

FANTASY

Sensible eating advice from body-image campaigners and eating disorder organisations is being diluted by a daily diet of stick-thin celebrities served up in the media. **Sarah Lang** reports.

THEY'RE EVERYWHERE, those unreal images of sultry, beautiful actresses, models and celebs, their immaculately made-up faces and bodies retouched to daunting perfection. The photographer's soft-focus lens, the image handler's Photoshopping and airbrushing skills, are their best friends.

Left staring forlornly at the smooth, cellulite-free skin, perfect thighs and upper arms, plump lips and flat stomachs are mere mortal females who, when glancing in a mirror at home, cannot help but compare the reality of wobbly bits and crow's feet.

And then there's the self-criticism of photos. In past years, the worst prints were torn up, discreetly dropped in the bin, the negatives lost. Now they simply get deleted from the digital before they're a few seconds old.

Wellington masters student Sylvia Nevin, 28, says she first looks for two things in photos: "Do I look fat, and do I look cross-eyed," while Felicity Frost, a 22-year-old hotel sales agent from Wanganui, says flaws are the only thing she sees in photos: "Nose is big, face is round..."

Two other women spoken to for this story say they have rehearsed flattering facial poses and angles, and avoid below-the-belt shots.

With the flawless images from magazines, TV and movies flashing constantly in the female psyche, a good hard look in a full-length mirror can seem like torture.

A 31-year-old Auckland teacher, who did not want her name used, tries to make the best of her pear shape through a healthy diet, exercise and flattering outfits. "However I have been known to stand in front of a mirror and get quite upset about the way I look. I sometimes feel I have one thing I truly like about myself — my décolletage — but I can easily pick a hole in everything else: ears too big, arms are fat and have small pimples, eyes quite ordinary, masculine features, light moustache, hairy jaw, cleavage small, nails crap, calves Kauri-like, feet hairy etc.

"Once I even got quite worked up about my nose — I'd decided it was too big — which moved a very good friend and flattie to secretly cover my room with a million little feel-good post-its, each one with a different hand-written warm fuzzy: your nose is NOT big, you're gorgeous, you've got a great body, you look great just the way you are."

Suffice to say the teacher doesn't always have the most positive body image. Psychologists define positive body image is a clear, true perception of how we look; negative body image is a distorted perception; body dissatisfaction is the gap between your current and idealised body.

Often a person's body image can be dramatically different from how they actually appear to others — such as the slim-but-not-thin woman who describes her body shape as "cargo-container-like" when she

was interviewed for this story.

While just two of the 17 women spoken to were medically overweight, most considered themselves too fat, and all of them ranged from not thrilled to (more commonly) terrified at the prospect of gaining weight.

Psychotherapist/sociologist Dr Susie Orbach, who is the author of *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, says: "For most people the problem is not their size but the torment of fat weighing on their minds."

And being thin doesn't necessarily vaccinate a person against body-image concerns. Says Wellington architectural designer Alice Harland Andersen, who's slim by anyone's definition: "People used to tell me I was too thin — I never thought I was — no one has lately and I'm paranoid I've put on weight."

The 27-year-old doesn't linger beside the mirror, only stopping for functional tasks like applying makeup or moisturiser.

Meanwhile, petite Auckland architect Christina Schregel — who's suffered body-image and disordered-eating problems since her teens — at 38 still doesn't see herself as thin. "A part of my brain tells me I'm not fat, but often I feel wobbly or chubby. I think it's because it's the whole way of seeing yourself that's wrong."

So what's with our often wildly-distorted body image? For a start, women and girls regard size as a defining element of their identity.

In one international study, almost two thirds of females identified weight as the key factor in how they felt about themselves; more important than family, school, or career.

While this may be hard to believe, body dissatisfaction has become so

common it's now a "normal" part of the female experience. Studies show 80 per cent of New Zealand women are dissatisfied with their bodies.

One study of teenage girls in Christchurch found that not only did seven in 10 want to be a significantly smaller size, most actually perceived themselves to be much bigger than they actually were.

RACHEL LATTIMORE, youth co-ordinator for central-Christchurch-based Eat (Eating Awareness Team), says: "If we're looking for imperfections that's what we'll find. When women look in the mirror they tend to focus on a part of their body."

Instead, she advises, look in the mirror and see a person, not an object that has to be changed.

"Look from head to toe, seeking out the things you like... We weren't designed to be models; we were designed to bear children. No one reminds us of that though."

Instead those touched up media images encourage us to be thin.

WHILE HUMANS haven't always worshipped at the skinny shrine, we now live in a society where the idealisation of thinness has become deeply ingrained. The unattainable standard of model-like size and proportions inevitably leads to body insecurity and dissatisfaction.

Take 29-year-old Auckland lawyer Lee, who didn't want her surname used. Since having children, Lee's become hyper-aware of her "bulging upper belly" and constantly compares her body to "the perfect body" in magazines and on TV.

"I think about all the things that I would like to improve. It

ENVIABLE: Rachel Hunter, above, modelling Lola swimwear and right, looking a lot less glamorous leaving the Lamps Plus store in Beverly Hills.



THIN: Stick-thin celebrities such as Victoria Beckham, right, and Lindsay Lohan make women feel insecure.

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definitely affects my self-esteem.”

