

—Women and Compulsive Overeating— *Transforming Unhealthy Reflections*

By Trina Swerdlow, BFA, CCHT

When you look in the mirror are you pleased with what you see? Your response may depend on how much or how little clothing you are wearing. Being a Certified Clinical Hypnotherapist offering tools for stress management and weight loss for the last three and a half years, I've been given many opportunities to hear how people *really* feel about their bodies. It's interesting that overweight men who come to see me may not be happy about their extra pounds, but they don't usually admit to the self-loathing that I hear from women.

And frankly, is it any wonder that women are self-conscious about their bodies and striving for perfection in our culture? Unfortunately, we can stand in a grocery store checkout line and see numerous "scandal-sheet" publications zeroing in on famous women's weight gains and extreme weight losses. I've been appalled numerous times by seeing close-ups of celebrities' cellulite photographed while they were out at a beach. I feel bad not only for the celebrities being targeted and the privacy being invaded, but also for the message these photos are giving *the kids* in the grocery store checkout line. And we wonder why eating disorders are rampant in America?

When I was first deciding how I wanted to assist people in losing excess weight, I realized that if clients were to get a full transformation, from the inside out, then offering tools to increase self-esteem was essential. In addition to working with clients individually, I wanted to offer tools that clients could use on their own. So, I began designing a Weight Loss CD Toolkit. I included exercises that focused on transforming unhealthy cravings into healthy habits, increasing exercise and willpower, and a track about how to stop emotional eating.

Many of my clients use the Weight Loss CD Toolkit on their own each day, and then come into my Danville office once a week for one-to-one support. When I work with weight-loss clients in my private practice, these are two areas that we often explore. I ask...

1. Do you have limiting *core beliefs* about yourself?
2. How were you perceived or *mirrored* in your family of origin?

A core belief is a positive or negative perception you have about yourself. For example, a positive core belief would be that you feel competent. A negative core belief would be that you feel incompetent.

We all have various core beliefs about ourselves. Some of us feel lovable and unfortunately, some of us feel unlovable. These perceptions either add to our self-esteem, creating a strong foundation for our sense of self, or if weighted in negativity, can make us feel like "imposters." If we're in an imposter mode we may be moving through life hoping no one will find out—that we're *really* incapable, unattractive, or whatever else we negatively believe about ourselves.

When we've not addressed or healed our negative core beliefs, they can result in a weak or shaky feeling in our foundations that can lead to low self-esteem. And, even though in reality we may be extremely capable, having a negative core belief about ourselves can sometimes lead us to sabotage realities that don't support these negative perceptions. So where do perceptions like these come from? One important source is our family of origin. In families, we see reflections in each other's eyes. These reflections act as mirrors.

Family perceptions, roles, and mirroring are illustrated beautifully in the 1996 romantic comedy: *The Mirror Has Two Faces*. In this film, Barbra Streisand plays Rose, a highly intelligent Columbia professor. Rose is a middle-aged woman who lives with her self-absorbed mother, Hannah (played exquisitely by Lauren Bacall). Hannah is a perfectionist who believes external beauty is all that really matters in life. Rebellious against her mother's superficial values, Rose pursues a rewarding career that develops her mind: she becomes an excellent teacher. However, even though she has a successful career, Rose has an image of herself as being unattractive and consequently indulges in compulsive overeating. She keeps a large stash of fattening junk food in a drawer in her bedroom and "grazes" whenever she's alone in her room.

This film serves as an excellent example of how we may be "mirrored" in our families. Throughout her life, when Rose looks into Hannah's eyes, she sees a reflection of her mother's belief that she/Rose is unattractive. Thus, a core belief about her self is born. Rose's sibling, Claire (played by Mimi Rogers), internalizes their mother's empty philosophy and relies on her "Hollywood beauty" and charm to get her through life.

