



DAYS PA INVESTIGATES

shattered expectations

By Rhonda J. Wilson

DAYS PA | September 2008

© IStockPhoto.com

The messages spa guests hear about miracle cures can create **unrealistic expectations**. Here's how to identify clients who may go **overboard** with treatments before they pose a threat to themselves and your business.

September 2008 | dayspamagazine.com

Editor's note: The anecdotes in this article don't necessarily represent the psychological disorders mentioned here. They're merely behaviors sometimes associated with these conditions. Many of the day spa owners we surveyed reported that "very few" of their clients suffered from obsessive behavior. They also revealed that the majority of these clients are likely responding to advertising claims and societal pressures to look more youthful. Chances are, only a small fraction of clients who request excessive or inappropriate procedures would actually be diagnosed with a psychological disorder.

A spa guest who returns again and again for services is a business owner's dream come true, right? Possibly, but what about the one who disregards recommendations and asks for chemical peels twice a week or microdermabrasion far more often than is safe?

Selena Belisle is all too familiar with this scenario. The owner of Spa Newbury (www.spanewbury.com) in Boston encountered this type of guest at an event celebrating the spa's reopening after an expansion. Clients were given tickets good for mini services, and Belisle didn't realize there might be a need to monitor how they were used. She quickly learned otherwise when one overzealous woman collected tickets from friends and treated herself to four mini facials, intentionally going to different estheticians to avoid detection.

"Her face was on fire after four applications of enzymes and cleansings in a two-hour period," Belisle says. "And she came out among party-goers screaming, 'Look at my face! I'd never come here again for a facial.'"

Belisle's story isn't altogether uncommon. While this woman went to extremes, your clients may be overdoing it on a smaller scale. Some may come to you for a procedure they've read about, not knowing the dangers. "One client wanted a micropeel for her first

treatment, but she was using prescription-strength Retin-A," says Vera Gaines, owner of SkinFit Face Spa (www.skinfitfacespa.com) in Wooster, Ohio. "Another client, whose skin was inflamed, dry and red from an allergic reaction, wanted microdermabrasion. She didn't understand that we needed to calm her skin down first."

Tamara Friedman also has firsthand experience with clients who repeatedly return for inappropriate treatments. Her spa is known for permanent makeup services that can significantly enhance natural fea-

"There was a woman who came in every other day for permanent makeup touchups. A client like that will **never be happy.**"

tures. However, when overdone, a person can end up looking disfigured. "This type of client starts wanting more the minute she loves the results," says the owner of Tamara Spa (www.tamaraspa.com) in Farmington Hills, Michigan. "There was a woman who came in every other day for permanent makeup touchups. A client like that will never be happy."

Many spa professionals are familiar with the client who's never content. In fact, a recent survey of business owners conducted by DAYSPA revealed that 87% have encountered clients who requested procedures unsuitable for them. These guests tend to exhibit the following characteristics:

- Have a history of receiving the same unsuitable procedure.
- Go too far with services somewhere else and come to you to fix it.
- Overuse even seemingly healthful spa services.
- Desire a treatment that friends or co-workers received with good results, even though it may not be appropriate for them.
- Show a desperation or frustration that makes you uncomfortable.

Do you have specific examples of obsessive clients?