The question of whether media coverage of skinny stars and weight loss drives our obsession with thinness — or whether our obsession drives it and its sales — is a chicken-and-egg quandary. But the media is certainly a key barometer of beauty.

A recent study-summarising article in leading journal *Psychology Bulletin* found that exposure to media depicting ultra-thin models and actresses (23 per cent thinner than the average woman) significantly increased women's concerns about their bodies; while the book *Fat is A Feminist Issue* reports that spending three minutes looking at fashion magazines lowers the self-esteem of four in five women.

With the likes of Victoria Beckham, Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, Nicole Kidman and other skinny stars plastered on the covers and pages of the glossies, many women can't help but compare themselves.

Even the new New Zealand women's magazine, *Women's Health*, falls into the trap.

While its current TV ad shows a woman on her way to work being bombarded by messages from “talking magazines” telling her that she's too fat and needs to exercise, the magazine dilutes its we-like-you-the-way-you-are message by its cover lines: “Total Body Tone Up” and “Eat More Weigh Less”.

Then sandwiched in between the stories and gorgeous-women-studded TV shows are the ads for beauty and weight-loss products, usually featuring flawless-looking, thin women.

And which woman, walking into Auckland's Kingsland, could miss a blackboard outside a beauty parlour which reads, “There is no such thing as ugly women, just lazy ones”.

Being told that those gorgeous glossy faces and bodies in fashion mags are whipped into shape by a team of personal diet consultants, trainers, stylists and makeup artists, doesn't seem to help.

Papped images of a scruffy-looking supermodel snapped at the supermarket in trackies and without makeup give limited relief.

Kiwi-born model Rachel Hunter is always getting caught, both in New Zealand and her hometown Los Angeles, in less-than-sexy outfits but it doesn't seem to bother her. Back in New Zealand this month to launch her clothing line at The Warehouse, Hunter joked during a fashion parade that she was wearing the same dress as one of the models but that she wasn't nearly as skinny.

Hunter, who uses size 8-12 girls as

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RACHEL HUNTER

models for her sizes-8-18 Rachel range, says it's unfortunate that women feel intimidated by looking at models, but pleads for them to not take it too personally.

“It's fashion, it's great photography, it's fantasy. I think most of us know that sometimes the camera does lie!”

She's well aware she doesn't escape from critical eyes.

“I'm aware I'm under constant scrutiny about how I look but the two most important things for me are feeling comfortable with who I am and being healthy. There's always parts of your body you prefer less than others but it's important not to get too involved with an image in your mind or a number on a scale.”

Auckland actor Amanda Billing who plays Dr Sarah Potts on *Shortland Street*, says her body image is “80 per cent good” and keeps that percentage up by appreciating her good bits.

“I remind myself about all the wonderful things this body's built for.”

But the 32-year-old hasn't always been on such good terms with her body. While her teen phase of wearing baggy clothes to hide her body is long over, she began feeling self-conscious when, on starting on *Shortland Street* four years ago, people she barely knew told her she looked bigger in real life.

“One guy even called me ‘plump’ to my face. I tried not to let that affect me, but it was hard.”

Billing is increasingly comfortable with her body as she gets older, however she admits that “the self-criticism's still there a little bit, depending on which side of the bed I got out of that day. [But] I keep an eye on obsessive thoughts and try to keep them in perspective.”

Admitting publicly that she sometimes worries about her body, says Billing, “is pretty revealing. I feel a bit afraid of other women's judgment: will they think I'm silly, weak, damaged or just vain?”

“I don't want to be that girl who obsesses about ‘whether my bum looks big in this’.

“But I'm human. If admitting this allows others to do so as well, and helps other women to go easy on themselves then perhaps, little by little, we'll start to become a little more compassionate. And happier in our wonderful skins.”

While woman are usually happy to talk about their body-image issues among friends, there's still a sense of embarrassment in speaking publicly about it.

Trying to put body image in perspective is something beauty-product company Dove has been striving for with its Campaign For Real Beauty advertising campaign.

Sprung from the campaign is the Dove Self-Esteem Fund, which funds school-based education programmes to help girls understand how the “ideal” images of beauty are created.

The fund — which has already reached 2.5 million girls in 17 countries and is on track to reach 5 million by 2010 — was launched in New Zealand in 2004.

It has enabled body-image-promotion and eating-disorder-prevention agency Eden (Eating Difficulties Education Network) to roll out its programme BWISE (Bodyimage Wellbeing In School Education) — which promotes “whole-school” environments that foster body satisfaction — in five Auckland schools so far. Meanwhile, EDEN also trains teachers and others who work with young people to run BodyReal, a workshop on self-esteem, body image and critical media literacy.

EDEN co-ordinator Dr Maree Burns says the “painful” struggle to alter body size and shape seriously compromises people's ability to have full lives.

CAST YOUR VOTE

On Wednesday, during Love Your Body Day, EDEN will ask people to cast their votes for body satisfaction by “signing” their painted handprints on a huge canvas in Auckland's Aotea Square (from noon until 2pm). Love Your Body Day T-Shirts are available from the EDEN website (www.eden.org.nz) until the end of December.



EARTHY: Amanda Billing is 80 per cent comfortable with her body.

DOUG SHERRING



SNAPPER MEDIA