

Does photo retouching create unrealistic expectations?

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There's been some controversy regarding Kelly Clarkson's recent Self magazine cover; apparently the photo was retouched to make her look much thinner than she really is. You can read the details [here](#), but Self is not the only offender. Pick up any fashion or fitness magazine at your local newsstand; the models look flawless. Though rationally you might know that they've been made up, airbrushed, thinnified, and detailed, these images still propagate a standard of beauty that is, for most women, impossible to achieve.

Unfortunately, this potentially harmful practice is not limited to fashion magazines. Take a look around your local gym. Chances are, you'll see advertisements for the latest group exercise class or fitness trend. The same sleek, toned bodies that you see in magazines appear on promotional posters and brochures. Unfortunately, these images of (digitally enhanced) perfection often cultivate an unrealistic expectation for what kind of results the average woman could expect to see by participating in the advertised activity.

My purpose here is not to debate the morality of photo retouching. It is simply to alert you to the fact that, although the great majority of fitness companies have good intentions and really are in business to help you improve your health and well-being, they are still just that- *businesses*. As such, they are going to create shiny, appealing advertisements to catch the eye of the consumer.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't join that boot camp class, cycling group, or fitness challenge. It is simply a reminder to keep expectations in perspective. You must learn to look past glitzy sales pitches and evaluate your progress based on standards that are grounded in reality. Just because you don't finish the program looking like one of the poster girls (and you probably won't), it does not mean you are a failure or that the program was worthless. In fact, very few people can completely change their bodies in a matter of weeks; if you lose a few pounds, increase your energy, and boost your self-esteem, these are indicators of success and you should view them as such. As it is often said, don't let perfect be the enemy of good. You're much more likely to be pleased with the end result if you can do this.

Below are some examples of unrealistic "perfect" thinking, followed by more realistic "good" thoughts to counter them.

Unrealistic: I'm going to lose twenty pounds by the end of this month.

Realistic: I can aim to lose a pound or two per week. Any more than that is unlikely- and, in most cases, unhealthy.

Unrealistic: I'm going to go from a size 12 to a size 2 in a matter of weeks.

Realistic: I may drop a size or two.

Unrealistic: I'm going to completely eliminate all my cellulite.

Realistic: I can't expect to get rid of every problem area, but the overall loss of body fat will result in the reduction of some cellulite.

Unrealistic: I'm going to get six pack abs.

Realistic: I could see a reduction in abdominal fat and some toning of the core muscles.

Unrealistic: This is going to be nothing but fun; I'm going to love every minute.

Realistic: There are going to be tough days when I want to quit, but my perseverance will pay off and I'll experience a great sense of accomplishment when I push through the hard times.

Unrealistic: I'm going to feel great from day one.

Realistic: I'll probably have some- or a lot of- soreness if I'm doing something my body isn't used to, but it's temporary.



A photographer edits images. Photo by [Jocelyn Foye](#).

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