The issues related to aging are becoming more evident in Western culture as the baby boomers reach middle age and beyond. According to Armbrust (2001), “by 2014, for the first time in the world, there will be more older people than younger” (p. 4). Although both genders experience the effects of aging and there are an increasing number of men with body dissatisfaction (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000), the standards of our culture seem to create more problems for women as they move through their middle and later years. The emphasis on youth and beauty is overwhelmingly apparent in advertising, television, movies, and print media. Women are constantly bombarded with visual images of young women and ads promising youthful looks forever. This immersion in a culture in which youth is worshipped can cause serious problems for women as they age, ranging from low self-esteem to depression and anxiety. Women seem to be more vulnerable than men to the pressure from society to conform to its expectations and, as a result, face more questions about self-worth as they enter the middle years of their lives. The purpose of this article is to explore (a) ageism as it relates to men and women; (b) the double standard of body image in our culture; (c) the role played by the media in setting standards for beauty; (d) the impact that the emphasis on physical appearance has on aging women, especially in terms of self-concept; and (e) the implications of these issues for counseling.

AGEISM AS IT RELATES TO MEN AND WOMEN

Ageism was coined in 1969 by Robert Butler, the first director of the National Institute of Aging, and he defined it as discrimination against people because they are old. Today, the term is more broadly defined as “any prejudice or discrimination against or in favor of an age group” (Palmore, as cited in Robinson, 1994, “What is ‘Ageism’” section, ¶ 1). According to Woolf (1998), some of the contributing factors to ageism are fear of death, emphasis on the youth culture in American society, and emphasis on productivity in American culture. Ageism seems to be much more prevalent in “Westernized” cultures (Pocuca, 2002), and although ageism affects both genders, women tend to be more negatively influenced by the prejudice against older adults than are men. According to Sontag (1979), “society is much more permissive about aging in men, as it is more tolerant of sexual infidelities of husbands” (¶ 5). Also, most positive traits associated with masculinity actually increase with age (e.g., competence, autonomy, self-control, and power), whereas feminine characteristics such as sweetness, passivity, noncompetitiveness, and gentleness usually remain stable as women age. Because women’s wisdom is considered to be “age-old, intuitive knowledge about the emotions” (Sontag, 1979, ¶ 5), aging adds nothing to “feminine” knowledge. Men, on the other hand, valued for their rational, intellectual minds, actually benefit from aging because experience tends to increase this type of knowledge. Also, because the business of men in our culture is about being and doing, rather than appearing, the standards for appearance weigh less heavily on men than on women (Sontag, 1979). Women are set up to fail in a system that defines success for men in terms of productivity and accomplishment and designates beauty and sexiness as the measure of success for women. Women cannot maintain their youthful looks as they age—despite creams, cosmetics, and surgeries—and thus they often feel pressured to defend themselves against aging at all costs.

UNATTAINABLE BEAUTY

Currently, the ideal female body, exemplified by models, actresses, and Miss America contestants, represents the thinnest 5% of women (Wolszon, 1998). Thus, 95% of women do not measure up to the standards of physical attractiveness they see on a daily basis. According to Kilbourne (as cited in Wolszon, 1998), “survey data indicate that three fourths of normal-weight women in the United States feel fat, more than half of adult women are on a diet, and one

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study showed that nearly 80% of fourth grade girls are watching their weight” (p. 542). The concern over physical appearance has led some social critics to observe “that women act as if they believe the shape of their lives depends on the shape of their bodies” (Seid, as cited in Wolszon, 1998, p. 542). This concern increases with age, as women realize that they are being betrayed by their bodies in a culture dedicated to youth (Mackin, 1995).

Whereas signs of aging in men make them look “distinguished,” these same signs (wrinkles, graying hair, weathered skin) are interpreted as negative characteristics for women (Grogan, 1999). In a survey of persons 55 years and older, men were defined as “older” between the ages of 60 and 64 years versus 55 and 59 years for women (Sherman, 1997). Women are expected to maintain thin bodies, unwrinkled and unblemished faces, and all other physical traits associated with youth, perhaps because “most women’s bodies are inherently more childlike than men’s—smaller, smoother, weaker” (Freedman, 1986, p. 193). This disparity between the standards of physical attractiveness for men and women as they age is discussed by Sontag (as cited in Freedman, 1986) in the following passage:

