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Unveiled

Pre-wedding Weight Concerns and Health and Beauty Plans of Australian Brides

IVANKA PRICHARD & MARIKA TIGGEMANN
Flinders University, Australia

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ADDRESS. Correspondence should be directed to:
IVANKA PRICHARD, School of Psychology, Flinders University,
GPO Box 2100, Adelaide, 5001, South Australia.
[Tel. +61 8 8201 2449; Fax +61 8 8201 3877;
email: Ivanka.Prichard@flinders.edu.au]



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Abstract

This study investigated the prevalence of appearance and weight-related concerns in 879 Australian brides-to-be recruited from five bridal websites. Close to 75 per cent of the sample intended to exercise more and follow a 'healthy eating plan', while over 35 per cent planned to cut fat or carbohydrates out of their diets. On average, participants wished to lose over 8kg (18lbs) by their wedding day, and one-third had been told to lose weight by someone else for the wedding. These findings demonstrate the salience of appearance concerns among brides-to-be and highlight the need to promote a healthier bridal body ideal.

Keywords

- *appearance*
- *body image*
- *brides*
- *healthy behaviours*
- *weddings*
- *weight*

OVER 110,000 weddings take place each year in Australia alone (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The average wedding costs AU\$49,202 (Saurine, 2009), and the wedding industry itself is said to be worth five billion dollars (bridgetobe.com.au). In the United Kingdom, the standard wedding exceeds £25,000 (Anonymous, 2008), and in the United States the average wedding costs over US\$25,000 (Wong, 2005). Given the expense of such a day, a great deal of pressure exists to make the day perfect. Casual inspection of the content of popular wedding magazines and websites makes clear that the bride's appearance is a critical component of the 'perfect wedding'. More specifically, magazines articles (e.g. Deluca, 2007), self-help books on wedding health and beauty (e.g. Villepigue, Rivera, & Alfieri, 2005), workout DVDs especially for brides (e.g. *Buff brides: Count down to gown workout*) and television programmes (e.g. *The biggest loser: Engaged couples*), all imply that women should lose weight and 'tone up' in order to look healthy and beautiful for their weddings. This pressure to lose weight can also come from the bride's family and fiancé (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Sobal, Bove, & Rauschenbach, 1999).

Within a general socio-cultural framework, the Tripartite Influence Model of body image and eating disturbance highlights three main socio-cultural factors that influence the development of body image and eating concern: parents, peers and the media (van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Coovert, 2002). Given the proliferation of bridal media outlined above that is now available to women preparing for their nuptials, it is likely that the majority of engaged women are exposed to multiple images of the ideal 'thin, tanned, and toned' bridal body (Sobal et al., 1999). Experimental research has demonstrated that exposure to thin media images can have a negative impact on female body image in terms of how women feel about their weight and shape (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). This is particularly the case if women have internalized the thin ideal (Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Posavac, & Posavac, 2005). Women so invested are likely to subscribe to and strive to achieve the ideal of the slim, toned bride (Sobal et al., 1999). Indeed, anecdotal evidence from Weight Watchers ('The ups and downs of love', reported in *Woman's Day*, 2006, p. 71) indicates that brides lose around 9lbs (4.1kg) for their weddings and suggests that 'there's nothing like a wedding to spur a girl on to look her best'.

In the lead up to a wedding, women may also feel pressure to lose weight from their family and friends. More generally, negative parental comments about weight and shape have been linked to increased body dissatisfaction (Rodgers, Paxton, & Chabrol, 2009). In addition, it has been observed that spousal comments can impact upon women's body dissatisfaction (Pole, Crowther, & Schell, 2004). Such pressures likely serve to increase the focus on weight loss and appearance investment as integral to the wedding day's success, potentially placing brides 'at risk' for body image and eating disturbance (Cash, Melnyk, & Hrabosky, 2004). Consequently, one aim of the present study was to investigate pressure coming from other people on brides-to-be to lose weight for their weddings.

