Physical appearance and spousal relationships

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Physical appearance is one of the most important attributes that a person has to charm a partner and start up a romantic relationship. It is even a significant criterion for evaluating a potential partner in both sexes, although more highly valued by men (Braun & Bryan, 2006; McNulty, Neff, & Karney, 2008; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005). In today’s social context, weight concerns have become virtually the norm, with the promotion of health and thinness limiting the diversity of body shapes that are perceived as acceptable. Over the past 40 years, women have become increasingly dissatisfied with their physical appearance (Abell & Richards, 1996; Parks & Read, 1997; Swami et al., 2010), a phenomenon that is now observed in men as well (Hoyt & Kogan, 2001).

How widespread is body dissatisfaction?

| 62% of women in Quebec think they should be thinner or lose weight |
| 34% of men in Quebec think they should be thinner or lose weight |
| 50% of healthy-weight women and 22% of underweight women want to lose weight |
| 20% of young men 15 to 24 years old want to gain weight (muscle mass) |

(Ipsos Reid, 2008; Ledoux & Rivard, 2000)

In both men and women, concerns over body image are associated with physical and psychological problems such as less frequent healthy behaviours (e.g., less physical activity), low self-esteem, feelings of shame and guilt, greater risk of depression, and the adoption of dysfunctional eating behaviours (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Johnson & Wardle, 2005; Provencher et al. 2007). Thus, individuals who are dissatisfied with their bodies seem less inclined to act in positive ways generally and to take appropriate care of their bodies and health, which can also have significant consequences on their interpersonal relationships, particularly by interfering with their ability to develop satisfactory intimate relationships (Bohn et al., 2008; Tantleff-Dunn & Gokee, 2002).

Body dissatisfaction and conjugal life
As regards romantic relationships, empirical evidence shows that the more individuals are dissatisfied with their bodies, the more

Keywords: physical appearance, couple, romantic relationship, spousal relationship, sexuality

Research has shown that concerns over body image are associated with a variety of physical and psychological problems. In this paper, the authors examine the links that can exist between those concerns in men and women and the quality of conjugal life. Clinical recommendations for couple’s therapy are also provided.
they are at risk of being dissatisfied in their spousal relationship and vice versa (Friedman, Dixon, Brownell, Whisman, & Wilfley, 1999; Hoyt & Kogan, 2001; Weller & Dziegielewski, 2004). Body dissatisfaction is associated with greater relational anxiety, greater fear of intimacy in spousal relationships and a more preoccupied attachment style in both sexes (Cash, Thériault, & Annis, 2004). Women who are dissatisfied with their physical appearance, because they feel less attractive, would also seem to adopt fewer emotionally risky behaviours, such as self-disclosure, which may result in establishing less intimate and less satisfying relationships (Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). From that perspective, sexuality seems to be particularly impacted in persons who are dissatisfied with their bodies because it implies considerable self-disclosure both physically and emotionally (Cash, Maikkula, & Yamamiya, 2004; Meltzer & McNulty, 2010; Murray et al., 2006). For example, a study has shown that body dissatisfaction in women would account for 15% to 20% of sexual dissatisfaction (Pujols et al., 2010).

This study highlights the importance of two concrete mechanisms that link body dissatisfaction and spousal dynamics. First, in women, the more they are dissatisfied with their appearance, the more they report intrusive thoughts about their appearance and performance during sexual relations, which would result in them enjoying their sex life less fully and experiencing less satisfaction in their spousal relationship. In addition, the results highlight links between body dissatisfaction, sexual and conjugal assertiveness in women, and their partner’s sexual and relationship satisfaction. Thus, women who are less assertive of their sexual needs say they are less satisfied sexually and conjugally, just like their partners. Sexual assertiveness in women therefore seems to be a particularly important variable in the relationship dynamic, because it links body, sexual and relationship dissatisfaction in women, but also because it is directly linked to their partner’s sexual and relationship satisfaction.

**A study of intra- and inter-partner links between body dissatisfaction and spousal issues**

Based on data from our study of 103 couples, body dissatisfaction would appear to lead to relationship dissatisfaction via the sexual sphere, particularly through problems of sexual assertiveness and the presence of cognitive distractions (Gagnon-Girouard, Turcotte, Paré-Cardinal, Lévesque, St-Pierre-Tanguay, & Bégin, 2012).

**IN WOMEN**

The link between body, sexual and relationship dissatisfaction in women is significant, regardless of the women’s actual weight.

In women, what their spouses think of their appearance is not a significant determinant of their own sexual and relationship satisfaction.

**IN MEN**

The link between body dissatisfaction, sexuality and relationship satisfaction is associated with actual weight in men.

Men are more sensitive to their spouse’s body dissatisfaction and what they believe she thinks of their bodies than to their own body image.

The spouses of women who are dissatisfied with their appearance report a less satisfying sex and conjugal life than other spouses.
These results clearly show that how women perceive their bodies, regardless of their actual body weight, is closely connected to the relationship dynamic, particularly via its association with the spouse’s level of relationship satisfaction. More specifically, sexual assertiveness and cognitive distractions may be concrete therapeutic targets that could be worked on to reverse the devastating effect of body dissatisfaction on the most intimate aspects of the spousal relationship.

### Avenues for clinical intervention

**Do not assume that a woman who is not overweight is not concerned by her appearance.**

Consider women’s concerns about their appearance and the potential impact on intimacy and sexuality within the couple.

**Investigate men’s perception about what they believe their spouse thinks of their bodies.**

Consider sexual assertiveness strategies and intrusive thoughts about appearance and performance as treatment targets in couples for whom these problems adversely affect the relationship dynamic.

### REFERENCES


