

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL...

Is what you see really there at all?

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Staff Writers

With summer quickly approaching, many are scrambling to get their bodies up to par in time for swimsuit season. The sun is high in the sky and the weather is perfect for a swim, but the water from the pool reflects the insecurities of someone with poor body image perceptions.

"A lot of people are feeling more pressure to get into shape since summer's coming and clothes are getting more revealing," senior Lauren Engelhardt said.

Body image has become an obsession for both genders. Today, more and more people are feeling the pressure to be thin and beautiful.

"Society today gives the impression that football and that whole testosterone image is what makes a guy, and that girls have to be super skinny," sophomore Yale Cho said.

The desire to fit into society's mold of perfection drives some to unhealthy options as they try to achieve the "perfect body image."

Feminine Physique

Flipping through magazines like *Vogue* and *Cosmo*, teenage girls are flooded with images of stick-skinny models with perfect teeth and straight-off-the-beach tans. According to sophomore Abbie Molnar, these magazines convey unrealistic perceptions of what a body is supposed to look like.

"The media distorts our perception on beauty. It tells us that skinny is what's normal," Molnar said.

Even from childhood, people are conditioned to believe that external characteristics lead to happiness.

"You never see fat people as the main characters in the Disney movies we watch as little kids. It's always the thin, pretty ones," senior Faith Chang said.

These stereotypes follow Americans through the course of their lives. In entertainment, people are bombarded with images of skinny and beautiful models, actresses and music artists. Many teens look to these celebrities as their role models and often feel the need to duplicate this image.

"Hollywood favors people that have unrealistic bodies, and girls will try to become like their idols," sophomore Jennifer Chiang said.

The Ugly Side of Beauty

The goals to imitate the appearances of Hollywood stars are sometimes taken to extremes, leading to eating disorders. Some celebrities resort to unhealthy options to maintain their thin physiques.

Many girls come to believe these extreme tactics are acceptable and strive to imitate their favorite stars.