To date, the methods that women may employ to achieve the ideal bridal body have remained largely unexamined. Two preliminary studies on brides (Neighbors & Sobal, 2008; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008) have demonstrated that the majority of brides-to-be in both the United States and Australia aim to lose around 23lbs (10kg) before their weddings. However, these studies have surveyed relatively small samples of engaged women recruited solely from bridal expos. These are one-stop locations at a particular site that showcase information about wedding fashion, cars, cakes, photographers and so on. It is possible that the women who attend these expos may be more invested in their appearance than engaged women in the general population. In addition, these studies have focused primarily on weight loss. Accordingly, the present study sought to examine other specific health behaviours (e.g. tanning), as well as pressure to lose weight, and wedding weight ideals in a more varied sample of engaged women. Such a sample also allowed for an explicit investigation of age among brides-to-be.

There are a number of health-related practices that women may employ to improve their appearance in the lead up to a wedding. For example, some women believe themselves to be more attractive when they have a tanned body (Banerjee, Campo, & Greene, 2008). Despite the health risks associated with tanning, Prichard and Tiggemann (2008) observed that 43 per cent of brides-to-be were planning to tan prior to the big day. It remains unknown what types of tanning procedures these women were planning to utilize (e.g. sun exposure or tanning salons). In addition, many engaged women intend to exercise more and diet in the lead up to their wedding day (Neighbors & Sobal, 2008; Prichard & Tiggemann,

2008). Again, it is not known whether these plans would be carried out in healthy or unhealthy ways.

Thus, the present study aimed to extend previous research by examining both relatively benign (e.g. increased exercise) and extreme (e.g. laxative use, sun tanning) appearance improvement behaviours that could impact upon a bride's health. It also aimed to examine the weight loss goals of brides-to-be and to determine the different sources of pressure to lose weight that surround the modern wedding. Uniquely, the relative importance of weight and appearance to the wedding day as a whole (as opposed to other aspects, e.g. weather) was also investigated. Finally, the age of brides-to-be in relation to appearance improvement behaviours was examined for the first time. It was hypothesized that: (1) the majority of brides-to-be would have an ideal wedding weight substantially lower than their current weight; (2) some brides would report pressure to lose weight for their weddings, predominantly from mothers and partners; (3) larger brides would experience greater pressure to lose weight; (4) brides-to-be would engage in a number of appearance altering behaviours, some of which may be detrimental to long-term health and well-being (e.g. extreme dieting or sun tanning); and (5) wedding day appearance would constitute a vital component of the wedding day's success in relation to other aspects of the day.

Method

Participants

Participants were 879 brides-to-be who were recruited online via five bridal websites across all of Australia. They ranged in age from 18 to 49 years and had a mean age of 26.18 years ($SD = 4.56$). Approximately one-third of participants (30.9%) came from the State of South Australia, one-quarter (26.3%) from Western Australia, 17.7 per cent from Queensland and 11.3 per cent from each of Victoria and New South Wales.

Measures

A brief online questionnaire entitled 'You & Your Wedding Health & Beauty Preparation' was designed for the study.

Background information Participants were asked to indicate their age, the state/territory they lived in and their wedding date.

Weight and ideal weight All participants were asked to indicate their current height and weight,

so that BMI could be calculated (kg/m^2). Participants were also asked their ideal wedding weight. This ideal wedding weight was then subtracted from participants' actual weight to gain an indication of desire to lose weight before the wedding.

Pressure to lose weight In order to assess the pressure placed on brides to lose weight, participants were asked whether anyone had suggested to them that they needed to lose weight for the wedding. If they responded yes, participants were asked to specify who.

Pre-wedding health and beauty enhancing behaviours Extending the earlier work of Prichard and Tiggemann (2008), participants were presented with a list of 24 possible pre-wedding health and beauty practices. This list was developed on the basis of the content of popular bridal magazines and websites. The 24 items represented specific types of eating behaviours (e.g. follow a low-fat diet), fitness behaviours (e.g. join a gym), dental care (e.g. teeth whitening), cosmetic enhancements (e.g. breast enlargement) and other beauty-related products/services (e.g. tanning). An 'other' option was also provided. Participants were asked to indicate (by ticking a box) which items they planned to do (or had done) in preparation for their wedding.

Important aspects of the wedding day

Participants were asked to rate the importance of 14 different aspects of the wedding day on a scale of 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). Items were formulated on the basis of popular bridal magazines and pilot work conducted with brides about sources of worry in the lead up to the wedding day. The resulting items were: the weather; looking good; fitting into the wedding dress; enjoying the day; everyone getting along; good food; good wine; having perfect hair; guests having a good time; feeling beautiful; impressing your fiancé; the wedding night; having flawless makeup; and the wedding photography. An 'other' option was also provided.

