Why People Put Themselves Under The Knife

In a long-term study, Prof. Dr. Jürgen Margraf, Alexander von Humboldt Professor for Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy at the RUB, investigated the psychological effects of plastic surgery on approximately 550 patients in cooperation with colleagues from the University of Basel. Patients demonstrated more enjoyment of life, satisfaction and self-esteem after their physical appearance had been surgically altered. The results of the world's largest ever study on this issue are reported by the researchers in the journal "*Clinical Psychological Science*".

The aim of the research

The researchers examined whether patients who undergo plastic surgery are systematically different from other people, what goals they set themselves before the surgery, and whether they achieve these afterwards. The researchers compared 544 first-time surgery patients with two other groups: on the one hand with 264 people who had previously wanted plastic surgery and then decided against it, and on the other hand, with around 1000 people from the general population who have never been interested in such operations. The desire for a better appearance for aesthetic reasons usually occurs in younger people with slightly above-average incomes. Women represent 87 % of all patients who opt for cosmetic surgery. Overall, there were no significant differences among the three groups studied in terms of psychological and health variables, such as mental health, life satisfaction and depressiveness.

Most patients do not expect the impossible from surgery

Using a psychological instrument, the so-called "Goal Attainment Scaling", the researchers examined what goals the patients wanted to achieve with cosmetic surgery. Alongside open questions, ten standard goals were offered, also including two which were clearly unrealistic: "All my problems will be solved" and "I'll be a completely new person". Only 12 % of the respondents specified these unrealistic standard goals. In the open questions, the patients answered on the whole more realistically, expressing wishes such as to "feel better", "eliminate blemishes" and "develop more self-confidence".

Long-term improvements in psychological variables after surgery

The psychologists tested the patients before surgery, as well as three, six and twelve months afterwards. On average, the participants claimed to have achieved their desired goal, and to be satisfied with the results in the long-term. Compared to those who had chosen not to have plastic surgery, the patients felt healthier, were less anxious, had developed more self-esteem and found the operated body feature in particular, but also their body as a whole, more attractive. No adverse effects were observed. Thus, the researchers were able to establish a high level for the average treatment success of the cosmetic surgery, also in terms of psychological

characteristics.

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