

1. Our Battle with the Mirror

Katie is a nineteen-year-old college student who has struggled with body image issues since she was eleven years old.

It began while observing her mom and older sister talk about their displeasure with their weight. They would complain their thighs were too big or their nose was too small and discuss what they could do to make improvements. Often, mealtime conversations revolved around incessant dialogue about diet and nutrition, or how much they should restrict to maintain a “healthy” appearance.

As Katie developed, it became obvious there were all kinds of unwritten rules at home about what foods were acceptable and which were taboo. Good ideas of health and eating were intermingled with unhealthy ideals for weight, image and beauty. Katie found herself comparing her own pre-adolescent body to

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that of her thin, image-conscious older sister. She developed food rituals and rules, as well as unrealistic standards she forced upon herself.

As Katie entered middle and high school, the sea of comparison grew to include peers and social media. She noticed friends posting pictures of themselves in new outfits and semi-promiscuous poses on social media, getting tons of likes and positive comments. It was a constant prompt to evaluate her appearance accordingly. Katie found herself chasing standards and consistently trying to measure up to what public opinion held as ideal. She regularly felt inadequate.

In an attempt to fulfill the ideal appearance, she checked how she looked in the mirror regularly, exercised obsessively and teetered on the edge of anorexia. Katie became anxious attending social events, uncertain of how others viewed her, or desperate to get compliments. She spent hours surfing social media to see what people were wearing, what the newest beauty trends were and to make sure she was not missing out. She tried to keep up with developing her own online "image," becoming preoccupied with who was following her on social media. She would count how

many “likes” she received from others and feel depressed when there was little response.

Katie explained to her counselor what she was experiencing: “I am constantly looking in the mirror. From when I am picking out my outfit, to when I am leaving school, just thinking about if I am walking weird. I feel like everyone I know is struggling with this. Maybe some more than others. Sometimes I need to remind myself that, and it gives me this feeling of reassurance. I am not the only one that’s stressed about my outfit that day or how my hair looks. When I think about my friends that I love so much, it has nothing to do with how they look. We also notice fifty more flaws about ourselves than everyone else does.

We all are seeking some form of self-approval from others. I want to be seen as pretty, nice, funny, stylish and many other things in other people’s eyes, but why someone likes you should be way beyond your looks. I will try to dress like other people to fit in, but I also find myself trying to wear different unique things to stand out and be seen. I just want to be seen, and to fit in. I want to be funny, but I don’t want to speak out and embarrass myself, and it’s all so confusing to me – why?”

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Always worrying about how people perceive us can lead to being stressed and anxious, which can impact grades, mood, confidence and self-image. When you are trying to impress a certain person and it seems like it's not working, what do you do? Do you create a fake personality or change your looks just to fit in and get attention? What happens when your true self begins to show? Will they judge you? Will they still like you?

Unknowingly, Katie's struggle with the mirror had become her idol; it was the thing that ruled her. She was at times blind to how much she clung to the need to find value in her outward appearance. It seemed "normal" – what every girl (and guy) her age did, and it became the thing she worshiped. By the time Katie entered her freshman year of college she was both gripped by, and depressed over, her inability to measure up. She lost interest in spending time with friends because she could not enjoy them. They had become a measuring stick of her own successes or failures and this way of living was leading her to despair.

Perhaps you can sympathize with Katie; maybe you even see yourself in her. My guess

is, to some degree or another, we each can identify with her struggle.

Although body image struggles have previously been thought to be a struggle primarily of women, that is no longer the case. Boys and men alike are falling victim to similar stereotypes and pressures in an image obsessed culture. Young boys who are bullied due to weight or appearance, teen boys who feel the pressure to look tough, build muscle and have a model build, men who must be polished, lean, muscular, attractive and desirable. There is an onslaught of messages facing young men and women alike, instructing them that their outward appearance defines them.

MAIN IDEA

We are all worshipers and can be tempted to find our worth in the wrong things.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How are you similar to Katie? How do you see yourself in her story?
- What are things you may be strongly tempted to worship? Why?
- Can you think of ways it impacts your daily life?