Hair I Am (Not)

Our hair is intricately entwined with our sense of self.

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For many black women, hair is often more than a personal accessory. It can be a powerful yardstick others use to measure who you are inside.

“I think for African-American women in particular you have to realize hair texture and skin color are huge factors that are intimately tied to how we see ourselves in the world, how other people perceive us and how that connects with self-esteem and the value we place on ourselves,” says Nicole Coleman, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Houston.

In American society, black women and girls are constantly confronted with the reigning standard of beauty—long, straight hair, fair skin and a Barbie doll–shaped body. The visual onslaught permeates our pop culture as reflected in music videos, television and magazines. But even so, this isn’t where we begin to build our self-esteem based on the kind of hair that we have. That outlook begins with messages we get from the women in our lives during childhood. “The messages [our caretakers] give us about our hair are both explicit and implicit,” Coleman suggests. “It’s delivered to us with looks we get or questions such as, ‘So when are you going to get your hair done?’ or ‘Are you going to wear your hair like that?!’ These kinds of questions certainly confirm black women’s sense of how negatively their hair is perceived, which is then translated into how they [begin to] feel about themselves.”

When black women feel they can’t measure up to the ideals of beautiful hair—as defined by both their caretakers and society—it can become a real mental challenge. This mind-set can even lead women to go to harmful extremes to achieve society’s desired look, Coleman says, sharing a story about a woman she met. The woman relaxed the edges of her hair every day so that it could be as straight as possible. The result? She suffered baldness from chemical relaxer overuse.

Although this anecdote illustrates the physical damage that can occur when African-American women obsess about their hair, unseen emotional scars may take a heavier toll on black women’s self-esteem. “[It] certainly breeds insecurity and can contribute to anxiety,” Coleman continues. “Being preoccupied with your hair and how people see it can really become an obsession, and that can create stress and affect your overall life satisfaction.”

Unfortunately, the damage has been done. Many black women do base their self-esteem and self-

image on what people think of their hair or appearance. Although this powerful connection can't be changed overnight, steps can be taken to break the cycle.

Look at yourself in the mirror each day and gaze within, Coleman suggests. "I think if women can focus more on who they are on the inside rather than how others see them, then they will be happier overall."

For women who are struggling with self-esteem or self-worth for any reason, mental health services can help. Individual counseling or group counseling is a great place to start. Coleman suggests in particular that women try group counseling with other black women because it connects them with women they can relate to on many levels. The experience keeps women from feeling isolated, and it offers them peer support in a group setting.

But the real self-esteem work needs to begin during childhood—between parents and little girls. "Regularly sit down and have an age-appropriate dialogue with your children and tell them that everybody is different, and that black women's hair texture is one of the aspects of how God made us different," Coleman suggests. "Really bring it down to a human level and let them know that their differences don't detract from their value and worth."

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