At one point in the film, Claire shares a poignant moment with Rose about how she relentlessly compares herself to other women—and admits to having the constant feeling of wanting to be the most beautiful woman in any room she enters. She sadly talks about how the years go by, "...until one day you walk into a room and you're the last woman any man notices."

What I love about this movie is its invitation to peer below various characters' protective masks, and more important, to see how Rose unravels her stunted and distorted outer self-image. Rose's painful personal growth begins after she marries, moves in with, and is then rejected by her husband (played by Jeff Bridges) in the bedroom. (I don't have enough space to go into this part of the movie plot, so you might want to rent it if you're intrigued). As a result of the rejection from the man she loves, Rose is devastated. Feeling undesirable, she disgustedly covers her own reflection in the mirror.

That night, humiliated, she "goes home to mother." This is when Rose and Hannah begin to talk...and I mean *really talk*. Rose asks her mother if she thought she/Rose was pretty as a baby. Rose shares her pain that she never would have thought she wasn't pretty if it hadn't been for her mother's response to her. As a young girl, Rose was told by Hannah to push her nose up with her index finger—to shorten it. In tears, Rose asks her mother what it felt like to look in the mirror and see her beautiful reflection. Ignoring her daughter's angst, she replies that it felt *wonderful*.

The next morning when she gets up, Rose finds a tired-looking Hannah sitting at the kitchen table. Her mother, surprisingly, has not slept all night after her conversation with Rose. Hannah courageously admits to Rose that she never loved another person—*not even her husband*. She also owns that she was jealous of how much her husband, Rose's father, loved Rose. Her brittle façade continues to crack as she tells Rose that she never meant to hurt her.

Then, Hannah shows Rose a childhood photo of a darling little girl. Rose takes the snapshot from her mother's hand and comments that her sister Claire was such a beautiful child. Hannah corrects her and tells her that the photo is of *her*, Rose, at two years old. Rose's eyes become filled with tears as she experiences her own beauty for the first time—*inside and out*. The negative core beliefs and distortions in the mirror are finally cracking wide open for Rose.

This scene particularly touches me because of the family healing that is taking place, as well as Rose's personal breakthrough. It's also a beautiful example of the "inner child" healing work that I sometimes do with clients. When Rose's rebellious "inner teenager" is ready to grow up, she can then begin to truly *mother herself*, and her precious inner child.

After Rose has this profound breakthrough with her biological mother, she begins to take better care of herself. She starts exercising, watching her calories (bye-bye chocolate Sno Ball snacks), and gets a new hairdo. Rose's excess pounds are released and replaced by a toned body and a positive, empowered sense of self. Can you see how Rose's limiting core beliefs began with the seeds of her mother's mirroring? Then, it becomes apparent that Rose continued to water these negative reflections until they became part of her own reality and eventually her core beliefs.

This wounding unfortunately doesn't happen only in movies—it happens in *real life* too. You don't know how many clients I've worked with who have talked about their petite sister as "the pretty one," or their older brother as "the athletic one," or another sibling as "the artist of the family." How sad that many family systems only allow *one cookie cutter portion* of traits or talents per child. This type of compartmentalizing encourages putting each child in a designated box. In order to fit into a rigid family system, children often conform by disowning their own unique form of beauty, athletic ability, or creativity—unless one of these is their "designated role."

In closing, I often suggest to my clients that they look at themselves in a mirror and ask if any *unloving* reflections from their pasts are holding them back from compassionate self-care and love—*today*. If so, I encourage them to think about the importance of transforming unhealthy reflections in the "Mind's Mirror" so that their wholeness/holiness can shine forth...*brilliantly unencumbered*.

This article is by Danville certified clinical hypnoterapist, and artist, Trina Swerdlow, BFA, CCHT and the author of *Stress Reduction Journal* and *Weight Loss: Powerful and Easy-to-Use Tools for Releasing Excess Weight*. These products are available from: <http://www.womenshealthcenterstore.com> You can reach her at info@TrinaSwerdlow.com or call (925) 285-5759 www.TrinaSwerdlow.com

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