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Ageing, anxiety, and appearance: Exploring the body image of women in midlife

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Abstract

The majority of body image research has focussed primarily on young adult women, a group within which appearance dissatisfaction has been repeatedly reported. These appearance worries have been found to adversely predict psychological and physical health outcomes, including unhealthy weight control behaviours, low levels of exercise, substance misuse and depression (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006). Recently however, greater attention has been given to women in midlife: commonly defined as the period between 35 and 55 years of age (Hockey & James, 2003). Similarly, appearance concerns have been identified amongst many women in midlife and older adulthood (Pruis & Janowsky, 2010; Tiggemann, 2004). Studies have found both that women aged 54 reported more dissatisfaction with their bodies compared with retrospective reports of their 20s, 30s, and 40s (McLaren & Kuh, 2004) and that levels of body dissatisfaction were similar in a middle-aged group (50-65 years) and group of women of 66 years and older (Lewis & Cachelin, 2001).

This article reviews research exploring the body image of women in midlife, a group who have been previously overlooked within this research area.

Key search terms: women midlife, body image, aging, interventions

What are the appearance concerns and their impact amongst women in midlife?

Concerns regarding weight and shape are repeatedly reported by women in midlife and late adulthood (Gravener et al., 2008). In fact, the majority of a sample of women aged above 50 years felt their weight or body shape played a key role in their self-perception, with half of the women checking their body shape or size on a daily basis and weighing themselves regularly (Gagne et al., 2012). The women also reported feeling less satisfied with several aspects of their appearance compared with when they were younger, including stomach (83.9%), shape (73.8%), skin (70.1%), weight (71.1%), arms (65.8%), face (54.1%), thighs (57.4%), and overall appearance (66.4%).

Appearance dissatisfaction has been associated with dieting in middle aged women (Allaz, et al., 1998). Nearly three quarters of a sample of women over the age of 50 were trying to lose weight and reported using the following extreme behaviours in the previous 5 years: diet pills, excessive exercise, diuretics, laxatives, and vomiting (Gagne et al., 2012). Indeed, research indicates that body dissatisfaction experienced by women in midlife has also been associated with disordered eating (McLean et al., 2010). Nearly a third of a sample comprised of 500 middle-aged women felt dissatisfied with their eating patterns, whilst more than 10% of the women supported the use of restricted eating to control their weight (Marcus et al., 2007). In fact, increasing numbers of women are being clinically diagnosed with eating disorders in midlife, suggesting that disordered eating is on the rise in this population (Cumella & Kally, 2008).

What factors contribute to the development of appearance concerns amongst women in midlife?

Appearance dissatisfaction amongst middle-aged women has been associated with a fear of aging (Lewis & Cachelin, 2001; Midlarsky & Nitzburg, 2008). Aging anxiety is defined as the “combined concern and anticipation of losses centred around the aging process” (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993), with perceived changes to physical appearance as one of the four major dimensions. Given Western cultural norms that associate women’s aging with a deterioration in physical attractiveness (Saucier, 2004), it is perhaps unsurprising that women in midlife often experience anxiety surrounding loss of attractiveness (Barrett & Robbins, 2008). Indeed, every year widens the discrepancy between a woman’s body and the Western youthful ideal due to the expected age-related changes that take place: the body shape changes, muscle mass decreases, wrinkles develop and the skin loses elasticity, and the hair thins or goes grey (Lewis et al., 2011).

Sociocultural models (e.g. Stice, 1994) emphasise the influential role of family, peers, and the media in the development of appearance concerns. Indeed, these influences have been associated with higher rates of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating amongst middle-aged women (Midlarsky & Nitzburg, 2008). Some of the responsibility for the high levels of body dissatisfaction has been attributed to the media through the mechanism of the transmission of unrealistic norms of female beauty. Exposure to older female celebrities who epitomise unrealistic standards of appearance for their age might provoke aversive psychological consequences for average women in midlife. In fact, the largest consumer group of cosmetic surgery is middle-aged women (40-55 years; American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2009), perhaps unsurprising given the growing “anti-aging” cosmetic industry (Huang & Miller, 2007). Indeed, body dissatisfaction, appearance investment, aging anxiety and media exposure have been shown to predict attitudes towards cosmetic surgery among middle-aged women (Slevec & Tiggemann, 2010).

Nonetheless, along with these anticipated changes to appearance, several biological pressures throughout the female life cycle such as pregnancy and menopause might also threaten body image (Janelli, 1993). The limited research in this area is however confusing. During pregnancy, women tend to put on weight and to experience changes in their shape, skin and hair. Whilst women generally tend to be more positive and accepting towards their body changes during pregnancy (Clark & Ogden, 1999), body image tends to worsen following birth, with women tending to feel most dissatisfied with their waist, hips, muscle tone and general weight (Jenkin & Tiggemann, 1997). During menopause, there tends to be a redistribution of weight around the waist, hips, and upper back, whilst body shape becomes rounder. These age-related physical changes may intensify body dissatisfaction, and indeed post-menopausal women have reported less positive attitudes towards their appearance than pre-menopausal women (McCabe, 2001). Furthermore, one study found reports of higher levels of dietary inhibition and restraint among post-menopausal women compared with pre-menopausal women (Copeland et al., 2006).

How can the body image of women in midlife be improved?

The process of cognitive reappraisal, in this case changing expectations and accepting age-related changes to physical appearance, has been associated with better body image and fewer eating concerns amongst women in midlife (McLean et al., 2010; Webster & Tiggemann, 2003). Women might engage in this cognitive reappraisal due to placing less importance on appearance. Both of these cognitive processes have been discussed as being conceptually similar (Tiggemann, 2004). In

fact Webster and Tiggemann (2003) found that self-perceptions relating to physical appearance were less important to the self-concepts of older women and that they engaged more actively in greater cognitive reappraisal of their bodies compared with younger women. Both the decrease in importance of physical appearance and engaging in cognitive reappraisal may serve as protective factors against body dissatisfaction and have implications for body image interventions (McLean et al., 2010).

Indeed, researchers have been developing psychosocial interventions which target body dissatisfaction in middle-aged women by focusing on the re-appraisal of age-related appearance changes, and early findings support the efficacy of these interventions in improving body image and eating concerns (McLean et al., 2011). A greater focus on identifying other risk and protective factors for the development of body dissatisfaction amongst women in midlife, will inform the development of interventions which target these influences.

Key Points

- Appearance concerns are more prevalent amongst women in midlife than originally thought.
- Body image dissatisfaction has been associated with disordered eating and the use of extreme weight control behaviours.
- Aging anxiety and sociocultural influences have been argued to contribute towards body dissatisfaction amongst women in midlife.
- Engaging in cognitive reappraisal with the intention of placing less importance on appearance and accepting age-related appearance changes, has been shown to protect against appearance dissatisfaction.

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