

Cosmetic Surgery Should You Do It?

Cosmetic surgery, once reserved only for the wealthy, has become more affordable and available, making it accessible to nearly everyone with a credit card or some extra cash. According to statistics released by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, nearly 6.9 million cosmetic surgical and non-surgical procedures were performed in the United States in 2002. Nearly 70 percent of cosmetic surgery patients have household incomes of \$50,000 a year or less. With shows like "Extreme Makeovers" exposing the masses to the myriad possibilities these procedures can create, plastic surgery is now out of the closet. It has become so commonplace that even celebrities, often shy about details of their personal lives, have become increasingly open about their own surgeries.

On a positive note, the increased popularity and reduced stigma of plastic surgery has made it possible for many people to change features that have always bothered them or caused them emotional pain. It has allowed those with good self-esteem to alter or enhance a body part so that it can be more consistent with their overall self-concept. On the flip side, however, the increasingly blasé attitude of the media about these surgeries has minimized the significance of the risks, recovery time, cost, and emotional impact. In addition, the increasing popularity and the high price tag of some surgeries means doctors without the necessary additional training for these delicate procedures will choose to dabble in this surgical minefield.

Not Just a Cry for Silicone... A Cry for Help

I am in favor of plastic surgery. I have given many referrals to plastic surgeons and have even undergone a procedure myself. Since I work with my clients from the inside

out, I always examine their psychological and unconscious motivations for seeking this type of treatment before giving my support (or a referral). I have found it is invaluable to help my clients' outlook and self-awareness before going into surgery so they do not go into the operating room with unrealistic emotional or physical expectations.

I have found that certain pathologies can indicate poor cosmetic surgery candidates. One type is patients who have active eating disorders. These candidates have body dissatisfaction which comes from deeper psychological issues which need to be resolved on the therapy couch, not the operating table. These "perfectionist" types are not satisfied by surgery because they are truly not satisfied with themselves. Another type is patients with body dysmorphic disorder, a preoccupation with an imagined defect in appearance that causes the person to obsess about it and to believe that everyone else does as well. People

with this disorder check themselves in the mirror repeatedly, grooming themselves excessively, pick at their skin, diet and workout excessively and constantly compare themselves to others. Because these people have such a skewed image of themselves, they are unable to judge the results of surgery accurately and often request multiple surgeries. A third type are those who actively struggle with depression or anxiety. These people need to work through these issues prior to surgery.

While surgery can be a bit of a mood elevator for those who suffer from depression or anxiety, it can trigger a depressive episode or anxiety attack. Not surprisingly, as many as 55% of cosmetic

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surgery patients who do not suffer from depression or anxiety experience some post-operative anxiety or depression. In addition, those who are psychotic, delusional, paranoid, or have severe personality disorders should not be considered candidates under any circumstance.

Ideal surgery candidates are internally motivated and have realistic expectations of the outcome of their specific surgery. Those driven to have surgery because someone else wants them to or in the hopes of saving a failing relationship have a greater risk of post-operative psychological complications.

How To Prepare

Once you have made the determination that you are interested in surgery, it is important to prepare. Do your research by gathering as much information as you can about the surgery you are considering. What are the risks? How common is follow up surgery with this procedure? For example, a rhinoplasty (nose job) requires a follow-up procedure 5-20% of the time to get the desired results. Find out how painful the procedure is. Most women who have had surgery report breast implants tend to be fairly painful while breast reduction is not. Speak to people who have had the procedure you are considering and find out what their experience was like. Was the recovery time what they expected? Was it more or less painful? How soon were they able to go back to work or start exercising?

Finding the right surgeon is one of the most important steps. Ask doctors you respect as well as friends who are savvy about plastic surgery who they recommend for the specific procedure you are contemplating. When you meet with the surgeon, find out about his qualifications and experience. Ask to see photographs of results from previous surgeries.

I recommend bringing someone with you during your

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consultation. In the excitement and anxiety of your first consultation you may not remember exactly what you were told. Even when warned that they will be asked to recall information, patients generally only recall up to 35% of information given.

Before my own breast reduction surgery I was terrified of "going under." I had seen an Oprah show many years ago that showed some worst-case scenarios and I was very anxious. Two things I did helped me get past my fears: I saw a hypnotherapist who made a tape for me that I played every night before I went to sleep; and I spoke to my surgeon about my surgery fears. The tape helped me relax and unconsciously seemed to help reduce (though not eliminate) my fears. The surgeon patiently discussed

my fears and had me speak with the anesthesiologist who explained to me what had happened with the Oprah guests and why it was unlikely to happen to me.

It is crucial that you are able to candidly discuss your concerns with your doctor. If you find that you are not comfortable talking to him about your fears, you probably have not chosen the right doctor. If you are truly committed to doing this and feel that you are ready, the right doctor is out there. Keep looking.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. She has been on 48 Hours, NBC News, The Other Half, Married By America and many more. Reach her through her website at www.DoctorJenn.com.