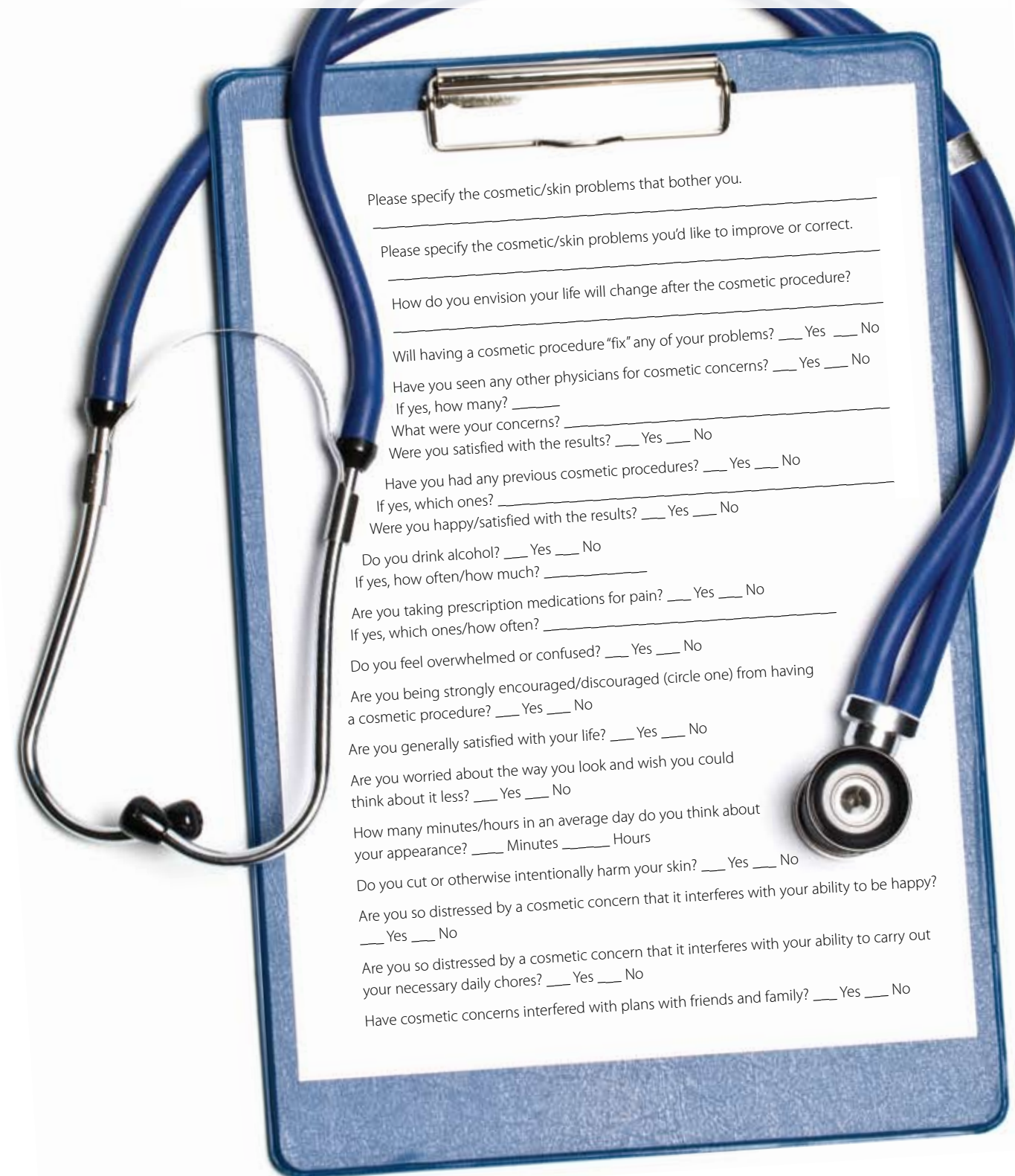
"I had a client who asked for an aggressive chemical peel that had the capability of burning her face. She was a beautiful lady who'd already had intensive chemical peels, microdermabrasion, Botox Cosmetic and collagen injections. I recommended hydration treatments instead to help her maintain her complexion. She wasn't satisfied with my recommendation. I'm sure she went somewhere else to get the procedure, because she had a tendency to shop from salon to salon."



Margaret LaPierre
Licensed Master Esthetician
Skin Therapy of Virginia
Richmond, Virginia

private screening

This intake screening form may help uncover possible psychological issues or unhealthy behaviors. It was developed by Richard G. Fried, M.D., Ph.D., author, dermatologist, psychologist and clinical director of Yardley Dermatology Associates (www.yardleyderm.com) in Yardley, Pennsylvania, and William Philip Werschler, M.D., professor and founding member of the Spokane Dermatology Clinic (www.spokanederm.com) and Aesthetic Image Medical Spa (aestheticimage.net) in Spokane, Washington.



In some cases, a person's unhealthy preoccupation with her looks can be a symptom of a larger psychological issue. For example, a spa guest may suffer from low self-esteem or insecurity about her appearance, or feel dissatisfied with another facet of her life and think a procedure will cure it. Or perhaps she has fallen prey to false advertising, misinformation about treatments or media images of unattainable beauty. The person with these feelings may not realize the cause, and instead think that she'll feel good about herself if she improves her skin, hair or nails. These clients are seeking an external solution to an internal problem.

Whatever the reason, some spa guests overuse treatments and services—and those who do may pose a potential danger to you, your business and the industry at large. Thus, DAYSPA has identified four disorders commonly associated with overzealous behavior—body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) and borderline personality disorder (BPD). In the following pages, we present useful tools to help spa personnel steer clients toward more healthful alternatives.