A principal components analysis of these items revealed the existence of three factors (eigenvalues greater than 1), explaining 32.9 per cent, 13.7 per cent and 7.6 per cent of the variance respectively. The first factor was clearly an appearance and beauty factor (eigenvalue = 4.61) consisting of looking good, fitting into the wedding dress, feeling beautiful, having perfect hair and having perfect makeup. The second factor (eigenvalue = 1.91) was diverse

and comprised impressing your fiancé, the wedding night, everyone getting along and the wedding photography, here labelled as 'impressing others'. The third factor (eigenvalue = 1.06) clearly contained enjoyment items (enjoying the day, and the guests having a good time). Although good food and wine loaded moderately ($> .45$) on both the second and third factors, they were conceptualized as part of the enjoyment factor. The weather did not load on any of the factors and was retained as a single-item scale. Accordingly, scores were obtained for each of the above four subscales (appearance/beauty, impressing others, enjoyment and the weather) by calculating the mean of all items loading on the particular subscale.

Procedure

Upon receiving ethical approval from the University's Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee, the study was advertised on five popular Australian bridal websites. Each site provided a directory of bridal products and services specific to five states across Australia. As an incentive for potential participants they were offered the opportunity to enter a raffle for a gift voucher from a large national department store. Participants' contact details for the raffle prize, and their questionnaire responses were stored in separate, secure locations to maintain confidentiality. Of 1223 potential participants who clicked on the link for more information about the study, 879 completed the survey. This represented a response rate of 71.9 per cent.

Results

Characteristics of the sample

On average, brides completed the online questionnaire approximately ten-and-a-half months ($M = 10.68$ months; 0.89 years, $SD = 0.60$) prior to their weddings. Given that the average Australian engagement lasts 16.7 months (Saurine, 2009), participants were likely to have been mid-way through preparations for their weddings. They had a current weight of 69.98kg ($SD = 16.11$), and a BMI slightly above the upper range of normal ($M = 25.41$, $SD = 5.51$).

Wedding weight ideals

Participants had an ideal wedding weight of 61.88kg ($SD = 10.28$), indicating that on average, they wished to be approximately 8.11kg ($SD = 8.66$; 18lbs) lighter by their wedding day. Overall, 750 participants (85.32%) reported an ideal wedding weight lower

than their current weight, 85 participants (9.67%) wished to remain the same weight, 16 participants (1.82%) wanted to gain weight and 28 participants (3.19%) did not provide sufficient data. Brides closer to their wedding date had a lower BMI, $r(799) = .13$, $p < .01$, and a smaller current to ideal wedding weight discrepancy, $r(802) = .20$, $p < .01$, perhaps suggesting that they may have already lost weight for their wedding. No relationship was found between age and the amount of weight brides wished to lose, $r(851) = .02$, $p > .05$, suggesting that on average the engaged women in the present study, regardless of age, wished to be thinner by their wedding day.

Weight loss advice

Overall, one-third (33%) of the sample had been advised by someone else to lose weight for their wedding. As predicted, heavier brides were significantly more likely to be told by more than one person that they should lose weight, $r(848) = .32$, $p < .01$, indicating the increased amount of pressure placed on brides who do not have a thin body. Across the entire sample, the bride's mother was the most likely to suggest weight loss for the wedding (17.4%), followed by the bride's fiancé (8.8%), friends (7.6%) and sales assistants at bridal stores (5.6%). Other sources of weight loss pressure included the bride's father (4.1%), dressmakers (2.0%) and other members of the family or extended family such as mothers-in-law (1.0%), grandmothers/aunts (0.9%), siblings (0.9%) and sisters-in-law (0.2%).

Pre-wedding health and beauty enhancing behaviours

Table 1 displays the percentages for a range of individual pre-wedding health and beauty practices. As can be seen, an overwhelming majority of engaged women planned to exercise more (80%). It is likely that the brides who were planning to exercise were doing so in order to aid weight loss, given that the discrepancy between their ideal wedding weight and current weight was significantly greater ($M = 8.62$ kg, $SD = 8.67$) than in brides who were not planning to increase their exercise ($M = 6.02$ kg, $SD = 8.35$), $t(849) = 3.51$, $p < .001$.

