

Tattoos: Changing Fashion Fads

by James Govier

The young man waited in uneasy anticipation while the artist prepared his tools. Rapid short breaths were making the young man's heart pound even faster as doubts circled in his mind: "Maybe I shouldn't go through with this." "Should I say something?" "What am I getting myself into?" Even though the young man was still undecided about actually going through with it, the artist prepared his arm for the havoc that was about to begin. "Relax," said the artist. "It never hurts as bad as you think." As he brought the needles up to the skin, the young man heard the faint buzz of the machine. The tiny needles began puncturing his skin; he flinched at first, but found that the pain wasn't as excruciating as he had originally thought. The artist began to work his magic. It was as if he was painting a picture on the young man's arm. After about 45 minutes, the artist stopped, admired his work and exclaimed, "There you go, son. You now have a tattoo." The young man looked at his arm, and through the blood and swelling, he could see the image he had chosen. He had now joined the ranks of many people who are turning their bodies into human canvases. In fact, over the last decade there has been a sharp increase in the number of people that are getting tattoos. Since the art of tattooing has become so popular, the reasons people are getting them are changing, the risks are becoming more controversial, and tattoo removal has become more common.

Whereas the process of getting a tattoo hasn't changed that much over the years, the reasons that people are getting them have. One of the most popular reasons is that it is a perfect way to rebel from the constraints of a conservative, uptight nation. As reported by James Gardner, a critic for the New York Post, "Body art allows people to reinvent themselves as rebels." Yet, in defacing their bodies to make some great social outcry against conformity, they are, in a way, hypocritically supporting the very idea they are trying to call arms against. With so many of today's teens getting these permanent modifications, they are all conforming to the idea that this is what they need to do to "stand out." Ironically, they are getting these permanent marks as a way to be cool or to fit in. Yet another reason for young people getting tattooed is that they want to associate with a certain group or crowd. For example, according to Jacci Gresham, a New Orleans tattoo artist, some people see rappers adorned with tattoos on TV and want to emulate them (Ewey). There are countless other examples. But, the bottom line is that youth today already try to have everything their favorite stars do, so why not get the same tattoo? With so many teens getting tattoos now, body art is no longer the rebellious art form that it used to be; it is now embraced by everyone. I think Gardner expressed it best when he wrote: "Tattoos have passed from bohemia and the inner city into our elite college campuses, only to end up in suburbia." One reason for the increase in tattooing among people of all ages is to show religious faith. People with religious tattoos, such as crosses and psalms, believe that these markings will bring them closer to God. They believe that this is a great way to show "an extreme expression of an extreme faith," explained Lori Jensen, Richard Flory, and Donald Miller, three researchers of evangelical tattooing (Briggs). So, while some people are getting tattoos for reasons of faith, others are getting tattoos for cosmetic reasons. Some women are actually getting their eyes tattooed so they don't have to put on eyeliner everyday, as stated by Howard Conn, a plastic surgery chief at the University of California at Irvine (Wilson). Clearly, there are a wide array of reasons for decorating one's body with tattoo art, and these reasons differ from those of previous generations.

While the reasons for getting a tattoo have changed, the risks associated with having this process done are still quite the same. And, they are controversial. This is illustrated in a December 1997 issue of Hepatitis Weekly. The article reported that A.L. Silverman, a Michigan doctor, found no evidence that tattooing was a factor for hepatitis. Silverman's study directly contradicted a previous study done by Myron Tong, a California doctor (Boyles and Key). Regardless of these two differing studies, there are some serious risks associated with unclean tattooing techniques. In fact, anytime the skin is "penetrated" there is a good chance of contracting an infection. So, someone with a tattoo must follow the proper after-care procedures to ward off unnecessary infections or other problems. These "problems" are varied, but one of the most common ones is an allergic reaction to the dye, especially for people with sensitive skin.

