

Wanting to live a 'normal-perfect' life is making women unhealthy

July 9 2018, by Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans And Martine Robson

These days, the health of a woman seems to be less about the absence of illness and more about being someone who works on their body and mind in order [to meet modern society's expectations](#) of looks and abilities.

This is not just a neat observation, but something we found while researching our new book, [Postfeminism and Health](#). We analysed a range of research and media – including advice in self-help literature, government promotion of healthy weight, and the way surgeons and their patients talk about surgical technologies (such as genital cosmetic surgery). We also looked at how media and [women](#) make sense of sex, apps for pregnancy, baby milk advertisements, [health promotion](#) in developing countries, and online posts by those in fitness or [pro-anorexia virtual communities](#).

Across all of this we found [health](#) being linked to a desire to be normal – and the idea that a normal life should be perfect.

Actions that women do to be healthy are often linked to a desire to be normal. Being "normal" means having a [body](#) that is not too fat or thin – and a mind that's not too anxious or too carefree. We found, for example, that being normal underpinned many women's decisions to undergo [weight loss surgery](#). These women hoped that being normal would free them from stigma and criticism, and let them enjoy being a "good" person.

This is just one way in which women are encouraged to think of their body as a problem that requires intervention to be normal. Following this logic, women's bodies will always require work to be normal. This work is intensified by an understanding that living a perfect life is normal, too. Expecting everyday life to be optimal – what we called a "normal perfection" – puts exceptional pressure on women to do more work on their bodies and minds.

Such is the pressure that, in today's world, rarely can women experience being good enough. When we completed a magazine's psychology questionnaire, deliberately getting the highest score, we were congratulated: "You are confident!" But we were also warned that we could not be too confident of our confidence: "Even those who are fairly confident often experience periods of self doubt. Or perhaps you feel confident in most areas, but still feel more nerves than you would like before a speech." It seems that, today, women's work on themselves is never done.

Confidence, empowerment and consumerism

The outcome of such constant self-scrutiny, self-critique and requirements to work on the self and the body is not good health – but anxiety and fear of failure.

This anxiety is intensified by the way that health is linked to an ability to consume. We can enjoy a multitude of choices within consumer culture – but this makes us vulnerable to never getting it right.

We found this destabilising aspect of consumerism throughout the many topics we explored in our book. For example, there was a social marketing campaign that apparently encouraged nursing women to eat healthily – but it could just as easily undermine their confidence in breastfeeding their children.

Against images of a breastfeeding woman who was [body-painted with fizzy drink or burgers](#), was the slogan: "Your baby is what you eat." The suggestion that a mother needs to have a perfect diet in order to provide healthy breast milk for her baby runs the risk of pushing her to choose infant formula.

The final thread in our research looked at how the desire to lead a normal-perfect life can begin to feel as if it comes from within, and is a personal desire and not a societal pressure. When we are repeatedly exposed to messages about what makes a "good person" these can become unconsciously ingrained in our thoughts. When we look in the mirror we might use a phrase or idea that we read in a magazine to think about our appearance. For example, we might look to see if we have a "thigh gap". And once we start to use these ideas in our own thoughts, they feel like they are our own personal ideas because they are part of our personal thoughts.

This is especially true today, because one of the messages we are exposed to is the idea that good people make independent choices. This is one of the reasons why women who have cosmetic genital surgery see it as an [empowering individual choice](#) and not the result of societal pressure. Even though the more women are exposed to seeing technologically changed female genitals, the more likely they are to see them as both normal and ideal.

Understanding that our [desires](#) emerge from within us makes it hard to challenge the commercial interests that are invested in us having these desires. It also allows consumerism to be understood as a solution to, rather than a causal factor of, women's lack of self and body confidence.

Our desire to be healthy seems progressive, essential even. But when we realise that health is also a consumer practice – linked to identity and the ability to live an ideal "good life" – we have a very limited vision of it. A

life worth living, it seems, will always be just beyond our reach.

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