Only one standard of female beauty is sanctioned: the girl. The great advantage men have is that our culture allows two standards of male beauty: the boy and the man. . . . Men are able to accept themselves under another standard of good looks—heavier, rougher, more thickly built. A man does not grieve when he loses the smooth, unlined hairless skin of a boy . . . while the passage from girlhood to early womanhood is experienced by many women as their downfall—for women are trained to want to continue looking like girls forever. (pp. 199–200)

According to Elissa Melamed (Freedman, 1986), appearance anxiety has its origins in early childhood, when girls are taught to value their physical appearance over all else. This anxiety escalates in puberty and reaches a new high at middle age, when cosmetics, creams, and hair dye can no longer cover the fact that the body is changing as it ages. The issue for most women then becomes learning to view themselves as acceptable even when they no longer fit the ideal of beauty of society in the United States. It is at this point that the myth of eternal youth must be examined.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA

A new term was coined at the conference, “VintAge 2001: Positive Solutions to an Age-Old Problem,” which was held in Manhattan in October 2001. The term silver ceiling was used to refer to the new ceiling affecting older persons in the entertainment business (Tolkoff, 2001). This term is especially relevant to women, particularly those who seek employment as actresses. Male actors are employed to play “love interest” roles well into their 60s; examples include Paul Newman, Robert Redford, Jack Nicholson, and Sean Connery (Grogan, 1999). These actors are often paired with much younger women, as exemplified by Jack Nicholson, 61, and Helen Hunt, 35, in As Good As It Gets; Michael Douglas, nearly 60, with Gwyneth Paltrow, young enough to be his daughter, in A Perfect Murder; and Harrison Ford, in his 50s, with Anne Heche, in her late 20s, in Six Days, Seven Nights. Older women are seen infrequently in films, usually portraying asexual, unattractive characters (Grogan, 1999).

The media in our culture reflect images of thinness and link this image to other symbols of prestige, happiness, love, and success for women. Because these images are repeatedly viewed over a lifetime (between 400 and 600 ads per day; Dittrich, 2002b), the standard becomes internalized and leads many women to feel fulfilled and satisfied only when they are working toward or succeeding at the achievement of that standard. This exploitation by the media is also aimed at women’s fears of real and imaginary wrinkles, which is connected to fear of age discrimination, being passed over in the workplace, and rejection or abandonment by romantic partners or mates (Pearlman, 1993).

A recent example of the unwritten standards of the media for women regarding physical appearance is the treatment of Katherine Harris, Florida’s Secretary of State. Harris first appeared in the national media during the certification of then Governor George Bush as the next president of the United States. “The Boston Globe said maybe she was planning to unwind at a drag bar, because of all her makeup, and the Boston Herald called her a painted lady” (Rivers, 2000, ¶ 4). The Washington Post reported that she “applied her makeup with a trowel” (Rivers, 2000, ¶ 4), and the texture of her skin was comparable to a plastered wall (Rivers, 2000). Seldom, if ever, are men’s physical traits even mentioned in media reports of their activities. Rather, the focus is on their ideas or philosophy and even their sexual exploits, but rarely on their weight or dyed or “comb over” hair.

The media feed the culture a steady diet of youth and sex, as is strikingly apparent in television, where in 2001 “only 24% of all women’s roles on prime time television went to women over 40” (Boyd & Rand, 2002, ¶ 2). In a survey taken of the top 10 American movies during a 1-week period in 2001, when characters over the age of 40 appeared, 16 were male and only 3 were female. Only 2 of these films had women over 40 while 9 had men over 40 (Huffman-Parent, 2001).

This underrepresentation of older women affects not only the actresses searching for employment, but also the number of role models available for younger women. If the majority of actresses they see in the media are young, this youthful image becomes the ideal for which they strive. As a result, young women will begin the battle against the aging process early and will continually support the companies advertising the cosmetics, creams, and surgeries available to keep them young. This becomes an increasingly frustrating struggle as the body ages and women begin to experience less and less satisfaction with themselves, because they fail to meet the standard of beauty as defined by our culture (Huffman-Parent, 2001). This perceived failure of women to achieve an unattainable standard raises many problematic issues for older women, especially in the area of self-esteem.
WOMEN AND SELF-CONCEPT