Keep in mind, there are no surefire solutions, and an official diagnosis of the disorder should be left to mental health professionals. However, by recognizing the symptoms and knowing which options are available to appease this type of client, you can strike an appropriate balance between professionalism and profitability.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder

A person who dwells obsessively on a real or imagined defect, and spends time, money and resources



Jann Henry
Co-founder, Licensed
Massage Therapist
San Antonio Massage & Spa
San Antonio, Texas

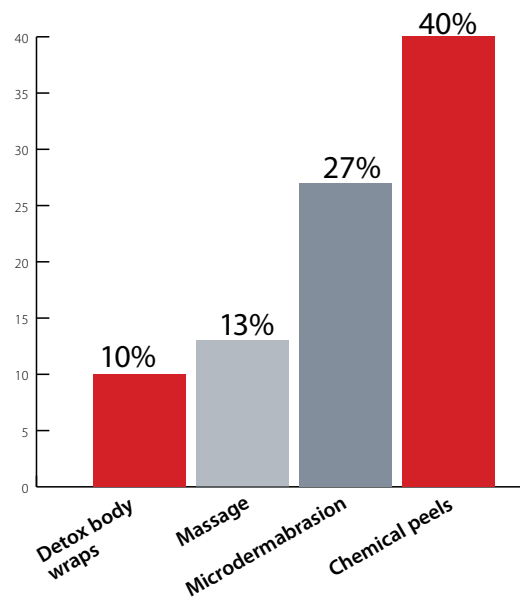
Do you have procedures in place to deal with clients who are considered obsessive?

"Beginning early in training, we educate. We work on a customer-specific basis. Based on the client's goal, we always let her know when we wish to see her next. We explain the specific purpose and how it relates to her objectives."

going overboard

DAYSPA conducted an online survey of 245 business professionals nationwide about obsessive clients. Responses from the survey, compiled in June 2008, appear on subsequent pages.

At your spa, which treatment or service are your clients most likely to overuse?



trying to correct it, may have BDD. This is a condition where a perceived flaw or imperfection in appearance can severely impair someone's normal functioning. In a 2006 joint study by Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts General Hospital, and the Universities of Marburg and Leipzig, Germany, 1.7% of participants displayed signs of BDD. Ongoing research studies at Butler Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island, have found that skin is the most common area of concern for BDD patients, followed by hair and nose, which makes day spas and salons the ideal places for these types of people to turn to for help.

Like the anorexic who thinks she's fat, people with BDD have a perceptual distortion of themselves. Consider a client who comes in saying she has "huge, ugly, horrible pores," yet they're barely visible to you. Or she may have a bit of downy hair on her lip that she sees as a "dark moustache." Her emotional attachment to correcting the defect goes beyond distress—it's coloring her life.

While a flaw may be minor to your experienced

eyes, it's tragic to this person. "People with BDD think everybody sees their flaw as they do. They feel ugly and ashamed. In extreme cases, this can lead to reclusiveness," says Jamie Feusner, M.D., professor and psychiatrist at the UCLA Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior (npi.ucla.edu/bdd) in Los Angeles and principal investigator for its BDD program. "They may also check themselves in the mirror constantly, or cover up with clothes or makeup. Many people with BDD have eating disorders, and a higher rate of suicide and suicidal tendencies than people who are bipolar or depressed."

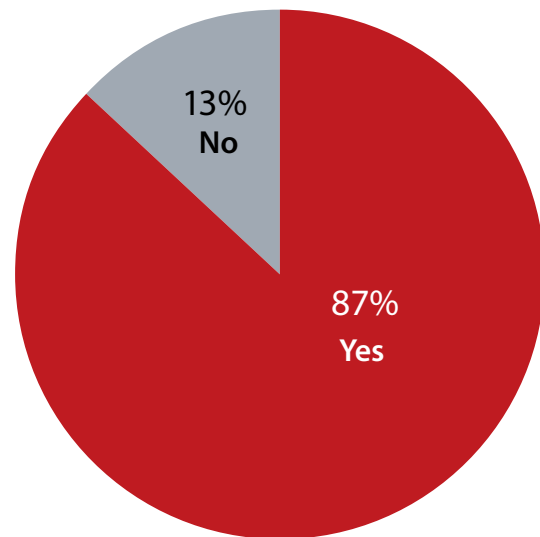
Marguerite Barnett, M.D., estimates that as many as 5% of her clients have BDD. She frequently has to talk them out of Botox Cosmetic and injectable fillers. "I may underestimate the incidence, since I suspect many of them go to other establishments and don't tell us," says the owner of Mandala Med-Spa (www.mandalamedspa.com) in Sarasota, Florida. "My estheticians also encounter these issues."

