

GUIDES TO CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

This guide (and others in the series) is an initiative of the Office of the Bishop and the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. It is intended to help church members consider how they might respond to contemporary ethical issues. It is meant for use in personal reflection and is not an 'official' statement of the church on the topic. I am grateful to Nick Schwarz, Assistant to the Bishop – Public Theology, for his work on this project and the people with whom he consulted.

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GOOD LOOKS

Learning about why we care about our looks and the way others look

How important is being good-looking?

People of every culture and time have been concerned with how they look.

In this guide, we ask: How about us? How concerned are we about how we look? How concerned *should* we be?

In this first section, we will cover a range of appearance and image-related topics to prepare you for making more mature and considered decisions about how you present yourself to others and how you judge others. We hope it will challenge you to think about how important looks are in the overall scheme of things.

What sorts of ways of trying to improve our looks are we talking about?

We are talking about actions such as the following (you might think of others):

- using cosmetics
- skin tanning or lightening
- styling and dying hair
- removing unwanted hair
- transplanting hair to cover baldness
- wearing flattering clothing and accessories
- dieting and using diet pills to be thinner
- exercising primarily to enhance appearance by reducing body fat and building muscle
- eating high-protein foods and taking dietary supplements to help build muscle
- using anabolic steroids and growth hormones to help build muscle

- cosmetic dentistry*, ie dental procedures performed to enhance appearance, for example, teeth whitening and porcelain veneers
- cosmetic surgery*, ie surgical procedures performed to enhance appearance, for example, breast implants, nose surgery, facelifts, tummy tucks and liposuction
- non-surgical clinic-based cosmetic procedures*, for example, injectables like Botox and dermal fillers, dermabrasion, and chemical and laser skin treatments
- using photo editing tools to improve your appearance in photos of yourself that you share with others on social media.

*We are not talking about:

- reconstructive plastic surgery to restore appearance after a disfiguring injury
- surgery to repair a birth defect that affects function as well as looks, such as a cleft lip or palate
- procedures performed to alleviate pain or improve function, such as breast reduction surgery.

Why do we care about our looks?

Most people care about their appearance. Some seem to care too little. Some seem to care too much! Here are some of the major reasons why most of us want to be good-looking:

- Our culture and experiences shape our beliefs that the better-looking we are, the more lovable we are. Believing we are lovable is vital for our sense of self-worth and belonging. In our minds, therefore, looks, lovableness, personal worth and belonging all seem to go together.
- Because we associate looks with personal worth, our pride and competitiveness cause us to compare ourselves with others. We would much rather compare well than compare badly. We would rather feel superior than inferior and have others envy us rather than disdain or pity us.
- Wealth has enabled more people to improve and maintain their looks as they get older. If we don't do costly appearance-enhancing things like (for example) straightening crooked teeth, replacing missing teeth, or having prominent warts or moles removed, we will stand out. Others might notice and think less of us!
- During our teenage and young adult years, we tend to be especially self-conscious about our looks because our body chemistry is preparing us for finding a mate and starting a family.
- We want to be popular with our peers and win their approval. Being admired by friends of the same age and sex and potential romantic partners seems more important than being admired by children or older adults.
- Our culture's obsession with looking good rubs off on us. We are more likely to be anxious about our looks firstly because social media, advertisers, celebrities, and the beauty, fashion, fitness and wellness industries typically define beauty narrowly so that it is very difficult for average people to measure up,¹ and secondly, because popular culture shapes us to believe that the better looking we are, the happier and more successful we will be.
- There are benefits to being good-looking. More people want to be your friend or marry you.² Others try harder to please you. They treat you better and assume without any evidence that your good looks are matched with good character and above-average abilities. Being good-looking gives you an advantage in various settings, for example, school, work, business, romance, loan or rental applications, and facing a jury in court.

¹ Two brief comments are in order here. Firstly, the profitability of these industries depends on making us *dissatisfied* with our looks but leading us to believe that with more time, effort and spending on goods and services, we can measure up and be happy and contented. Secondly, using models of only one racial type can promote the misconception that only people of one racial type are truly beautiful. Using racially diverse models helps to combat that misconception.

² In our consumer culture, having a greater choice of potential friends and marriage partners is seen as desirable –an indication of a person's specialness or superiority.

- There are drawbacks to being ordinary or unattractive. Fewer people want to be your friend or marry you.³ Others are more likely to mistreat you, look down on you and assume without evidence that your plain looks are matched with a dull or unattractive personality or a questionable character.
- Sometimes, our looks have serious implications on our health and our ability to participate in enjoyable social activities, for example, if we gain too much weight.

