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TATTOO

The Invaluable Compendium for Dermatologists

Types

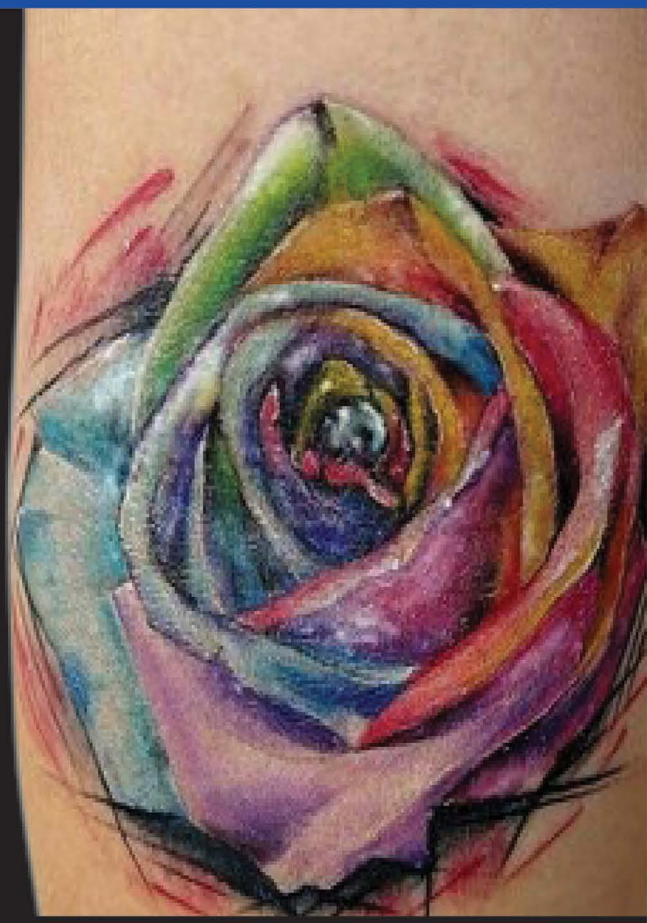
Adverse effects

Treatment

Tips & Tricks

Obsessions

Other aspects



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Shashikumar BM
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Foreword

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JAYPEE

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Chapter 4

Psychosocial Aspects of Tattoos

Smitha Prabhu S

INTRODUCTION

Tattooing is an art known to humankind since prehistoric times when the Paleolithic man decorated himself with scars made of flint knife, and it serves many purposes like ornamentation of the body, assertion of ideas and beliefs, exhibiting affection for the loved one, showing allegiance to certain sects, and even to increase self-esteem. Occasionally tattoos also mask defects like a vitiligo patch or a bad scar, or even a mentally perceived inadequacy. In certain African cultures the number and intricacy of tattoos indicate gender, physical age, mental maturity and even stature of individual in the social strata.[1]

The psychology and sociology of tattooing has been well-studied and there are varied and conflicting opinions. Tattooing has been considered as a primitive substitute for clothing, as a desire to beautify the body, a way of exhibiting bravado and the urge to identify with the in-crowd.[2]

TYPES OF INDIVIDUALS WHO GET TATTOO

Before the 1960s, tattoos remained culture specific and ritualistic. American seamen were the first group of individuals to attain tattoos, closely followed by bikers. Later, fraternity boys and celebrities took up the trait, and by the 21st century tattooing has become a common mainstream decorative activity, so much so that it has been labeled "modern day social branding".