"People with BDD think everybody sees their flaw as they do. They feel ugly and ashamed."

One of Barnett's clients went overboard with microdermabrasion. When she refused to continue treatment, the guest performed a home procedure on herself, which resulted in hyperpigmentation and scarring. "Another client picked her skin so badly that she looked like a burn victim," Barnett says. "We agreed to provide reconstructive surgery with approval from her therapist."

going overboard

Have any of your clients requested procedures that you felt were excessive and/or inappropriate for them?



"Over the course of several years, her requests became more and more demanding. Eventually, I realized what was happening and refused further treatment," she adds. "The client actually threatened a lawsuit but had no grounds."

The way in which these clients are handled can make the difference between a disgruntled spa guest and a satisfied one. "It's difficult to tell a client she's being unreasonable," Barnett says. "If she returns too soon for another treatment, I may say, 'I'd like to see how this settles and have you come back in six weeks.' When you express it as concern, it can be easier for them to hear."

continued on page 80 ►

support system

See resources below for more information on body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) or borderline personality disorder (BPD).

BDD

The BDD Foundation
thebddfoundation.org
The Broken Mirror: Understanding and Treating Body Dysmorphic Disorder, Katharine A. Phillips, M.D. (Oxford University Press, 2005).

OCD

Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation ocfoundation.org
Overcoming Obsessive Thoughts: How to Gain Control of Your OCD, Christine Purdon, Ph.D., and David A. Clark, Ph.D. (New Harbinger Publications, 2005)

NPD

Narcissistic Personality Disorder www.narcissistic-personality-disorder.com
Identifying and Understanding the Narcissistic Personality, Elisa F. Ronningstam, Ph.D. (Oxford University Press, 2005)

BPD

BPD Central www.bpdcentral.com
The Borderline Personality Disorder Survival Guide, Alexander L. Chapman, Ph.D., and Kim L. Gratz, Ph.D. (New Harbinger Publications, 2007)

continued from page 76

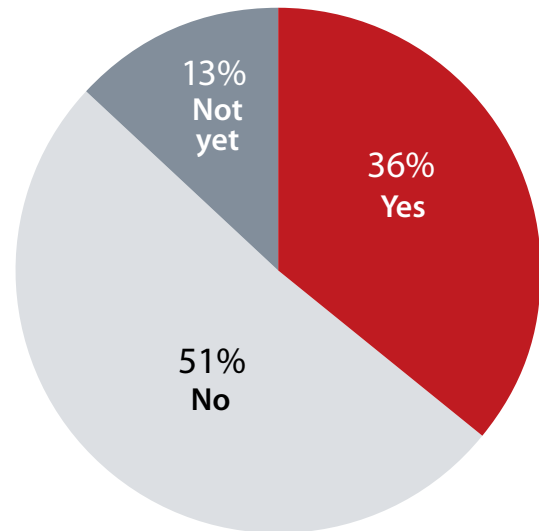
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Psychological conditions frequently overlap, making it even more difficult to understand a troubled client. A person with BDD may also suffer from OCD, which affects 2.2 million Americans 18 and older, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (nimh.nih.gov). The disorder is defined by ritualistic behavior, and manifests itself in fears and suspicions about having, or not having, certain treatments. “The client may overwhelm you with ‘what if’ and ‘what else,’” says Richard G. Fried, M.D. Ph.D., author, dermatologist and psychologist.

One strategy Fried uses for dealing with these clients is to give them literature or refer them to a website, and insist that they go home and think about it. “I let them know that I sympathize with their concerns because there’s so much information out there,” says Fried, who’s also clinical director of Yardley Dermatology Associates (www.yardleyderm.com) in Yardley, Pennsylvania. “I tell them I spend hours sorting through it, and I wouldn’t want to do something to

going overboard

Do you have procedures in place to deal with clients who are considered obsessive?



oCD is defined by ritualistic behavior, and manifests itself in **fears and suspicions** about having, or not having, certain treatments.

them that I wouldn’t do to a member of my family.”

Whether clients have OCD or not, anything on your menu has potential for overuse. Friedman has even witnessed obsessions with pedicures. “With corns and calluses, they want us to cut down more and more. Even though we tell them they need the padding to protect their feet, they’ll insist on more until they bleed,” she says.