"The media uses wrong images for girls that pressure them to change and

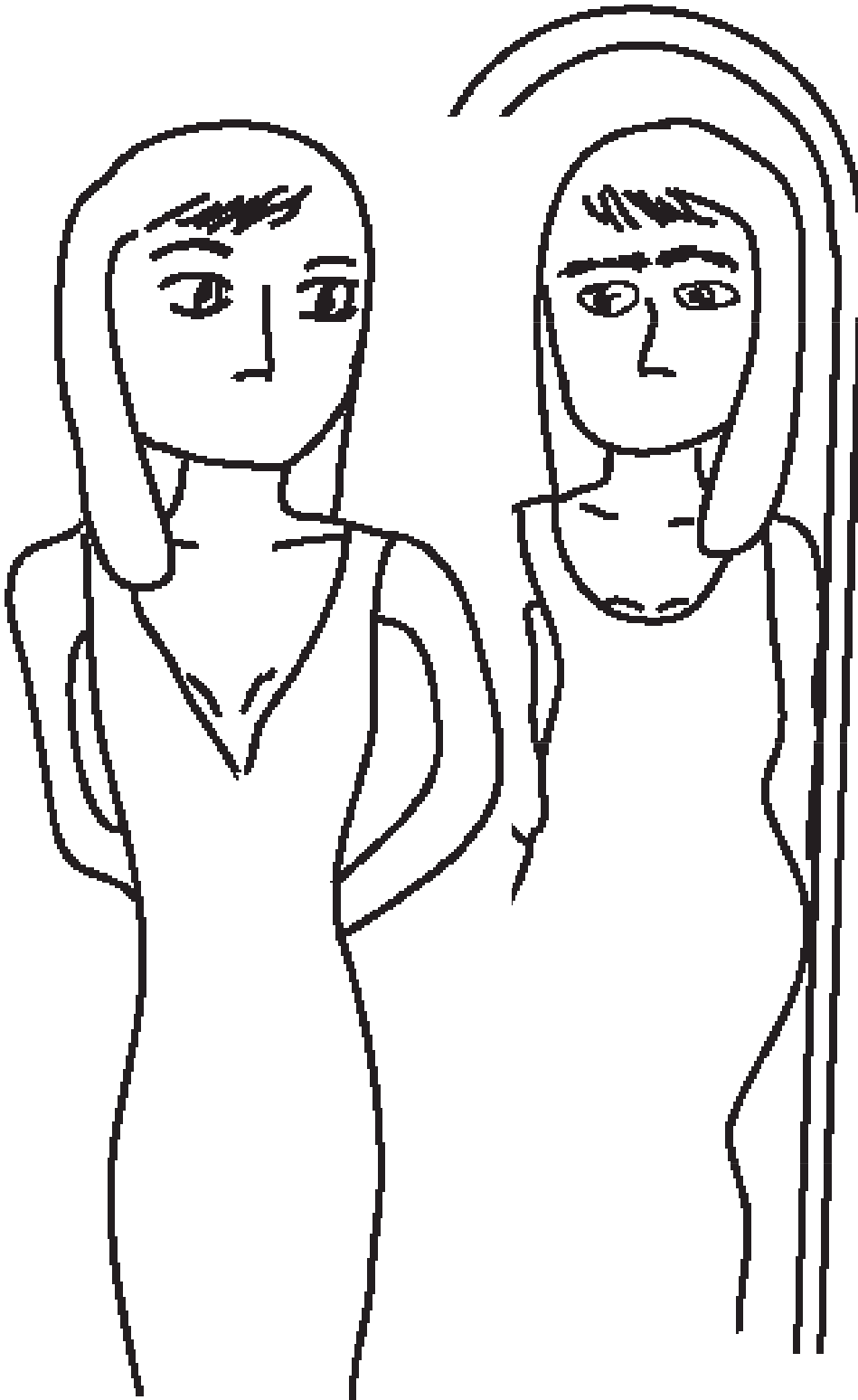


Illustration by Maggie Zhang

be bulimic or anorexic," freshman Evan Schaeffer said.

Fremd psychologist Joe Pikor explained that eating disorders like anorexia or bulimia are more common for females while males may be tempted to use steroids.

Anorexia nervosa is a serious, potentially life-threatening eating disorder characterized by self-starvation and excessive weight loss, according to the National Eating Disorders Association.

Bulimia nervosa, another disorder, is characterized by a cycle of binge eating and self-induced vomiting or other methods to undo or compensate for the effects of overeating.

Pikor said that girls with eating disorders usually have an unrealistic idea of the ideal body image, low self-esteem and an intense obsession with food and

body weight.

"It's a series of factors such as personal, family and self-esteem issues. The drive for perfection and control are contributing factors as well," Pikor explained.

Many girls who develop eating disorders are looking to have more power in their lives by controlling their food intake.

"Control is one of the central issues because eating is one of the few things that you can control in your life," Fremd social worker Gina Baddick said. "No one can tell you what to put into your body, but you have to consume food in order to survive."

But many do not recognize they have a problem, and as a result, the situation often spirals out of control.

"It's difficult because people are often in denial. They're like alcoholics," Pikor

said. "You have to work your whole life to recover from an eating disorder. Even then, relapses are common."

Eating disorders are prevalent throughout American high schools, and Fremd is no exception.

"We always have several cases a year of both bulimia and anorexia," school nurse John Reyes said.

Muscular Mindset

Body image is not an issue confined to just one gender. While some girls may crack under the pressure to measure up to the ideal body type, boys do not escape the expectations to be muscular and fit.

"Guys are supposed to have ripping biceps and massive pectoral muscles," sophomore Matthew Koehlinger said.

Boys often feel the most pressure to be strong from their peers.

"It's mostly about power. It's a competition thing," freshman Dan Szwiec said.

As with girls, guys sometimes resort to unhealthy alternatives in order to achieve their perfect body.

"Guys that want to be masculine and strong-looking work out excessively and use things like steroids and pills, which are just as bad as girls and eating disorders," junior Mike Williams said.

But problems with body image are less prevalent among boys than with girls, according to Pikor.

Chiang agrees that girls tend to obsess even when they do not show their insecurities outwardly.

"With guys, the problems are more external, while with girls, even if no one says anything, in their mind they still stress out about their bodies because in their mind, it's not perfect," Chiang said.

Road to Happiness

Despite the challenges both genders endure to improve their bodies, what's portrayed by the media isn't necessarily what the general population agrees is attractive.

"Girls have a different perception of what's attractive. I think these days they try to be too skinny or too tan. That's not attractive," Schaeffer said.

Girls also have similar feelings toward guys that strive to fit their stereotype.

"I don't think it's attractive when guys try to be too muscular because it gets to a point where they look like the Hulk, and it's scary," sophomore Eshara Mondal said.

Although physical appearances may seem essential to social acceptance, experts say it's important to keep in mind that having the "perfect body" is not a direct ticket to happiness.

If someone has an eating disorder, the best route of action is to contact a trusted adult, perhaps a teacher or counselor at the school, according to Reyes.