our happiness and our productivity. It affects the quality of the human experience.”

Pick up a magazine or watch television, Cash says, and it is hard to avoid images of the physical ideal. Even though beautiful models comprise the minutest fraction of humanity, we nonetheless compare ourselves to these rare, supersymmetric few, often internalizing beliefs in our own innate physical inferiority. Cash cites eating disorders as one example of obsession with a model-like thinness that only a few are genetically equipped to indefinitely maintain without undue effort or lasting physical harm.

Nor are the relentless body-image media messages lost on potential employers. In several carefully controlled studies, researchers have found that attractive, taller people are hired more quickly, tend to succeed faster and eventually make more money than equally talented but shorter, plainer colleagues.

“There are folks out there who say we need to change society — the cosmetics, weight-loss and fashion industries, as well as the media messages. I really wish we had a different society, but we don’t,” Cash says. “I’ve spent my professional time trying to empower people not to be victims. If we stop paying attention to the messages, the messages start dwindling. We stop buying into them. And they don’t work anymore.”

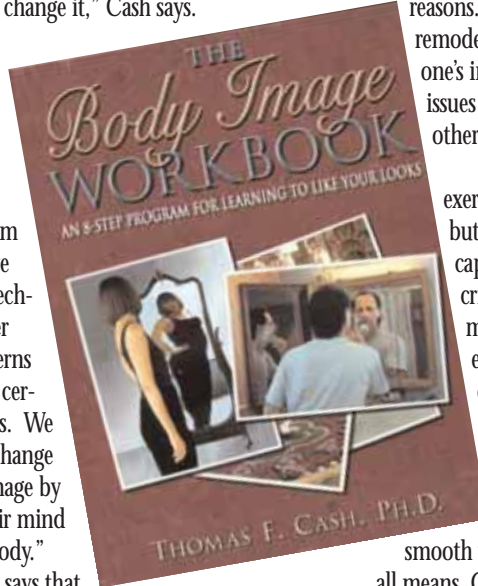
In an effort to help people address negative physical preoccupations, Cash has written “The Body Image Workbook: An 8-Step Program for Learning to Like Your Looks.” The book, published in 1997 by New Harbinger Publications, is based on earlier therapeutic models derived from clinical trials involving hundreds

of students at Old Dominion over the last 12 years. Indeed, the workbook has become part of Cash’s current research to evaluate the success of “self-administered” body-image modification.

“If you can become aware of a problem then you can change it,” Cash says.

“We educate people, give them a system and a framework. And then we can teach them specific, active therapeutic techniques to alter thought patterns that produce certain behaviors. We help people change their body image by changing their mind about their body.”

Cash says that, based on earlier studies, more than half of the workbook’s users should become “functionally recovered.” This doesn’t mean that respondents’ physical self-criticism will cease, only that it will become far less intense. He believes people can learn to view their appearance in a more positive manner. “You don’t accept everything,” Cash explains, “but you change enough to accept most things about your body.”



Do The Right Thing

There is no question, Cash points out, that health and appearance are often linked. Obesity is a national concern. The population as a whole is heavier; physical inactivity and a diet rich in saturated fat have led to the ballooning of average weight within the past quarter century. Age is also involved; as the 75-million-plus baby-boom generation has gotten older, for example, it inevitably has gotten fatter. With obesity come predispositions to such maladies as high

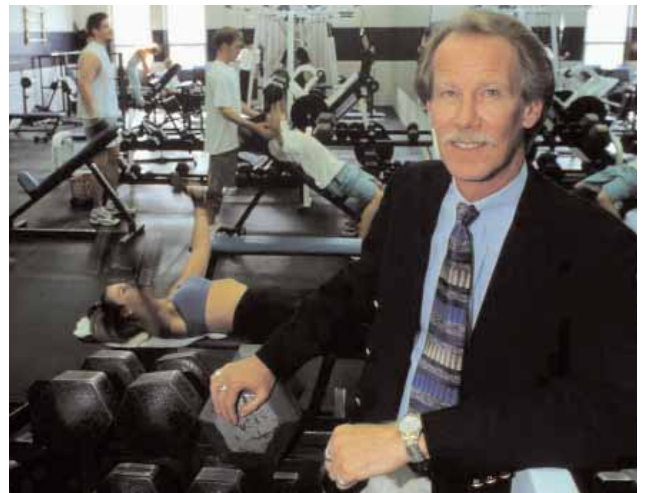
blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

Despite obesity’s risks, Cash believes that any physical countermeasures, including weight reduction and a dedicated exercise program, should be undertaken only for the right reasons. Before opting for extensive “exterior remodeling,” Cash urges concentration on one’s interior life: the vexing emotional issues that persist no matter the intensity of other efforts.

“The most effective exercise is exercise not to change what you look like but how your body feels and what it’s capable of,” Cash avers. “That’s the criterion. That way you’ll maintain momentum. The point is to do and to experience. But don’t evaluate your experience with a number on a weight scale.”

We are at a stage in history when humans can replace hair, surgically reshape body contours and smooth wrinkles with lotions and creams. By all means, Cash says, one should avail oneself of such options when necessary. But they are no panacea. Physical change alone is no guarantee of genuine psychological change — or of a productive, enriching life.

“Be good consumers,” he advises. “Here are all the options; take one and move on. Don’t rub something on your head or take a pill so you’ll have dating, mating and job opportunities. Don’t spend the best years of your life worrying about your appearance.”



Thomas F. Cash is a professor of psychology at Old Dominion.