There is a high incidence of tattooing in delinquents, people with personality disorders and prisoners. Tattooing is a sign of elevated "status" and exhibition of masochistic personality. Prisoners with tattoo were shown to be more narcissistic, more positive about their body image and had less guilt associated with sex.[3] Mostly it is normal people who undergo tattooing as

a whim or fancy. The Harris Poll survey on tattoos in America showed that around 21% of people had a tattoo, and most were in the age group of 30–39. About one-third of tattooed people felt tattoos made them strong, sexy and attractive.[4] Males undergo more tattooing and the ratio is 5:1. Tattooing is mostly undertaken during vacations and while intoxicated.[5]

A German study on personality differences showed that tattooed individuals are more extroverted, sensation seeking and are in the search of a unique identity.[6] Adults with tattoo are shown to be more sexually active, with likelihood of more high-risk behaviors in various studies.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPORTANCE TO THE INDIVIDUAL

The factors for getting body tattooed vary from individual to individual. A decision toward getting a tattoo involves these three elements in varying degrees: (1) symbolism of the act, (2) exhibitionistic and (3) masochistic attitudes.[5]

The main factors behind getting tattooed are:

- Rebellion and expression of individuality (Figs. 4.1 and 4.2)
- Enhancement of appearance and sexual attraction
- Love of art and creativity
- As a pictorial representation of some personal significance



Fig. 4.1: Lion tattoo conveying courage, strength, pride and royalty.
Source: Dr Shashikumar BM.



Fig. 4.2: Individual personality.
Source: Dr Shashikumar BM.



Fig. 4.3: Family members name tattoo.
Source: Dr Shashikumar BM.

- Remembering loved ones, family members (Fig. 4.3) or celebrity (Fig. 4.4)
- Group affiliation and commitment
- Cultural, spiritual or religious importance.

Some people also like to test their pain endurance or try to overcome the fear of needle by getting tattooed. Often it is done when in a state of



Fig. 4.4: Celebrity tattoo on the forearm.
Source: Dr Shashikumar BM.

intoxication or succumbing to peer pressure.[7] To most, tattoo signifies power and indestructibility. Immediately after tattooing, there is more body appreciation, higher self-esteem and lower anxiety. The tattooed person perceives himself as livelier and better than his peers and feels indestructible.

WHAT THE TATTOO SIGNIFIES ABOUT A PERSON?

Someone who gets a tattoo or personal, rather than religious or cultural purposes portrays themselves as a brave person who thinks of themselves as eternal, and is willing to change their body permanently. Tattooing increases the self-esteem in susceptible people. People who get tattoos done on prominent sites of their anatomy are attention seeking and want to stand out in a group.

Some groups and gangs have a mascot tattoo which enables individual members seem to belong closely to each other and to the group, and also enables members of large gangs to identify each other. Other reasons for getting a tattoo are memory of a loved one, displaying attitude or character trend like humor, love for literature, animal love, or to please a beloved of the opposite gender. The sexual character of tattooing is apparent in men who tattoo naked females on their forearms or trunk, and females in certain subcultures who tattoo their external genitalia to attract men.[2] A Bulgarian study considered unprofessional tattooing as symbols of autoaggression and self-infliction of injury, a means of resistance to authority and norms and a tendency to mimic the Western culture.[8]



Fig. 4.5: Drawing of Om (Hindu religion tattoo).
Source: Dr Shashikumar BM.

Egoistic people draw attention to pertinent parts of their anatomy by tattooing beautiful images like butterflies and figurines. Tattoos depicting the Egyptian ankh, Hindu Om (Fig. 4.5), cross symbol and various deities in caricature soothe the psyche as well as impart a sense of indestructibility.[8] The decision to be pierced itself is an assertion of individuality and the design is often an escape from control and conformity. A person who submits to tattoo lives more in the present, and does not believe in the traditional earn and save concept of life.[9]

Psychologists consider tattooed individuals as narcissistic, uninhibited, impulsive, emotionally immature, neurotic people prone to exhibitionism and masochism and delinquency. Tattoos also compensate for physical and mental handicap.[10] There are also contradictory studies stating that tattoo seekers show integrated, adaptive and socially acceptable behavior patterns. People with multiple tattoos have more personality disorders including maladjustment, as compared to those with a single tattoo.[5]

In a certain subtype of individuals, who keep on acquiring tattoos and almost covering their whole bodies, it can be considered as an adaptive as well as addictive behavior (Figs. 4.6A to D).