Research shows that women begin their concern with body image early in life (Grogan, 1999). According to Rutgers University psychologist Jeannette Haviland, being attractive is ranked at the top of the average female’s concerns from the age of 10 on (Pogrebin, 1996). With weight as the second most important concern of aging women (following memory loss; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, as cited in Clarke, 2001), the impact of body image invariably plays an important role in the increase or decline of an aging woman’s self-concept. The relevance of this issue depends on how much a woman has based her identity on physical/sexual attractiveness. If a woman has been strongly influenced by the media and the views of Western culture in general, her feelings about herself will reflect her disappointment with the physical appearance of her body. Even women who have not been overly concerned with body image in their younger years will report an astonishment at their aging bodies (Pearlman, 1993). Although a person might feel the same on the inside, the outer shell has changed, and identity confusion results. A feeling of losing control of their bodies is also reported by many women, particularly those in the midst of a midlife crisis (Mackin, 1995). This loss of control, along with the accumulation of failed expectations and feelings of being overwhelmed at home and at work, contributes to the tendency to describe this developmental stage as a crisis. Also, women have noted that when they are no longer viewed as young and desirable (ageism), they begin to struggle to regain a sense of self, one that is not dependent on the views of others (Pearlman, 1993). This struggle can lead to anxiety and depression if the woman is not able to discover her own inherent value, beyond her physical body.

It is difficult for women to realize that they are aging and can thus no longer fit the feminine stereotype in our culture—young and beautiful. A solution to this, as suggested by Niemelä and Lento (1993), is for women to start exploring their feelings and fulfilling their true needs. If women can create for themselves a sense of inner beauty, they will gradually require less and less approval from a society obsessed with youthful outer beauty.

UNATTAINABLE BEAUTY

The impact of ageism on women should be explored and issues that could be affected by this cultural bias should be discussed. Many older women will exhibit signs of depression or anxiety, which could be a direct result of discrimination because of their age and gender. Also, aging as a continuing process may affect women powerfully, because of the pressures from society to stay young and vibrant. They must continually “work on themselves” to be seen as valuable members of a society devoted to productivity, beauty, and youth.

Assertiveness training has been suggested as a valuable component of a treatment plan for women who have the illusion that their worth is decreasing with age (McBride, 1990). Because our culture often regards assertiveness in women as a negative trait, it is important to explore society’s perception of assertive women and help the client understand possible ramifications from any change in behavior. A combination of assertiveness training and cognitive restructuring would be most effective in helping a woman to develop a resistance to external influences that influence her perception of herself as a valued member of society.

The use of metaphor is also a valuable tool to help women create a more positive attitude toward aging. For example, Clark and Schwiebert (2001) proposed the use of Penelope’s loom (a Greek myth) as a metaphor for women’s development during midlife. The loom helps the client see that each life is unique, with myriad threads coming together to form a life tapestry. These threads may include issues related to empty nest, menopause, vocational and educational goals, intimate relationships, and multiple roles and expectations. Also, the counselor can help the client unravel and reweave her tapestry in midlife, focusing on her experiences of the world from her perspective as a woman. This technique is especially valuable for counselors dealing with women whose life experiences are either difficult to understand using the traditional theories or are outside the personal experiences of the counselor. The benefit of metaphor is illustrated by an old proverb (Chien, as cited in Clark & Schwiebert, 2001): “give people a fact . . . and you enlighten their minds; tell them a story and you touch their souls” (p. 164). As counselors, one of our priorities should be to use every opportunity to help clients connect with their souls.

IMPlications for counseling aging women

Ageism and Women

The impact of ageism on women should be explored and issues that could be affected by this cultural bias should be discussed. Many older women will exhibit signs of depression or anxiety, which could be a direct result of discrimination because of their age and gender. Also, aging as a continuing process may affect women powerfully, because of the pressures from society to stay young and vibrant. They must continually “work on themselves” to be seen as valuable members of a society devoted to productivity, beauty, and youth.
In one survey, women reported feeling more embarrassed about their age than by their masturbation practices or same-gender sexual encounters (Kinsey, as cited in Dittrich, 2002a). Much of this shame comes from the standards that women have unconsciously accepted throughout their lives, especially from the 40 to 50 million ads they will have seen by the time they are 60 years old (Dittrich, 2002b). Investigating the possible internalization of the cultural standards can also be an important part of a woman’s understanding of the role society has played in the formation of her belief system. Women can be encouraged to view the media and its emphasis on youth and beauty with a more critical eye and to view the marketing schemes emphasizing eternal youth as Madison Avenue hype and nothing more. Discussing this issue with other women might help decrease feelings of individual victimization by society and allow women to begin to understand their role in controlling culture’s influence. As women develop a deeper sense of self through self-exploration, they will be less affected by the media’s portrayal of aging and more confident in their own intrinsic value. Opportunities also exist for women to take an active position against an ageist, sexist media, which might prevent them from feeling like helpless victims.