Caring too little and caring too much about our looks

In our culture, caring too little or too much about looks is commonly seen as a sign of a flawed character or mental illness.

a) Caring about looks and personal character

If you seem to care too little about your looks and don't have a good excuse, be aware that many people think appearance reflects character. For example, if you look scruffy, dirty or very overweight, they might assume that you are lazy, shameless, or lack self-discipline.

If you seem to care too much about your looks, including when others think looking good is unnecessary, they might assume you are vain or insecure.

But if others judge your level of concern for your looks as reasonable or fair, they are more likely to view your character favourably and think of you as sensible or self-respecting.

b) Caring about looks and mental illness

A lack of concern for looks can also be a sign of distress or mental illness. If you look unwashed and ungroomed or gain a lot of weight, others might wonder if you are depressed or failing to cope with a personal crisis of some sort.

Excessive or unreasonable concern with looks and intense desire to 'fix' perceived defects can also point to mental illness. Expert help should be sought by individuals with a distorted and highly negative body image, disordered eating and extreme exercise habits because these are signs of eating disorders like anorexia nervosa and for those who feel unreasonably anxious or ashamed about or disgusted with part of their body or appearance because these are signs of body dysmorphic disorder.

In between these extremes is the 'healthy range of concern with looks' – neither too little nor too much.

In Box 1 below, we look at the effect on teens' and young adults' mental health of online sharing and comparing of 'selfies'.

³ In our culture, having less choice of potential friends and marriage partners is seen as undesirable or pitiable – a sign of lowly status or inferiority.

Box 1: Sharing and comparing selfies and mental health

Teens and young adults are big internet and social media users, and much of their use centres on sites and content that influence them to believe that good looks are important.

The more important we think it is to look good, and the more pressure we put on ourselves to look like celebrities, fashion models and sporting heroes, the more likely we are to be anxious about and unhappy with our bodies.

The following behaviours are strongly associated with anxiety and depression related to body dissatisfaction and with eating disorders and increased desire for cosmetic surgery:

- taking photographs of yourself ('selfies') in which you present yourself as attractively as possible and your life as happy and successful
- using photo editing software or beauty apps to enhance your attractiveness
- posting your enhanced selfies to a social media account for others to view and 'like'
- wanting your selfies to compare favourably with others (even when neither your selfies nor theirs truly reflect your looks or lives).

The more we do to artificially enhance our appearance, whether via makeup, cosmetic procedures, drugs, or photo-editing software, the more internally conflicted and unhappy we are likely to be because we are essentially using deception to increase our value in others' eyes. We can't help but wonder: What would they think of the 'real me' – the unenhanced me?

Wanted and unwanted attention

Most of the time, it is nice to be on the receiving end of admiring looks and compliments about our appearance.

But sometimes it isn't. For example, men and older boys who notice that girls' bodies are developing express their appreciation in crude, embarrassing and upsetting ways, leaving girls feeling self-conscious, unhappy and scared of their emerging womanhood.

Much of the blame for males' tendency to see and treat girls and women as sex objects can be attributed to pornography and the pornification of popular culture. Girls shaped by porn culture to think that they should look and behave like porn stars can, unfortunately, expect to be treated like sex objects by boys and men shaped by the same culture. Porn culture harms everyone!

Outer and inner beauty

Wise elders of every culture have recognised the distinction between outer and inner beauty. To educate children not to place too much importance on outward appearance, they teach them memorable sayings like, 'Don't judge a book by its cover', 'Appearances are deceiving' and 'All that glitters is not gold'. An amusing proverb from Arabia warning children about vanity says, 'A monkey looks into the mirror and sees a gazelle'.

The more attention we pay to our outward appearance, the less attention we tend to pay to our inner qualities. If we have an attractive exterior but an unattractive interior, we will soon get a reputation as someone whose beauty is only skin deep.

A boy who desires a girl because he likes the way she looks but doesn't care about her inner qualities is experiencing lust, not love. If the girl responds to his advances, she is at risk of being treated like a trophy or a

consumer product that he can show off, use, and then dump when the novelty wears off. The same applies to the sexes reversed. Using others in this way is selfish and hurtful.⁴

Relationships that are heavily based on outer beauty are superficial and fragile. Outer beauty fades over time or is taken away, for example, by accidents and illnesses. A relationship must be based on something more substantial than physical attraction to be strong and enduring. We must grow to love the inner person.

Truly beautiful people are beautiful on the inside. They have a lovely character. They have an attractive mind. They very often come from loving families. And Christians would add that we can see God at work in them.