COMMON TATTOO DESIGNS AND WHAT THEY SIGNIFY?

Tattoos have been broadly placed into three categories:[5]

1. Mnemonic tattoos.
2. Erotic or decorative tattoos.
3. Philosophical tattoos.



Figs. 4.6A to D: Whole body tattoo. He used to get tattooed in every fair he attends. *Source:* Dr Shashikumar BM.

Tattoos have been classified into various subclasses by Ferguson-Rayport et al. (Table 4.1):[11]

- A skull on the body suggests that one has conquered/is not afraid of death
- Teeth, fangs or jaws are used to intimidate others, especially by sports teams and gang members.

Tattooing is considered as a nonverbal means of communication. Offensive, abusive and erotic tattoos are often encountered in prisoners and army rejects who have neuropsychiatric problems.[5] There are studies correlating offensive tattoos to criminal behavior.

Table 4.1: Classification of tattoos.[11]

Type	*Subtype*	*Example*
1. Identification tattoos	• Emblems • Personal data • Life events	• Societies, committee, gangs • Initials, date of birth • Wedding, job
2. Love tattoos	• Idealized love • Mother • Sentimental • Pornographic	• Woman draped in flag, within a moon, etc. • Heart, flower, etc. inscribed with mother • Initials of lover • Nude woman, body parts
3. Bombastic and pseudoheroic tattoos		• Skull with cross bones • Dagger • Panther
4. Inviting fate		• Card with no. 13 • Horseshoe with good luck
5. Religious and commemorative		• Jesus • Cross • Hindu Om • Egyptian ankh
6. Private symbols		Significance is known only to the user
7. Miscellaneous		Animals, birds, flowers, butterflies

Tattoos indicating specific subtypes: the well-known Pachuco cross tattoo (a cross with three lines radiating upward, usually found on the web between the thumb and index finger) (Fig. 4.7) of Hispanic origin has been adopted by Western youth offenders.

"Jail house tattoos" are crude, often painfully etched into the skin and proclaim that one is brave and powerful, and is part of a larger group, rather than a lone individual. This is often seen in people belonging to prisons and camps. These often carry cryptic messages and identities.

In some female prisons, the passive lesbian partner is tattooed with the initials of her dominant lover on the right third finger. Worded tattoos often proclaim antisocial behavior (e.g. born to be a rebel, I hate police) and devout people have religious tattoos.

TATTOOS AND THE PSYCHE: INDIAN EXPERIENCE

There are no exhaustive studies or case reports on the psychology and sociology of tattooing in India. On personal interviews with patients with tattoos, varying responses given were:

- A book lover and music lover wanted to tattoo related themes on her inner wrist for her next birthday as she felt it will make her happy whenever she sees it.

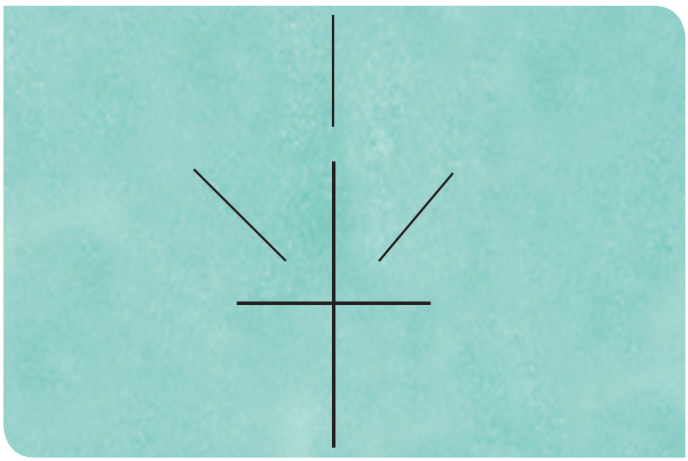

Fig. 4.7: The Pachuco Cross.

