

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO

Beauty Sick



How the Cultural Obsession
with Appearance Hurts
Girls and Women

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About the Book

Combining scientific study with voices of real women, *Beauty Sick* reveals the shocking consequences of our culture's obsession with girls' appearance on their emotional and physical health as well as on their wallets and ambitions. Dr. Renee Engeln argues that for women to truly be able to fulfill their potential, they must work to break free from this toxic beauty culture. *Beauty Sick* provides theory and practical, workable solutions to help women fight back against beauty sickness, leaving them more able to embrace their whole selves and turn their energies toward changing their world.

About the Author

Dr. Renee Engeln is an award-winning professor at Northwestern University, where she teaches about psychopathology, the psychology of women and gender, social psychology, and the psychology of human beauty. In addition to publishing numerous empirical journal articles and presenting at academic conferences on body image, fat talk, and the objectification of women, she gives talks on these topics to groups around the country.

Discussion Questions

PART I: THIS IS BEAUTY SICKNESS

CHAPTER 1: WILL I BE PRETTY?

- What does the term *beauty sick* mean?
- According to Engeln, what causes beauty sickness?
- In the opening of the chapter, on page 3, we learn just how early girls begin thinking about their ideal body in the facts about five-year-old girls. Describe your reaction to these statistics.
- What do you find compelling about the stories of Leigh and Artemis?

CHAPTER 2: JUST LIKE A WOMAN

- What is normative discontent? In what ways is normative discontent harmful to women?
- How do the words we use to describe the physical appearance of women and men shed light on the origins of beauty sickness?
- In what ways can beauty offer a type of power over others? Is this type of power worth pursuing? Why or why not?
- In this chapter we learn about Gabrielle, whose mother and father have differing opinions on the importance of beauty. What kinds of conflicts does this create for Gabrielle? In the end, which parent do you feel most shaped Gabrielle's current beliefs about beauty?

CHAPTER 3: I, OBJECT

- Coined by Laura Mulvey, what is "to-be-looked-at-ness"? How do women experience it? In what ways is it related to beauty sickness?
- How does the objectification of women lead to women "performing" aspects of their gender?
- What kinds of experiences do Sofia and Erin have with street harassment? Do these experiences seem representative?

- On page 57, Erin talks about the “constant scrutiny” women face when they leave their houses. She outlines four potential ways to deal with it. Do you agree with her? Would you add any to her list?
- On pages 58-59, Erin tells the story of her hair and how her experience of street harassment changed dramatically. Are you surprised by Erin’s story? What other behaviors, beyond shaving off one’s hair, might alter the experience of street harassment so dramatically?

PART II: THIS IS WHAT BEAUTY SICKNESS DOES TO WOMEN

CHAPTER 4: YOUR MIND ON YOUR BODY AND YOUR BODY ON YOUR MIND

- What is body surveillance? How does it manifest in women’s lives?
- In Rebecca’s story recapping a conversation with her mother, Rebecca says, “You’re forty when you felt unhappy with your body for the first time? You made it that long?” (77) Would your reaction have been similar?
- What are the ways in which body surveillance contributes to loss of cognitive resources?
- What is interoceptive awareness? How does body surveillance affect interoceptive awareness?

CHAPTER 5: IT’S A SHAME

- In what ways does a culture focused on appearance increase shame? What are the psychological and health-related consequences of shame?
- M.K. blames her parents’ attitudes and behaviors for her experience of beauty sickness. Do you agree with her assessment? What other factors might have influenced M.K.?
- In what ways did M.K.’s experiences of beauty sickness shape her life outcomes?

CHAPTER 6: YOUR MONEY AND YOUR TIME

- What are the different ways in which beauty culture costs women time and money?
- How realistic is it for women to opt-out of certain beauty regimes and rituals? Is there also shame attached to this opting-out?
- What are the ways in which the United States perpetuates and exports beauty sickness to other cultures?