Pushback against the cultural obsession with beautiful bodies

The negative consequences of our culture's obsession with beauty are now well recognised: an epidemic of body anxiety and depression and disordered eating among teens and young adults – especially young women – and anguished parents searching for ways to make their children happy and healthy again.

Here are some signs of pushback against this culture:

The body positivity or body acceptance movement

The 2023 Australian of the Year, Taryn Brumfitt, is a prominent advocate of 'body positivity' who pushes back against the culture of unattainable bodily perfection and body shaming. Along with advocates of body positivity, she promotes the idea that we should 'love, embrace and celebrate' our bodies regardless of shape or size and be grateful for what they can do rather than fixate on the way they look.

Others take body positivity even further. Advocates of 'fat pride' tell us that being fat is great and something to be proud of and celebrate.

But positive self-talk often doesn't work for people who are very overweight. It feels forced and fake, like trying to fool themselves. They can't help but feel that, by allowing themselves to get so fat, they have let themselves down.

That's why many health experts advise against 'loving' and 'celebrating' obesity and instead help very overweight people to work towards healthier eating patterns and come to terms with the fact that different people's weights naturally tend to settle at different points due to genetic and hormonal influences.

The laws of probability state that when we rate individuals in a population against contemporary beauty ideals, most people will be average looking. Very few will meet these ideals. Because outward appearance is largely determined by genetics, people who are 'naturally beautiful' should feel lucky rather than proud of their looks.

Finding community and acceptance in other ways

Humans are social creatures. We need and want to be accepted by others and spend time with them. We especially want friends of the same age. Those who realise they won't ever be popular because of good looks often find other ways to make friends.

Teens and young adults who can't break into the good-looking 'in-crowd' often find friendship and acceptance in other groups, especially groups with a shared attribute (such as ethnic background) or common interest (such as computers or sports). Some find community and acceptance in tribes or subcultures that rebel in some way against society's norms, including society's beauty ideals. Examples

⁴ Using dating apps to meet encourage users to take a consumerist approach to date selection based largely on appearance.

include emo, goth and punk. In recent years, the trend of identifying as 'trans' or 'non-binary' can also be seen as both a rejection of contemporary ideals of femininity and masculinity and a search for identity and acceptance.

A Christian perspective on caring about looks

Christians, first of all, look to the Bible for guidance on moral issues. The Bible has some important things to say about concerns with good looks. For example, it has passages that deal with self-worth, worries about appearance, coveting others' beauty, judging others by their looks, respect for our bodies, and the relative importance of outer and inner beauty. Table 1 below lists some major biblical themes relevant to the topic of physical appearance and some key passages.

Table 1: Biblical wisdom on physical appearance

Theme	Key scriptures
<p>Our self-worth comes not from how we look but because God created us in his own image.</p>	<p>So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).</p> <p>I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well (Psalm 139:14).</p> <p>For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).</p>
<p>Our self-worth comes not from how we look but because God loves us, died for us, and wants to be in relationship with us.</p>	<p>For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).</p> <p>But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).</p>
<p>God wants us to honour him in the way we use the bodies he gave us.</p>	<p>Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19,20).</p> <p>Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:1,2).</p> <p>Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is much more important. It promises a reward both in this life and the next (1 Timothy 4:8).</p>
<p>God wants us to be like him and judge others not by outward appearance but by the state of their hearts.</p>	<p>But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7).</p> <p>Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion (Proverbs 11:22).</p>

	<p>Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised (Proverbs 31:30).</p> <p>Stop judging by mere appearances, but instead judge correctly (John 7:24).</p>
<p>Worries about our looks can become a distraction, a stumbling block, an idol, a road to sin.</p>	<p>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also ... Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life worth more than food, and the body worth more than clothes? ... So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:21,25-34).</p> <p>Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewellery or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight (1 Peter 3:3,4).</p>

Summary of key biblical teachings

- God made us, and he loves us regardless of how our outward appearance measures up against the beauty ideals of people in our cultural moment.
- But God wants us to care well for the bodies he gave us and treat them with respect and modesty. However, he warns us against valuing our looks too highly and against flaunting our looks to tease, arouse or use others in self-serving ways. If we do these things, our looks become a distraction, a stumbling block and an idol that leads us and others into sin.
- God cares much more about the state of our hearts than our outward appearance.
- God also warns us against coveting others' looks and judging them by their looks. When we pay too much attention to others' looks, we reveal ourselves to be shallow and frequently also as hypocritical and unfairly judgemental.

