

Do Sane People Get "Revenge Surgery"?

by Kate Sullivan, Associate Editor



You had a bad breakup. Maybe your boyfriend ended things via text message. Maybe your girlfriend decided you two were moving too fast only days after you moved across the country to be with her. Maybe your spouse cheated and wasn't sorry. And maybe afterward, you pulled a Gwyneth Paltrow in *Sliding Doors* and cut and colored your hair just to try something new—who hasn't? But would you go under the knife?

Today, the *New York Post* features divorcees who did just that below the headline "I Had Revenge Surgery." I hate seeing that phrase in the tabloids (even more than "Stars Without Makeup"). I just can't imagine revenge being the true motivation for any sane person's elective surgery. Many of the divorcees in the story were of a certain age, of a certain moneyed class, and in a certain body rut where they might have considered injections and lifts whether they had just gone through a traumatic divorce or not. By categorizing their cosmetic procedures as "revenge surgery," I worry that the story makes such a thing sound legitimate. "Revenge surgery" enters a creepy *Death Becomes Her* territory, where a woman's appearance consumes her personality, and her whole goal in looking hot is to draw in a man and punish a man (and maybe another woman, too).

Back in 2007, *Allure* (tongue firmly in cheek) examined beauty products that catered to the newly dumped, from comically-named nail polish (Orly's Pawn the Ring) to a London surgery group's "Post-Divorce Pick-Me-Up Package," which included breast enhancement, liposuction, teeth whitening, and Botox. The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons rightly chastised those doctors for "incredibly unsavory marketing." But is it more than unsavory? I asked [Elie Levine, a New York City plastic surgeon](#), about the ethics of "revenge surgery."

What do you think when you hear the phrase "revenge surgery"? Alarm bells go off in my head. It's definitely a catchy phrase, if you're looking to publish an article on it and get peoples' attention. Plastic surgery's popularity in the mainstream pop culture is a double edged sword—it definitely generates a lot of interest in the things that we [cosmetic surgeons] do, and it allows people to gain information on a lot of the aesthetic care out there that they may not otherwise have if it wasn't such a public topic. But at the same time, [that popularity] makes it seem like cosmetic procedures are a very easy thing to make quick decisions about; that it's no different from deciding what you have for lunch today—that you could just do it on whim. That you could do this for "revenge." These are still surgical procedures that you really need to think through before you're undergoing them.

Do you think it's OK to want to freshen up your looks after a break up? I think it's extremely reasonable. It makes sense for someone who has gone through a major life process—whether it's a significant amount of weight loss or they've gone through a divorce, to consider a cosmetic procedure; to say, 'I'm going back out there; I'm going to be dating again. What do I really look like? What do I want to look like? What's important to me?' But at the same time, I wouldn't encourage someone who just found out that their spouse is cheating on them and that they're getting divorced to rush over to the local plastic surgeon or dermatologist's office to undergo something. Similarly, I'd hope that the practitioner who they go to see wouldn't be in a rush just to do things, that they're really doing [a procedure] at the right time for the patient.

Have you ever turned patients down for smaller procedures, like injections? The threshold is definitely smaller for things that are temporary, but I've turned patients away for little things and for big things. The two major reasons to turn patients away is 1) unreasonable expectations—they're hoping to get much more than the procedure can do for them, so in the end they're not going to be happy with it. 2) They're not really emotionally there for it. A 19-year-old patient coming in and seeking breast augmentation might not be emotionally mature, or someone going through a divorce might not be emotionally ready.