

# Seeing is Deceiving

- Becky Twaalfhoven

My parents always told me not to compare myself to other people because I have no idea what is behind their looks and achievements. As the second youngest of seven children, I can personally attest that this is true. I have witnessed the exhaustion of medical school while outsiders see only accomplishment and commitment; I have felt the stress of buying a house and getting married and having children, even though these are supposed to be milestones of success. Others may be jealous and wish these successes for themselves without knowing the stress and exhaustion and emotion poured into it all. Jealousy can be motivating, but it can also be deceiving. Admiring an athlete for his or her physical fitness can kick start a healthier exercise regimen, which is usually a positive influence; but admiration can turn into unhealthy obsession.

One particularly dangerous area is “fitspiration,” a combination of fitness inspiration that (theoretically) involves gaining body and exercise inspiration by viewing other people’s appearances and habits. However, especially in terms of online sources, what you see is a select, perfected version of the subject. Greatist.com, a health and well-being site, recently published an article detailing the extreme methods fitness models employ to prepare for a photo shoot. According to the article, models manipulate their carbohydrate and water intake to extreme levels in the days leading up to the shoot in order to maximize muscle definition and skin dryness. The effects of such manipulation are ironic: the energetic and strong athlete who epitomizes health in a photo most likely felt lethargic, weak, and dizzy during the shoot.

The purpose of this example is to show the unspoken behind-the-scenes behind appearances. The same holds true for personal encounters with unfamiliar peers or even strangers. To be jealous of classmates for academic achievement is pointless; it is impossible to know every factor that played into those results. Comparing scores on an exam, for example, is often not simply a reflection of intelligence. It’s possible that one student with a lower score had to work or study for another test, or may have been sick or exhausted. The constant competition that is high school has no time or space for reasons, so we have come to judge based on appearance.

An open mind and a healthy dose of perspective are essential for self-confidence, because recognizing other people’s individual traits and their backgrounds will give you confidence in yours. Remember that body type depends on heredity, metabolism, exercise, diet, sleep, and stress, among other factors; remember that academic performance depends on commitment and organization, but also a host of uncontrollable factors like test dates, work schedules, emergencies, and illnesses. Work for the purpose of self-improvement is the most satisfying kind of work, and it does not involve comparison with any other person’s appearance of success.