Reflection questions to help with decision-making about looks

Reflecting on what you watch, see, read and hear and on how much time you spend thinking about your appearance

What you watch, see, read and hear affects your view of yourself and how much time you spend thinking about your looks. Can you see a connection between the media you expose yourself to and your feelings about your body? Are you so devoted to enhancing or preserving your looks (serving and glorifying yourself) that your appearance has effectively become an idol, your hope for salvation?

If so, is now a good time for you to commit to filling your mind with better things and devoting more of your time to better activities?

Deciding whether to do something you think will enhance your appearance

In this section, we offer some questions for you to think about. Reflecting on these questions will help you make better decisions about spending lots of time or money on your appearance (or on somebody else's appearance, such as one of your children) than if you acted without thinking.

- What are you thinking of doing?
- Is it something you want to do or something others are pressuring you to do?
- God loves you and cares about what you do. Would God approve?
- Why do you want to do this? What outcome are you expecting or hoping for? How honourable are your motives?
- Who have you been comparing yourself to? Is it sensible for you to compare yourself in this way?
- Are your hopes or expectations realistic? Will doing this achieve the outcome you desire? Will doing it satisfy you/make you as happy and contented as you think it will? What will you do if it doesn't?
- Will it benefit your health or potentially put it at risk?
- If it is something big, costly or risky, such as having cosmetic surgery, have you thoroughly investigated the pros and cons?
- Is what you are proposing legal? If so, are you old enough not to need your parents' consent?
- Have you discussed it with relevant others, such as parents, grandparents or other wise elders, and sought their opinion?
- Is what you are proposing necessary? Will *not* doing it endanger or ruin your life?
- If it isn't exactly necessary, is it reasonable? What is the case for doing it?
- Is it proportionate, ie how expensive is it in terms of time and money? Could you be satisfied with a lesser/cheaper alternative?
- What are the consequences? For example, if you take this action, will further actions follow it, taking up more and more of your time and money? Are you in danger of becoming dependent or addicted and trapped in a cycle of spending?
- What are the opportunity costs/trade-offs? If you spend your time and money on it, what will you *not* be able to do?
- Do you fully understand the risks involved, and are you willing to take them? How likely is it that something will go wrong? How bad could it be? If something goes wrong, will you be able to undo it? If so, how difficult/painful/costly will it be to undo? Or will it be irreversible?

Making assumptions about others based on their appearance

Think about what you've learned in this guide about judging others by their appearances. For example, if you are interviewing applicants for a position in your organisation, is it reasonable to consider their appearance in addition to their likely ability to do the job well? If you are on a jury trying to decide whether an accused person is guilty of a crime, you will consider the evidence presented and perhaps their body language. But will you allow their looks to harden or soften your heart towards them?

It is also worth considering how much importance we place on looks as young people looking for a suitable person to marry. How fussy are you about a potential spouse's looks? Remember that good looks alone are a poor foundation for a strong and enduring marriage. Perhaps knowing this will widen your field of possible life partners.

Reviewing decisions

Having done or not done something to change your appearance, it is worth reflecting on your choice. Would you do the same again or encourage others to do as you did? If yes, why do you say you were correct? If not, what would you do differently?

Here are four made-up cases in which the person or persons who made decisions reflect on their actions:

Comfortable with decisions

Phil and Liz are parents who agreed to their 11-year-old son Charlie's request for ear-pinning surgery after carefully weighing up a range of factors, including:

- how severely his ears stuck out
- the constant teasing he endured because of his ears
- the difficulty of helping him come to terms with his ears and training him to develop a 'thick skin'
- his motivation, which was clearly to stand out less, not to 'become more handsome'
- the effect the teasing was having on his self-confidence and on his enjoyment of school
- the cost of the operation
- Charlie's willingness to forego a new bike for Christmas in exchange for the operation
- the potential risks and benefits of the operation
- Charlie's willingness to endure the pain of the operation and precisely follow the surgeon's post-op care instructions to maximise his chances of a smooth recovery.

Now that Charlie's operation and recovery are over, the teasing has stopped, his self-confidence has improved, he is enjoying school again, he has stopped wearing beanies all the time, and he doesn't complain about having his hair cut. In fact, he bought a pair of clippers with saved-up pocket money so Phil can give him crew cuts for free. Phil still sometimes wonders whether saying no to an operation would have made Charlie a stronger and more resilient character. But, on the whole, he and Liz feel comfortable with the way they weighed up their decision and are pleased with the outcome.

