

If you're a female, you'll most likely recognize this cycle. Some of you may have participated in it (I know I have). Beauty can be highly prized and standards are set based on geography and income levels (among other factors).

When we compare ourselves to those standards, it often triggers the cycle with our "inner selves" and with our peers, taking up far too much head space and sometimes – extreme amounts of time and money.

This often starts in high school and is repeated in ritual female bonding and grooming sessions (two or more women getting ready together).

### The You're Not Pretty Enough Cycle



### So what are we actually *thinking* when we participate in the cycle?

An analysis of online conversations about this reveals that what we're thinking is often in conflict with what we say.



1. Participating in this cycle doesn't make anyone feel comfortable; in fact it generally makes us feel crappy.
2. Don't assume that the person who says "I am fat" is putting him or herself down. An objectively fat person can also have strong self-acceptance and self esteem.
3. Don't assume that people are fishing for compliments. That's usually not the case and minimizing those feelings with a sentiment such as "shut up, you're tiny!" reinforces unhealthy stereotypes such as thin = good, and fat = bad, and that beauty should be weighted heavily when we assess ourselves.
4. Often, we simply want an acknowledgement that we're feeling insecure about our looks.
5. The person initiating the cycle may not even be consciously aware they're doing it, or that the initiation triggers others' own insecurities about their looks.
6. As Pervocracy stated, when this cycle starts, it's not always that a person wants to hear "you're pretty;" rather, we want to hear that "pretty" is not the definition of our worth.

Shutting a person down before confirming this can often make the initiator feel shameful, and question the sincerity of the friendship. On the other hand, the person on the receiving end of someone's negative self-talk has the right to state how he or she feels when hearing a friend put themselves down.

## How to respond when others engage in negative self-talk

### Determine the need & respond accordingly

Does she need a quick-fix validation? (e.g., "Do I look OK?")

Does she persist? "Are you sure? I mean, I don't know..."

Is she engaging in negative self-talk, such as "I'm fat" or "I'm ugly"?

Use your best judgment and choose what works best with your style and the situation. If any of these result in an awkward incident, you can always follow-up via email, later in person, etc.

"Yeah, you look great."

Dig a little deeper. "What don't you like exactly?"

We like Captain Awkward's advice: "When you tell me things like that, what would you like me to say or do?" Then wait and listen to what they say. The beauty of this is if they're cycling inside their own head and don't even know they're doing it (remember those habits) then it forces them to consider it, and possibly admit/stop it. If they actually want something specific from you – e.g., "just a friendly ear" – it gives them permission to ask for it. Asking a kind, sincere question in response to something you don't understand is rarely a bad approach.

OR

"I'm sorry you feel that way...want to go to a movie?" [or something else distracting and fun]

OR

Acknowledge their feelings and remind the person that there are many people who love them. "You're not ugly, and you have a lot of people who think you're pretty awesome. We/they can't all be wrong."

OR

"Please don't talk about my friend that way." And then...let that sit. The quiet gives them space to consider this and actively using "my friend" lets them know you care.

OR

OR

Sometimes a compassionate but playfully sarcastic, "oh yeah, you're super ugly" will do the trick. But usually between close friends/partners who already possess that type of dynamic in their relationship.

If this encounter occurs between you and someone you don't know that well, you can start with "Oh we've all felt that way. Here's how I move on from it..." If it continues (and it's something/someone you feel comfortable engaging with), then you can lead into the other conversation starters above.

**Some Don'ts.** Being "pretty" doesn't matter to everyone. A person can objectively look at themselves and think *I'm average looking and that's not only fine, it also means that appearance is not an important factor in how I value myself.* If someone in that situation says, "you know I'm not really one of the beautiful people." responding with: "Of course you are!" can come across as annoying, insensitive and reinforcing to the notion that beauty is priority over all else, such as knowledge or kindness or talent. **To the initiator,** phrasing your insecurity as "I feel insecure about my looks," is more productive than "I feel fat/ugly" because the latter can put someone in the position of feeling like they have to argue with you or change the subject – something that's again, uncomfortable.