- One person said that his favorite rock star has a tattoo, and he too wanted it.
- A newly wedded couple got their partner's initials tattooed on their ring fingers in lieu of the traditional ring.
- A lady, who lost her mother, tattooed her mother's name surrounded by four stars, depicting herself and three siblings, on her wrist.
- A dog lover has tattooed paw prints on her arm to express eternal love for her dog.
- There were also multiple tattoos of Tibetan chakra, Hindu Om and Chinese alphabets which symbolized power and rebirth.
- One person with multiple tattoos said she is addicted to tattooing, and the pain of tattoo needle gives her a sense of serenity.
- A person has tattooed all his important dates in various parts of his body (birth, first day of job, marriage, separation).
- A girl tattooed a Phoenix after a bad romantic breakup.
- One man had name of his two daughters on each arm.

A highly intelligent writer, who on asking about his tattoo of his favorite character (Arya Stark of Game of Thrones fantasy book series), replied eloquently that "A tattoo is a kind of relationship, or so it felt. You realize that it is going to be there forever and taking a plunge to that kind of commitment means that the tattoo you want for yourself is something that defines way more than anything or anyone can make you feel and understand. May be its something that makes you feel adequate, something that makes you strong or sometimes its just there to complete nothing in particular. It makes you feel good, confident even and you are proud of whatever it is that is a part of your body now".

All these people had tattoos mainly on their wrists, arms and posterior neck.

TATTOO AND ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

In 2008, "Ghajini", a hugely successful Indian film was released, which depicted an important role for tattoos: a man with anterograde amnesia who tattooed his body with different images whenever he gained fragments of memory, so as to recover his memory to avenge the death of his beloved. The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo is a psychological thriller novel by a Swedish author, which has a troubled criminal turned vigilante teenager, Lisbeth Salander, who has multiple piercings and tattoos, including a dragon tattoo prominently displayed on her left shoulder blade. She has had a troubled childhood and is socially aggressive.

TATTOO REMOVAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BEHAVIOR

Although the craze for tattooing is on the rise, an equal number of people desire tattoo removal and many a times they are in a hurry to do so for various personal, social or occupational reasons. Getting tattoos of the names of the current love interest leads to a lot of psychological distress if there is a change of heart. Dissatisfaction or boredom with an existing tattoo is the main reason sometimes for removal of tattoo. Feelings of low self-esteem, stigmatization and anxiety are common in patients seeking tattoo removal. Sometimes abnormal methods are employed in anger or frustration to get rid of tattoo or bad memory due to tattoo (Figs. 4.8 and 4.9). When not succeeded, frustration increases and goes to depression.



Fig. 4.8: Individual tried to erase the tattoo by burning the skin.
Source: Dr Shashikumar BM.



Fig. 4.9: Same patient when not succeeded retattooed the area to camouflage it. *Source:* Dr Shashikumar BM.

CONCLUSION

Tattooing is a growing form of body art, indulged in by people irrespective of gender, age or station in life. These serve varying purposes from mitigation of boredom, love for art, expression of ideals, love for living and nonliving objects, as well as belonging to a group or sect, and occasionally as a form of body harm or aggression. Tattoos are here to stay, and innovative means of expression are being explored day by day. Though majority of the persons indulging in tattooing are ordinary people from varying sects of life, an underlying psychological problem should be explored in those with multiple tattoos, large body area tattoos, images depicting violence and nudity and tattooing of unusual body parts.

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TATTOO—The Invaluable Compendium for Dermatologists

This is the first Indian book on the topic of 'tattoos'. It includes all about tattoos, like historical aspects, composition, methods, medical tattoos, complications, and its management, tattoo removal methods including lasers. It contains more than 150 images on tattoo complications and tattoo removal. It is a ready-reckoner for the physicians, dermatologists, professional tattoo artists and for all those who are interested in tattoos.



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