With respect to intended eating behaviour before the wedding, 74 per cent of brides-to-be intended to follow a healthy eating plan, 21.3 per cent planned to reduce the amount of fat in their diets and 15.1 per cent were going to reduce their carbohydrate intake. Engaged women who intended to follow more restrictive eating plans (e.g. a low-carbohydrate diet)

Table 1. Pre-wedding health and beauty plans (percentages)

Pre-wedding behaviours	%
Fitness behaviours	
Exercise more	79.5
Join a gym	21.8
Get a personal trainer	11.4
Play more sport	10.0
Generally lose weight & tone up	0.1
Eating behaviours	
Healthy eating plan	74.3
Low-fat diet	21.3
Low-carb diet	15.1
Take laxatives	1.3
Cut alcohol consumption	0.1
Low GI diet	0.1
Celebrity Slim Shake diet	0.1
Gastric banding	0.1
Other beauty-related products/services	
Manicure	77.4
Facial	63.4
Massage	57.1
Fake tan (home or spray tan)	46.3
Solarium tan	7.8
Sun tan	6.0
Use firming gels	7.1
Dental care	
Home teeth whitening	32.9
Teeth polished by dentist	20.4
Professional teeth whitening	19.9
Orthodontic work (e.g., teeth straightening, tooth crowned)	0.5
Cosmetic enhancements	
Permanent hair removal	10.9
Skin brightening	3.4
Other cosmetic surgery	1.1
Breast enlargement	1.0
Breast reduction	0.7
Microdermabrasion	0.3
Botox	0.1

had a significantly greater BMI ($M = 26.40$, $SD = 5.47$) than brides who did not plan to follow such eating plans ($M = 25.24$, $SD = 5.50$), $t(846) = -2.25$, $p < .05$, and also wished to lose more weight before their wedding ($M = 10.11\text{kg}$, $SD = 9.66$; $M = 7.74\text{kg}$, $SD = 8.43$), $t(849) = -2.88$, $p < .01$. At a more extreme level, a small percentage of brides (1.3%) also intended to take laxatives, and one bride even planned to have gastric banding.

Table 1 also shows that manicures, facials and massages were popular beauty-related services for these

engaged women. Over 60 per cent of the sample intended to tan their bodies before the wedding, suggesting that being tanned is important to many brides. Of concern is that 13.8 per cent planned to solarium or sun tan. In terms of cosmetic dental enhancements, over 50 per cent of brides intended to have their teeth whitened (either professionally or at home) for the wedding. A further 11 per cent planned to have permanent hair removal. A small proportion of brides (3%) intended to have some kind of cosmetic procedure (e.g. botox) or breast enhancement.

The number of behaviours participants intended to engage in was calculated as an overall index of motivation to alter appearance. Brides intending to engage in more appearance behaviours were further from their wedding date, $r(824) = .14$, $p < .01$, wished to lose a greater amount of weight, $r(824) = .15$, $p < .01$ and had been told by a greater number of people that they should lose weight for the wedding, $r(824) = .17$, $p < .01$. No relationship was found between age and the number of health and beauty-related behaviours brides intended to engage in, $r(875) = -.02$, $p > .05$, suggesting that brides of all ages were equally as invested in their appearance.

Important aspects of the wedding day

Participants were asked to rate different aspects of the wedding day in terms of their importance to them. From Table 2 it can be seen that all aspects of the wedding day were quite important (means greater than 3.6 on a five-point scale). Not surprisingly,

Table 2. Means (and standard deviations) for the rated importance of individual aspects of the wedding day

Important aspects of the day	<i>M</i>
1 Enjoying the day	4.89 (.36)
2 Guests having a good time	4.61 (.63)
3 Fitting into the wedding dress	4.49 (.74)
4 Feeling beautiful	4.46 (.69)
5 Wedding photography	4.36 (.82)
6 Looking good	4.34 (.71)
7 Good food	4.23 (.75)
8 Everyone getting along	4.14 (.84)
9 Impressing your fiancé	4.09 (1.03)
10 The wedding night	4.07 (.91)
11 Perfect hair	3.78 (.92)
12 Flawless makeup	3.76 (.98)
13 The weather	3.68 (1.00)
14 Good wine	3.64 (1.10)

