What the mirror doesn’t tell you

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The amazing work and wonder within you

“I HATE MY BODY.”

“I’m such a fat, worthless cow.” “Where did all these gray hairs and wrinkles come from?” “I have total thunder thighs.” “How could anyone find me attractive when I look like this?” “My body is such a burden.”

If you’re like 97% of the American population, you’ve probably had thoughts like these at some point. According to a survey by Glamour magazine 30 years ago and updated in 2014, 54% of women are unhappy with their body and 80% claim the mirror makes them feel bad about themselves. Unhappiness about body image has been reported in girls as young as age 6. Even men admit to body-image angst; from 1997 to 2001, the number of men who had cosmetic surgery increased 256%. Clearly, we need to evaluate the messages the mirror is telling us. (See Campaigning for real beauty.)

Mirror, mirror, on the wall

Although many of us rely on the messages in the mirror as the absolute truth, we need to be aware of the inherent distortions it may hold. Ever since 8,000 B.C., when the mirror made its first appearance, people have been evaluating their personal worth based on their physical appearance. Two opposite attitudes exist: Some people are fixated by their own faces, as shown by an obsession with “selfies.” Others declare their body hatred throughout the day.

We have a love-hate relationship with the mirror—but the mirror may not always tell the truth. People with anorexia nervosa see a distorted view in the mirror; some view themselves as fat even though they’re scarily thin. The mere act of focusing on something, such as a nose or a mole, may make it look larger in the mirror. Even your mood may affect the way you see yourself. When you’re tired, angry, or anxious, the mirror may reflect your emotions more than your true physical image.

What the mirror tells you

Relying on the mirror to tell you “who is the fairest of them all” may not give you the honest truth. But despite potentially negative messages people get from the mirror, it can provide helpful information. It can tell you a lot about the outside and the inside of your body. Although we focus on our exterior image, the mirror offers clues to the internal health of your body.

Using your critical thinking assessment skills, take an objective look at your skin and hair. The skin, the body’s largest organ, can provide feedback on your sleep (or lack thereof) and nutrition. Without adequate vitamin intake or sun, your skin may look

Campaigning for real beauty

In 2004, Dove® commissioned a global study, called The Real Truth about Beauty, to further global understanding of women, beauty, and well-being—and the relationships among them. The study found only 2% of women would describe themselves as beautiful.

Subsequently, Dove launched its Campaign for Real Beauty, which triggered a global discussion about the need to define beauty more broadly. It uses various vehicles, including media messages, partnerships, and training with the Girl Scouts of America and Boys and Girls Clubs, to promote awareness and education for women and girls of all ages. Its video “Evolution” (youtube.com/watch?v=iYhCn0jf46U) shows how professional makeup artists, photo enhancement, and computer manipulation can make an average-looking woman look beautiful.
pale and flaccid; without adequate essential fatty acids, it may be dull or dry. Stress, overwork, and lack of purpose in your life may reflect in the eyes that stare back at you. Your hair texture and natural color also can hint at the state of your nutrition, exercise, and rest.

What the mirror doesn’t tell you

The mirror doesn’t tell you about the amazing functions of your body systems, or that you and your body are the most brilliant creations in the universe. As Shakespeare’s Hamlet exclaimed, “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable!”

Your endocrine system, for instance, is an amazing creation of numerous autonomic functions working through a negative feedback loop of chemicals to regulate many systems. It also balances your energy levels through the thyroid gland. And when is the last time you thanked your adrenal glands for helping regulate your blood pressure via cortisol and aldosterone?

Thanks to auto-regulation, your body can keep its temperature within the same general range even when the environment around it changes constantly. Breathing is controlled by tissues in your carotid arteries that track carbon dioxide (CO₂) concentration and send messages to the brain’s respiratory center. Your body breathes faster or slower to eliminate CO₂ as needed, all without your conscious awareness.

Your pancreas produces both insulin and glucagon, which naturally oppose each other but work in harmony to balance blood glucose levels. These levels affect the function of all three trillion cells in your body. Your glucose level rises in the morning to awaken you and give your cells energy to start the day automatically. Somatostatin regulates the endocrine system, balancing insulin and glucagon to work in complete balance without your attention.

The mirror doesn’t tell you how well your liver detoxifies drugs and chemicals and maintains your blood glucose level when you’re asleep. Nor does it reveal that your immune system constantly monitors and patrols your blood for foreign pathogens, which it then kills through a complex chemical cascade. Does it tell you that your spleen has been working hard to store white blood cells and recycle red blood cells?

What the mirror doesn’t tell you about your magnificent self is far more interesting and exciting than the cellulite you may glimpse in your reflection. It doesn’t let on that your body has innate abilities, such as auto-regulation, self-defense, and self-healing. Even the guy who cut you off on the freeway yesterday has an amazing physical orchestra playing within

Learning to love your reflection

Here are some ways to change what you see in the mirror.

- When looking in the mirror, focus on what you love.
- Stop comparing yourself to the celebrities you see in fake airbrushed photos.
- Look past your face and hair so you can pick up on health cues.
- Honor your body by giving it some TLC.
- Take time to care for your body.
- Be grateful for your body systems that are working well.
- Pay compliments to your internal organs.
- Focus on your energy level, not your weight.
him. (See *Amazing body facts the mirror doesn’t tell you.*)

**The nursing reflection**

Ironically, some nurses who care for sick patients and help promote health and healing are unhealthy themselves. Research shows that occupational stress, poor coping behaviors, and lack of support cause anxiety and depression in nurses. The longitudinal Nurses Health Study, which began in 1988, examines relationships among hormone replacement therapy, diet, exercise, and other lifestyle practices and chronic illnesses. It found female nurses' health was no better than that of the general populace. Ideally, nurses' health should mirror their knowledge about the human body, health, and illness. Unfortunately, knowledge alone doesn’t create vibrant health. We should sing along with the Disney character Mulan, who asks, “When will my reflection show who I truly am?”

As nurses, we can do better to reflect the true inner beauty of our bodies—and project that beauty in our lifestyles. Balancing the mirror’s messages is the key. What the mirror *doesn’t* tell you can inspire you to honor or your body. What it *does* tell you can motivate you to care for yourself so you can better model healthy behaviors for patients.

**Fixing the mirror’s reflection**

In our society of quick fixes and limited warranties, it’s easy—and often necessary—to replace just about everything. We can replace most material objects when they’re worn out. The only thing that can’t be replaced is the human body. We can misuse and abuse it, or treat it with loving care. (See *Learning to love your reflection.*

Despite the wondrous advances of medical science (and plastic surgery), your body is still your very essence. Although it comes with a lifetime warranty, its quality isn’t guaranteed; that’s up to you.

**So what does your mirror say to you? And will you listen?**

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**Succession-planning leadership program**

To identify high-potential candidates for leadership roles, organizations can develop a succession-planning leadership program for nurses who meet minimum requirements. Applicants would be evaluated to determine if they meet set criteria. For example, all nurses with bachelor's degrees in nursing who are eligible for leadership positions would apply to a 6- or 12-month program designed to assess and improve their leadership behaviors and management skills. Criteria might include tenure, formal education, current and past leadership roles, and personal career vision. This program would allow nurses to design a personal development plan based on their needs, while offering structured leadership content through monthly workshops supported by experiential learning activities.

To promote personal and professional development, nurses in the leadership program should be mentored and coached. Those who successfully complete the program would enter a pool of individuals prepared to assume leadership roles as they become available.

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**Selected references**

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