Although potential infections, allergic reactions, and other health risks need to be taken seriously, those considering a tattoo should be aware of additional risks. As much as tattooing is becoming accepted by people, there are still groups that put a social stigmatization on this art form. Where someone gets tattoos, how big the tattoos are, and what the tattoos are of are all-important factors in having one's tattoos accepted by some of the social groups today. For instance, the Air Force will not accept anyone that has discriminatory or racial tattoos as well as tattoos that can be seen outside one's clothing, as reported by Air Force Times from August of 2000 (Castellon). It also may be quite hard to find a job in today's world with tattoos that are visible while wearing clothing. For that reason, it would be wise for potential tattoo clients to consider the health and social risks, which are a source of controversy, before getting tattooed.

However, some people don't take the time to think through their decision to get a tattoo. Because many people get tattooed on a "whim," more and more "tattooed" want their body art removed. This is often a long, expensive, and very painful process. However, technological advances have made the process more effective and less painful. The most common ways of removing a tattoo these days is by laser. These lasers are designed to blast a laser beam into the pigment in the skin and break up the tiny particles in the cells. The tattoo pigment can then be absorbed into the blood stream. There are a few different ways lasers that can be used for removal: selective photothermolysis, ultrapulse CO₂, and photoderm PL. The first of the three, selective photothermolysis, targets only the skin cells which have dye in them and is said to leave almost no scarring, reported dermatologist Steven B. Snyder in a December 1997 issue of Men's Health. Snyder also indicated that smaller tattoos can be removed in two to four sessions, and the entire process costs about \$800 to \$1000. However, larger and more intricate tattoos can take about eight different sessions and cost anywhere from \$2,000 to \$3,000 (Geraci). While the same Men's Health article reported that the ultrapulse CO₂ is a little less expensive, ranging from \$1,250 for smaller tattoos and \$2,500 for larger ones and is known for leaving very little scarring, this laser doesn't just target the dyed skin, but burns off thin layers of undyed skin around the tattooed area. In contrast, the photoderm PL uses only one laser to burn off all of the different pigments. When interviewed for the Men's Health article, Barry Auster, a doctor at Laser Sculpting Center in Southfield, Missouri, said that this laser takes about one-third the time of the other lasers, but the outcome isn't quite as dependable, and the cost is still about the same (Geraci). However the studies in regards to this last laser differ a great deal. Cosmetic Surgery Times of July 2000 stated that patients who underwent treatments from this laser noticed no effect on their tattoos (Hannapel). Regardless, there are other means of removing tattoos besides lasers. These procedures were quite popular before laser treatments were available. One such treatment is called "excision." Excision occurs when a small tattoo is actually cut out and sewn back together. For larger tattoos a skin graft is taken from another part of the body and placed in the area where the tattoo had been. This process will always leave a scar in its place and stops the hair growth where it is placed. Since the melanin layer, or color-layer, of the skin is being removed, the spot where the tattoo was will no longer tan. Some more "crude" ways of removing would be dermabrasion and salabrasion. Dermabrasion is the practice of actually scraping off layers of skin until the tattoo is removed. While salabrasion uses a sander type instrument and physically "sands" off the layers of skin, both of these procedures do leave extensive and permanent scars. Yet, another alternative is to bleach the pigment in the skin, as written in Dermatology Times of July 2000 (Wilson). This is accomplished by using a bleach or acid on the tattoo needle and going over the tattoo with these solutions. As can be seen, there are different ways of removing unwanted tattoos, all of which, especially the lasers, are becoming more commonplace.

With the removal of tattoos becoming more sophisticated and less expensive, it seems that these once permanent markings may become another weekend adventure, acquired spur of the moment and often only kept for the short-term. Undoubtedly, those getting impulsively branded will continue to fuel the growth behind tattooing. However, many may lack awareness of the controversial risks associated with tattooing as well as the cost and pain of someday erasing that tattoo from the pages of a person's personal history. While the history of tattoos is constantly evolving, many would argue that permanent tattoos should remain branded for a lifetime.

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