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Changing Body Standards Are Rewiring The Black Girl Brain

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Maintaining body image confidence as a Black woman who's berated with images of surgical enhancements, injections, and risky weight loss goals is becoming more difficult by the second.

This pressure overwhelmed me two years ago, when I relocated from a close-knit Ohio town to Los Angeles, where navigating the Hollywood shuffle *literally* feels like survival of the fittest. I had to shed the comfortability of being barefaced, spending hours on makeup before attending soirées almost weekly just to feel acceptable among women with obvious Botox, fillers, eyelifts, and other modifications that are way out of my budget as a freelance writer. Body-wise, my tall and slim physique is accepted among the party crowds I'm in, but I've maintained it by drastically changing my health routine.

When most are asleep at 5 a.m. during the workweek, I'm powering through at the gym, energizing myself off nothing but a cold brew and a prayer to burn my lower belly pudge that's grown harder to get rid of. And when that's over, I overthink the day's meals by incessantly factoring in the calories I plan to eat. Striving for body perfection among inescapable social media trends like #SkinnyTok and the BBL aesthetic has become an unattainable goal, and I'm not the only Black woman who feels its weight.

While most studies show that Black women have low body dissatisfaction, body image discussions are often racialized, not exhibiting the caveats of our self-perception when inundated with Eurocentric beauty standards. While curvaceous figures are largely idealized among Black women, simultaneously, thinness has ruled for generations. Cosmetic surgery boomed in the era of the

‘Instagram face’ and has created an uncanny valley mania—even when social media users can’t afford to go to the surgeon’s office, an augmented reality filter is just one swipe away. There’s heavy influence in looking the part, and Black women are victims of psychological harm when our anatomies are maligned, and fluctuating ideal physical types can render us body dysmorphic.

The push towards perfection has an even greater hold on Black teen girls as body augmentation continues its rise. Although surgery was not as marketable to female teens as it is today when I was in high school, being slim prevailed, and as a heftier young woman—my highest weight as a teenager being 200 pounds—having a complicated self-image caused me to briefly develop bulimia. The compulsion lasted for at least a quarter of my sophomore year when I frequently forced myself to purge after highly processed meals, but stopped after fears of teeth rotting and whispers between classmates about my clothing appearing baggier. Today, I discourage eating disorders but can’t help but feel self-conscious when socializing with svelte influencers and media personalities—it exacerbates fears of returning to my teenage self.

Amid body dysmorphic lifestyles making Black women overexert themselves in the gym and sacrificing their appetites, beauty trends are now turning women towards the operation table. Board-certified plastic and reconstructive surgeon and immediate past president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, [Dr. Steven Williams](#), notes that there can be empowerment in the decision to undergo surgery, while mentioning that there’s an inordinate amount of pressure on young Black women.

“There’s an overall and an overwhelming pressure, asymmetrically, on women to constantly be young and beautiful, and it was there long before the internet,” Dr. Williams tells AFROPUNK. “I think the internet, especially in teenage girls, has an incredibly negative effect in terms of trying to find perfection, impossible standards of beauty, the standard of beauty that may not align with what you really want—a desire to fit in. But I think that increasingly in modern days, there’s a little bit less of that. I think especially in my African-American patients, they do have their own voice and they are saying, ‘I know that this is a trend, but this is what I’m interested in.’”

And on social media, Black women take the dollface and vixen-shaped references they see, like JT, SZA and *Love Island* alum, and put them on their moodboards to determine whether they want to look similar.

“I think that people are influenced by the things they see around them. That’s just the way of the world,” admits Dr. Williams. “And so, I think when BBLs are really popular, people do look at themselves. They say, ‘Well, maybe, how would I look with that?’ People have the opportunity to kind of visualize themselves in that scenario once they’re made aware of those types of procedures, but I think that overall people are finding a stronger voice and being able to really say, ‘This is what I want for me.’”

Although a proponent for Black women to choose what their bodies need best, body image and movement coach and physical therapist Dr. Lisa Folden implores us to look into how we’re navigating mainstream beauty standards and within the Black community.

“With Black women, the struggle is complex because we live in a world where the standard of beauty is always Eurocentric, no matter what,” says Dr. Folden. “Even as trends come and go, the poster child for beauty is never a Black woman. Maybe ambiguous looking, but it’s never a Black woman.”

She continues, “It’s almost like Black women are pushed to this even more narrow standard of beauty than the average woman or a white woman, simply because we have these prerequisites set upon us from the larger society and then our community.”

Mainly serving full-figured female clients Dr. Folden assists them in constructive activities that promote health instead of toxic diet culture that targets women in large bodies. And on social media, the evidence of body shaming is rampant, with studies showing that Black women have lower physical activity levels than white women. But when diet and fitness content creators humiliate us for rarely going to the gym by mocking our hair, eating habits and unfamiliarity with workout machines, we’re intimidated to engage.

“I get very upset when I see men who are fitness trainers and they’re making jokes and making light of women’s bodies and women’s struggles and saying things like, ‘Hey, if you want to be a snack, you got to stop eating snacks,’” Dr. Folden shares. “It’s spewing ignorance, it’s spewing misinformation. Those are the ones that really upset me because it’s encouraging shame.”

“We are taught to shame, feel shame from the way our bodies look and as a result do something to take away from our joy, like stop eating, or beat ourselves up in the gym and do things that don’t align with self-love and self-care and self-compassion,” she adds.

While respecting her clients’ body autonomy, in practice, Dr. Folden invites them to affirm younger versions of themselves and even look at their nude bodies in full-length mirrors as first steps to body acceptance. Body positivity isn’t achievable for all, but as body standards relentlessly shift, our self-love should be constant.

“You don’t have to look in the mirror and love every part of your body. Nobody ever does every single day,” says Dr. Folden. “But you can be nicer to it because it is the vessel that’s carrying you through this experience on Earth.”

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