

Excessive concern over appearance can harm health

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By Megan Rauscher

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - A psychologist at the University of Buffalo, New York has found that some people become anxious and expect that they will be rejected by others based on their physical appearance.

Being highly sensitive to appearance-based rejection can have serious negative effects on a one's mental and physical health, Dr. Lora Park, who directs the Self and Motivation Research Laboratory at the university, told Reuters Health.

Her research also shows that positive, self-affirming thoughts and close ties with others can buffer people from the harmful effects of appearance-based rejection fear.

Park developed the appearance-based rejection sensitivity (ARS) scale that measures the extent to which people anxiously expect to be rejected by others based on their looks.

She tested the scale on 242 college students, and found that people with high ARS scores were likely to base their self-worth on their outward appearance and to rate themselves as physically unattractive. They also were likely to have low self-esteem, high levels of neuroticism, insecure attachment styles and unhealthy eating habits.

"Both men and women who reported being sensitive to appearance-based rejection were preoccupied with their body and weight in unhealthy ways," Park said in a UB-issued statement. "They avoided eating when hungry, exercised compulsively, and engaged in bingeing and purging."

"What I found fascinating," Park told Reuters Health, "was that even after controlling for low self-esteem, neuroticism, insecure attachment styles -- things that have been shown in past research to predict [eating disorders](#) -- high appearance concerns still had this unique predictive power."

In a follow-up study, Park found that, for people with high ARS scores, merely thinking about what they disliked about their appearance made them feel [depressed](#).

"Simply having people list what they didn't like about their appearance, whether it was their weight, their height, having acne or some other facial or body feature, was sufficient for people high in appearance-based rejection sensitivity to feel lonely, rejected, unwanted and isolated," Park said.

In contrast, people with low ARS scores were not negatively affected when asked to think about negative aspects of their appearance.

Results of a third study suggest that there are ways to mitigate the effects of being anxious about rejection based on physical appearance. When Park had subjects with high ARS scores think about and focus on their strengths or existing close relationships, they felt better about themselves.

"A reminder of one's strengths or close relationships was enough to reduce the damaging effects of thinking about negative aspects of one's appearance," Park said. This finding emphasizes "the power of positive thoughts about your self and also the importance of having social support and close relationships."

Park's research is scheduled for publication in an upcoming issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

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