PART III: THIS IS HOW THE MEDIA FEEDS BEAUTY SICKNESS

CHAPTER 7: MALIGNANT MAINSTREAM MEDIA

- What are the three serious problems with media images of women that Engeln identifies? Why are they problematic?
- On page 153-154, we hear Sasha’s story, where she equates “normal” beauty with “white.” How did she come to equate “normal” with “white”? What effects did that have on her perceptions both of herself and also of beauty in general?
- In what specific ways does media imagery encourage us to see women as “things instead of people.”

CHAPTER 8: (ANTI) SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE OBSESSIONS

- How does social media increase beauty sickness?
- Social media is, as Engeln notes, a way of advertising and a form of brand-building. In what way does this type of online content contribute to the cyclical nature of beauty sickness?
- On page 174, Maria uses the term “paparazzi” to describe what it was like going out when she was in college, concerned about how many photos would be taken at parties she attended. Is “paparazzi” a useful term to describe the effect of the prevalence and impact of social media at college social events?

PART IV: THE WAYS WE'RE FIGHTING BEAUTY SICKNESS AREN'T WORKING

CHAPTER 9: MEDIA LITERACY IS NOT ENOUGH

- What are some ways in which media literacy can be used to help counter beauty sickness?
- Engeln believes feminism doesn't cure beauty sickness. Do you agree with her? How can feminism better help combat beauty sickness?

CHAPTER 10: THE PROBLEM WITH 'REAL BEAUTY'

- On pages 222-224, Engeln describes the Dove Approach. What is it? Why is it significant?
- How was Beth's change, from talking about how her body looks to what it can do, revolutionary for her?
- Given the evidence throughout the book so far about how much women are consumed with beauty culture, do you think it's realistic to expect women to talk or think about beauty less?

CHAPTER 11: TURNING DOWN THE VOLUME

- Given the prevalence of messages encouraging beauty obsession, what are some meaningful ways to alter our environment so that we hear fewer of those messages?
- Explain how Stice employed cognitive dissonance to help women feel better about their bodies? How is this approach relevant to beauty sickness?
- How has evolution shaped how we think about physical attractiveness?

CHAPTER 12: STOP THE BODY TALK

- What are the different types of negative body talk that Engeln's lab encountered after their first study?
- How does negative body talk relate to the wider culture as a whole?
- What is the difference between a descriptive norm and an injunctive norm? How do they relate to negative body talk?
- In this chapter, we learn that negative body talk isn't solely relegated to “fat talk” through Nique's story. How is Nique's story different from most body image stories we hear?

CHAPTER 13: FUNCTION OVER FORM

- Why does Engeln advocate for a shift in focus from thinking and talking about a body's form to concentrating on its function? In what ways does that redefine the idea of beautiful bodies?
- How does beauty sickness encourage women to lose a sense of their bodies as a "physical resource" (293)? Why is this shift so harmful?
- How does contemporary gym and exercise culture contribute to beauty sickness?

CHAPTER 14: LEARNING TO LOVE YOUR BODY AND TEACHING OTHERS TO DO THE SAME

- What is a functional body orientation? Why is it significant?
- How do mothers shape how their daughters view and think about their bodies?
- What is body appreciation? How is it useful in combating beauty sickness?
- How can self-compassion be used to counter beauty sickness?

CHAPTER 15: TURNING AWAY FROM THE MIRROR TO FACE THE WORLD

- In what ways is Melanie, the instructor in one of Colleen's fitness classes, such an influence?
- On page 354, Engeln tells us the two questions she typically asks when she speaks to groups of female students. Why are these questions significant? How do they work to subvert beauty sickness?
- On pages 358-359, Engeln talks about expanding the Bechdel Test. How does she propose to expand it? What would this type of expansion do for how we talk about beauty sickness?

Writing Prompts

- In what ways does objectification and the male gaze contribute to beauty sickness? How do some of the women Engeln interviews experience beauty sickness as a result of objectification? How do women sometimes play a role in making other women beauty sick?
- How can mainstream and social media improve representations of women? What can consumers and users do to hold media accountable in terms of how it represents women?
- What do you think a campaign for real beauty would look like? What kinds of narratives would be in such a campaign? What images? What would a successful campaign's overall message to women be?
- In what ways could scholarly and mainstream feminism work together to help solve the problem of beauty sickness?

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