Feminist therapy could also be beneficial in helping women to deal with the influence of the media because it encourages the expression of anger toward injustices and teaches assertiveness. Examining the role of power is an important aspect of the feminist approach to solving problems (Herb, 2000), and the media in our culture certainly hold tremendous power over most of the population, especially the female portion. As women learn to realize the impact that the media have had on their self-concept, they may be better able to view the media more critically. This would allow them to prevent further internalization of the images that surround them in U.S. society and begin to see more clearly the truth about their intrinsic value as human beings.

**Self-Concept**

Counselors need to develop an awareness of the interaction of individual, biological, and sociocultural influences on women in midlife (Lippert, 1997) and to examine their own myths and beliefs about women at this stage of life. Attention should be given to resolving developmental conflicts among this population, especially as they relate to the mixed messages women receive from society (Lippert, 1997). One technique cited in the literature is *construction of meaning*. This meaning-making process involves several strategies, including consideration of any broader psychological issues, analysis of the nature of events in the lives of these women and their meaning, empowerment through support, affirmation of commitments, and self-exploration (Cook, as cited in Lippert, 1997). The use of this process could help women begin to feel better about the choices they have made throughout their lives and to accept the roles that they have to fill in their middle years. Acceptance can lead to more positive feelings about self and to a high level of satisfaction with one’s life circumstances.

Another technique that may help women become more conscious of dissatisfaction with their self-concept is *values clarification*. This process can help women realize that incongruence of values with behavior and circumstances can cause conflicting emotions about their ideas of who they really are. According to Howell (2001), when women’s values were congruent with their behaviors and circumstances,
they reported feeling happy, satisfied, and comfortable, whereas incongruence in these areas resulted in feelings of guilt, sadness, anger, anxiety, fear, and loneliness. The positive aspect of the negative feelings is that this is often the impetus for a woman to begin the process of assessing changes in her environment. Because intense emotions are often a predictable and natural component of this developmental stage and can sometimes help clients discover the areas of discontent in their lives, practitioners may want “to weigh the benefits of emotion-reducing exercises or medications against the therapeutic value of discomfort. Rather than treat emotional distress as something to reduce, the counselor and client might use it as an indicator of potential areas for values congruence work” (Howell, 2001, p. 64).

Women can be guided to begin to think of midlife as a time for reevaluation, not crisis. They should be encouraged to become more realistic and to reappraise their goals and their ability to meet them (Mackin, 1995). The issue of self-esteem should be addressed in women of all ages, but especially women who are middle-aged and older. These women are dealing with multiple changes and need direction in determining their evolving roles in the various areas of their lives. Many women believe they have previously defined their identities in terms of their relationship roles—mother, partner, daughter (McQuaide, 1998). They may feel an urgency to separate the true self from the false self, a process that may result in insecurity and anxiety about their place in society. By discussing this journey toward self-awareness, women may be less tempted to settle for another false self and will feel supported and understood as they struggle to achieve individuality. They can also begin to feel valuable as human beings and realize that neither age, nor beauty, nor productivity is the sole determining factor of their worth. If self-respect is encouraged in women, many problematic issues of aging can be avoided. By supporting a woman as she moves through the normal transitions of life, the counselor can assist her in developing internalized values that will support her through the aging process.

**CONCLUSION**

The issues confronting aging women are influenced by many factors, most of which are societal. The implication seems to be that because women are held to higher standards of physical attractiveness throughout their lives, they are more negatively affected by ageism and the aging process. This affects many aspects of women’s lives, including their self-concept and general mental health. Because the culture in the United States perpetuates the belief that youth and beauty are necessary for acceptance, most women continuously struggle with the issue of body image. They need to find ways to combat the feelings of oppression and self-criticism so they can function as valuable and contributing members of our society. To assist women in this process, counselors can focus on two major goals: (a) supporting clients who work to refute negative cultural stereotypes and (b) inviting and promoting the active participation of the client in her own personal growth and development” (Degges-White, 2001, p. 10).

The process of becoming more autonomous will be difficult for women unless they are able “to accept the variations in bodies of women of different ages as acceptable and beautiful rather than trying to conform to the unrealistic ideals promoted by advertisers and the fashion and diet industries” (Wolf, as cited in Grogan, 1999, p. 190). As counselors, our job is to facilitate this process and, by doing so, help women learn to value themselves for their inner selves, rather than for their outer shells.

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