

Psychiatry and Beauty

Few people realize the vital role played by beauty care in the rehabilitation of our mentally ill. Even fewer understand the importance of personal appearance in maintaining and strengthening the mental health of the normal woman.

BY EUGENE D. FLEMING *Photos by Robert J. Smith*

For Mrs. L., twenty-nine, the wife of a successful engineer and the mother of two pre-school children, life had inexplicably lost all meaning. Emotionally numbed by an overwhelming mental depression, she cared for nothing in the world, least of all herself. Before her mental illness, she had been an attractive, energetic woman who had taken pride in her appearance. Now, a recently admitted patient in a mental institution, on her way to receive her first treatment, she looked bedraggled and unkempt. Her dark brown hair, once lustrous and neat in a page boy cut, was coarse and uncombed; her eyebrows had grown bushy and wild; her face was a pasty white. Walking with a nurse to the treatment room, she shuffled listlessly along, as though her leaden mood were a physical burden.

When she left that room an hour and a half later, she looked—and felt—like a different woman. The trace of a smile was on her lips; her step had regained some of its old buoyancy. The darkness of her grim despair had been brightened, at least partly. What psychiatric wonder had worked this quick transformation? A new drug? Electroshock? Insulin therapy? Nothing of the sort. Mrs. L. had received nothing more than a beauty

treatment in the hospital's beauty salon.

Few people are aware that every progressive mental institution, both private and public, has a beauty salon staffed by professional beauticians, and that every female patient is given a beauty treatment shortly after admittance, followed by periodic grooming checks thereafter. The results are not always as dramatic as in the case of Mrs. L., but they are rarely completely negative.

A Therapeutic Tool

A severely depressed woman who was in the salon at the same time Mrs. L. was there gave little indication that the beauty treatment was having any effect. Her face remained expressionless, and she showed no interest in what was done to her. But then, as she was about to leave the salon to go back to her ward with an attendant, she dipped down to take one last feminine peek in the mirror at her new hair-do—a small but significant sign that the woman had not completely forsaken herself, that she still cared. "It's realistic, and therefore mentally healthy, to care how you look to other people," says Dr. Harry H. Brunt, Jr., medical director of Ancora State Hospital in New Jersey. "That's why we consider beauty treatments for

female patients an important therapeutic tool here. Often, the better a woman looks, the better she feels. Appearance is equated with dignity," he continues. "An attractive appearance can help a woman regain some of the sense of self-worth that she's lost."

Obviously, psychiatrists attach considerable importance to a woman's regard for her own appearance. Says Dr. Lena Levine, member of a panel of professional consultants serving the National Association for Mental Health: "If you have self-respect, you take some trouble about your looks, and that healthfully gives you more self-respect." In other words, beauty care makes a vital contribution to the mental health of every woman, sick or sane.

"If I feel low," says Mrs. Ruth K., a Manhattan housewife, "I take extra pains with make-up. It's not only good for me, but for the whole family. When a woman feels she looks her best, she radiates a pleasant attitude and gives her entire family a lift." Another New York woman, the wife of a department store executive, expresses an equally healthy attitude: "Cosmetics give me the feeling that I am making the best of what God gave me, and that's a good feeling." As the New York City psychol-

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