Regrets decisions

Cindy is tall and has done some modelling through a local agency. She dreams of becoming famous like her hero, the supermodel Barbie. Cindy spends at least an hour every morning getting her makeup right before showing her face to anyone else. To raise her profile, she posts new pictures of herself every day on her Instagram account. Her self-esteem rises and falls with the traffic on her account and the presence or absence of admiring feedback. To stay thin, she eats sparingly, does a lot of fast walking and aerobics, and takes laxatives or makes herself vomit if she loses control and binge-eats. She wants to lose weight off her hips and thighs, but it comes off her chest first, where she least wants to lose it. She is also unhappy with the size of her nose and the thinness of her lips. Over time, in pursuit of her modelling dream, she has nose surgery, teeth whitening, injections to plump up her lips, liposuction on her hips and thighs, and breast implants. After every procedure, Cindy thinks she'll be happier, but every time she looks in the mirror afterwards, she sees someone who isn't more beautiful, just different and more of a fraud. Her guilt and anxiety increase every time she uploads beauty-app-enhanced selfies to her Instagram account. Finally, after suffering burns from a botched skin-smoothing procedure, Cindy feels ashamed and foolish. With her family's support, she finds a helpful counsellor, closes her Instagram account, and enrolls in a psychology degree. She hopes that having learned from her mistakes, she can help others overcome and avoid body image problems.

Ken is envious of his mate Joe's chiselled, muscular body and how girls seem drawn to him. He joins a gym, reads bodybuilding magazines, and buys expensive dietary supplements, but all his efforts aren't producing the size gains he hopes for. One day, a huge guy at the gym has a quiet word with Ken about some 'juice' that will bulk him up big time. Ken knows there are risks with taking anabolic steroids, but he dismisses the negative thoughts when he thinks of the gains he could make quickly, the chicks he will pull, and the mates he will impress! He does indeed make big size gains but has to keep taking the drugs to maintain them. They come with serious side effects, including fluid retention, acne, hair loss, gynaecomastia (breast tissue growth), shrunken testicles, reduced sperm count, erectile dysfunction, liver damage, high cholesterol, and a heightened risk of stroke and heart failure. Girls who are initially attracted to him quickly dump him because

of the terrible mood swings the drugs cause. After punching and seriously injuring a girlfriend, he spends nine months in prison, where he has lots of time to think about his actions. One of the prison chaplains, together with his parole officer, arranges for Ken to speak with a doctor and psychologist, who confirm what Ken already knows – that he has made a lot of bad decisions, and it is time for a change.

Mixed feelings about decisions

Germaine and her friend Gloria hate that culture says to be beautiful, women must have hairless legs and armpits. They resent shaving and waxing, yet their strong senses of pride and shame mean they both feel pressure to conform. Germaine wishes she had the courage to be countercultural and let her leg and armpit hair grow. She berates herself for her cowardice every time she gives in and shaves her legs and armpits out of fear of what people might think or say about her. Gloria plucks up the courage to let her leg and armpit hair grow but berates herself for her cowardice because now she won't go out in public wearing clothes that reveal her armpits and legs because she too fears what people might think or say about her.

Further reading

Christian resources

- Focus on the Family, 'Scriptures about beauty and appearance', <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/scriptures-about-beauty-and-appearance/>
- J Denny 2023, 'If God doesn't hate my body, why should I?' *Eternity News*, <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/opinion/if-god-doesnt-hate-my-body-why-should-i-2/>
- Heather Creekmore 2017, *Compared to who? A proven path to improve your body image*
- Heather Creekmore's website <https://www.improvebodyimage.com/>
- Tim Keller 2013, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*

Secular resources

- Beyond Blue, 'Eating disorders, anxiety and depression factsheet', <https://nedc.com.au/assets/NEDC-Resources/Collaborative-Resources/NEDC-Beyond-Blue-Fact-Sheet-Comorbid-EDs-anxiety-and-depression.pdf>
- Butterfly Foundation (eating disorders) resources, <https://butterfly.org.au/resources/>
- National Eating Disorders Collaboration factsheets:
 - Body image: <https://nedc.com.au/assets/Fact-Sheets/NEDC-Fact-Sheet-Body-Image.pdf>
 - Body dysmorphic disorder: <https://nedc.com.au/assets/Fact-Sheets/BDD-fact-sheet.pdf>
 - Disordered eating and dieting: <https://www.nedc.com.au/assets/Fact-Sheets/NEDC-Fact-Sheet-Disordered-Eating-and-Dieting.pdf>
 - Eating disorders in Australia: <https://nedc.com.au/assets/Fact-Sheets/Eating-Disorders-in-Australia-ENG.pdf>
- National Eating Disorders Collaboration booklet, 'Eating disorders in schools: prevention, early identification, response and recovery support', <https://nedc.com.au/assets/NEDC-Resources/NEDC-Resource-Schools.pdf>