Table 3. Means (standard deviations) for the subscales of the importance of different aspects of the wedding day and their correlations with other variables

<i>Important aspects of the day</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Proximity to wedding</i>	<i>Desired weight loss</i>	<i>Pressure to lose weight</i>
Subscales					
1 Enjoyment	4.34 (.52)	.09*	-.04	-.02	.00
2 Appearance/beauty	4.17 (.65)	-.01	.08*	.09**	.13**
3 Impressing others	4.16 (.64)	-.12**	.07	.00	.06
4 The weather	3.68 (1.00)	-.09*	.03	-.01	-.03

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

enjoying the day and guests having a good time were rated as the most important individual items. However, these were closely followed by the appearance-focused items of fitting into the wedding dress, feeling beautiful, the wedding photography and looking good. In terms of the factorial subscales, enjoyment was the most important aspect, followed by appearance, impressing others and the weather (see Table 3).

Table 3 also displays the correlation coefficients between the different aspects of the wedding day and age, proximity to wedding day, desired weight loss and pressure to lose weight. It can be seen that age was significantly positively associated with enjoyment and significantly negatively correlated with the importance of impressing others and having good weather. Interestingly, no relationship was found between age and the importance of appearance-related aspects of the wedding day (i.e. fitting into the dress, feeling beautiful, looking good, perfect hair, flawless makeup). However, these were positively associated with time to wedding, desired weight loss and increased pressure to lose weight.

Discussion

The present study examined the pre-wedding health and beauty practices, bridal body weight ideals, sources of pressure to lose weight, age effects and importance of appearance relative to other aspects of the wedding day in a large sample of over 800 Australian brides-to-be. In support of previous research (e.g. Neighbors & Sobal, 2008; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008), we found that 85 per cent of engaged women aspired to an ideal wedding weight considerably lower (18lbs) than their current weight, and that a variety of methods were to be employed to achieve this ideal. Given these brides-to-be were approximately ten-and-a-half months away from

their wedding days, this desired weight loss appears healthy and achievable. However, close to 35 per cent of participants were going to follow a low-fat or low-carbohydrate diet and a small percentage of brides-to-be intended to take laxatives, follow a 'celebrity slim shake diet' or get gastric banding before their wedding. Unhealthy weight control practices such as these have been linked to the development and maintenance of eating pathology (Polivy & Herman, 2002; Steffen, Mitchell, Roerig, & Lancaster, 2007; Stice, 2002), placing these brides at risk of what the popular press terms 'bride-orexia', anorexia nervosa specific to brides (Nuijens & Billias, 2004).

Brides also intended to partake in a number of other pre-wedding beauty practices such as tanning, teeth whitening, manicures and facials to ensure they looked 'perfect' for the big day. While the majority of these behaviours are relatively benign, some can be potentially damaging to one's health. For example, close to 14 per cent of brides intended to solarium tan or sun tan in preparation for the wedding day. In view of the fact that both sun and solarium exposure are considered 'a central risk factor for the development of skin cancers' (Cafri et al., 2006, p. 199), this intended behaviour is potentially harmful for the health of Australian brides. As such, the perception that tanned women are healthier and more attractive needs to be targeted (Banerjee et al., 2008; Danoff-Burg & Mosher, 2006; Jackson & Aiken, 2000). Likewise, brides-to-be should be more informed of the risks associated with teeth whitening (Tredwin, Naik, Lewis, & Scully, 2006).

The present study also showed that, in relation to the wedding day as a whole, enjoying the day was rated as the most important factor. The bride's appearance, however, was not far from her mind. Fitting into the wedding dress, feeling beautiful and the wedding photos were also rated as highly important aspects of the wedding day. Given that,

on average brides had an ideal wedding weight over 18lbs lighter than their current weight (corresponding to at least one dress size), it is not surprising that these aspects of the day were salient. It is possible that some brides, similar to Neighbors and Sobal's (2008) brides, may have purchased wedding gowns smaller than their current size as an incentive to lose weight before the wedding. In support, in response to the question of had anyone suggested they should lose weight for the wedding, one bride in the present study reported 'my dress says so'. A number of women also felt pressure to lose weight from other people, with one-third of the brides in the present study reporting that someone had advised them to lose weight before the wedding. As predicted, this pressure to lose weight was more evident among heavier women and came mainly from the bride's parents (mothers in particular), fiancé, friends or sales assistants at bridal stores. In general samples, perceived pressure to be thin and lose weight has been shown to lead to body dissatisfaction, dieting and negative affect (Stice, 2002), as well as binge eating behaviour (Stice, Presnell, & Spangler, 2002). In addition, women with bulimic symptomatology have been shown to attempt to change themselves to fit others (e.g. partner's) expectations (Schembri & Evans, 2008), a process likely to be exacerbated by the pressure to lose weight surrounding weddings.

Reviews of body image across the adult lifespan (e.g. Tiggemann, 2004) generally indicate that the relative importance of body weight and shape decreases with age. However, this does not appear to be the case among women preparing for their weddings. Regardless of age, appearance aspects of the wedding day were just as important to both younger and older brides. Brides, young and old alike, were invested in their appearance in terms of their intent to partake in pre-wedding appearance improvement behaviours such as tanning, exercising more and cosmetic enhancement. In addition, women of all ages planned to lose weight before the wedding. The findings indicate that appearance, and weight in particular, are indeed very salient components of the whole wedding day for brides.

Such a large investment in appearance has been associated with poorer body image outcomes (Cash et al., 2004) and may become particularly problematic for brides if their ideal wedding appearance is not being achieved. The resulting body dissatisfaction is likely to be exacerbated by not fitting into the wedding dress or being told to lose weight by others, potentially leading to even greater body dissatisfaction

and eating disturbance as the wedding approaches (Stice, 2002). Certainly, the enjoyment of the wedding day itself is likely to be compromised. On the other hand, if pre-wedding weight loss is achieved, it may lead to initial gains in self-esteem and body satisfaction, but at some cost to health (e.g. extreme dietary restriction). And what happens after the wedding if weight is subsequently regained, as is most likely? Accordingly, future research could usefully track the course of body dissatisfaction and eating behaviours in newly married women. In addition, clinicians need to be mindful of the potential risks associated with wedding appearance management, especially for their already weight concerned patients. Interventions to promote positive bridal body image might usefully focus on being a 'healthy' bride, so that women learn that having a healthy diet (rather than slim shakes or eating no carbohydrates) and looking after themselves is ultimately more important than emulating the ideal thin, toned and tanned bride on their wedding day.

The results of the present study should be interpreted in light of some potential limitations. Although an online cross-sectional survey design was successfully utilized to reach a larger and geographically more varied sample of engaged women than in previous research, the brides so recruited may not be representative of all engaged women and may be more invested in their appearance than brides in general. Future research should aim to sample brides closer to their wedding day recruited from a greater variety of sources. In addition, while the study was able to examine specific wedding-related behaviours, the questionnaire was necessarily kept short to increase potential participation. Future research could usefully examine wedding weight loss ideals and dieting behaviour using standardized established measures. Other factors related to well-being, such as stress levels, may also be important for bridal health. The inclusion of a comparison group of non-engaged women, and designation of whether brides were preparing for their first or subsequent wedding, would also be methodological improvements.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present study confirms the results of previous research (Neighbors & Sobal, 2008; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2008; Sobal et al., 1999) indicating that engaged women of all ages are highly invested in their wedding day appearance and that their appearance is a central factor to the success of the wedding day as a whole. The present study also shows that engaged women intend to partake in a number of pre-wedding

beauty practices and weight loss techniques, some less healthy than others, to ensure they look perfect for their special day. What remains unknown is whether partaking in these beauty-enhancing practices and placing such a great emphasis on appearance for the *one* day actually carries lasting harm.

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Author biographies

IVANKA PRICHARD, BSc (Hons in Psychology), is an Associate Lecturer in Psychology at Flinders University, South Australia. Her major research interests are in the areas of exercise, health and body image. She also recently got married.

MARIKA TIGGEMANN, PhD, is a Professor in Psychology at Flinders University, South Australia. Her major research interest is in the area of body image. She teaches courses in Personality, and the Psychology of Food, Eating and Body Image.