Friedman adds that another client wanted unhealthy amounts of anticellulite niacin body wraps. The treatment contains powerful ingredients

that can damage skin if applied more than twice a week.

As a rule, it’s important to consult with your clients about existing physical conditions—whether they exhibit excessive behavior or not. While many spa services complement medical treatments, they should never be expected to replace them. Juli Culver remembers a client who visited her spa every day for a three-hour massage to alleviate symptoms of a neurological problem. “We had to talk about expectations, about what I couldn’t do for him rather than what I could,” says the owner of Drift Away Day Spa in St. John (www.driftawaystjohn.com), U.S. Virgin Islands. “I advised him not to pursue deep tissue. Instead, we moved into yoga and energy work.”

Another possible concern with an OCD client may be the bond between her and the service provider. For some, spa sessions are the only times a guest is touched or listened to, which could lead to misuse of services.

Keep in mind, whether you’re dealing with a client who has a specific disorder or not, the connection between psychology and beauty treatments or cosmetic procedures is complex, according to Fried.



Nancy Holmes
Esthetician
On Sight Beauty
Sarasota, Florida

Do you think obsessive client behavior has increased in the last five years?

“Yes, it’s because of the belief that if enough skin is peeled away, the client will become young and beautiful.”

He takes it into account with each patient he sees and uses communication to assess the situation.

“Asking someone *why* she wants to have a procedure or treatment is telling,” Fried says. “If it’s because she doesn’t like the brown spots on her skin, and she’d like to feel more comfortable without makeup, that’s a great reason. But if she says it’s so her spouse won’t leave, this could indicate a problem.”

Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Another insatiable client may have NPD, which presents itself as the opposite of BDD. The condition affects less than 1% of the population, according to the Mayo Clinic (www.mayoclinic.com), but it may be more prevalent in the spa and self-improvement culture.

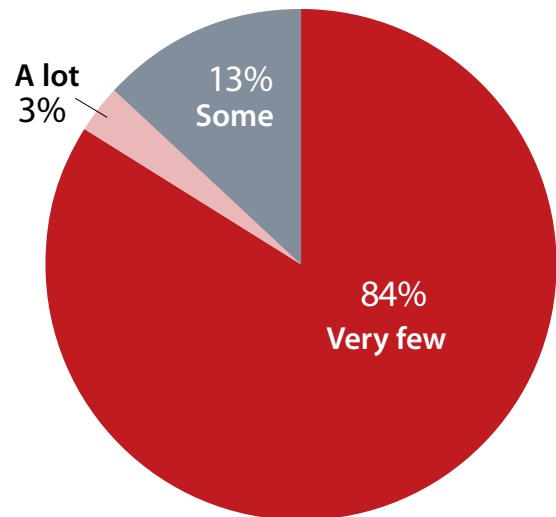
This client may be described as vain and self-centered. “In actuality, the narcissist doesn’t feel good about herself and is trying to boost her fragile ego by changing her outer appearance,” Feusner says.

This person’s standards are likely excessive and unrealistic. Minimizing expectations and tracking progress can help. “We take photographs at the beginning, so we can show the client how far she’s come,” says Roxanne Paterson, regional marketing director at Iatria Day Spas (www.iatria.com) in Raleigh and Cary, North Carolina. “Client histories with extensive notes are always accessible, and regular guests are discussed at staff meetings.”

A spa guest with NPD or another complex personality disorder may also be so preoccupied with services that she becomes irresponsible with her time and money. Paterson recalls a TV makeover show in which a woman forced her family to sell

going overboard

In your opinion, how many of your clients suffer from obsessive behavior?



their home to pay for her cosmetic surgeries.

“The problem is the unhealthy need for people, women especially, to fit the image of perfection,” says Drift Away’s Culver, who is referring in general to clients who go overboard with procedures.

When a client with NPD or some other psychological disorder books one antiaging or skin resurfacing appointment after another, her real problem may stem from interpersonal relationships or career issues. She may be experiencing grief, loneliness or any of the feelings we all have, but she’s pinning the problem on her appearance.

“People often seek physical change at turning points in their lives, such as menopause, a breakup or divorce, or children leaving home,” Barnett says. “I try to ferret out where patients are coming from, then encourage them to step back and take a more realistic look at themselves.”

With NPD clients, experts say you need to carefully word criticisms about their overuse of services. “If you believe the person shouldn’t have additional treatments because they’re excessive, or even harmful or wasteful, perhaps you can suggest that they look good as they are and don’t need additional improvements,” Feusner says. “They may respond positively to stroking their ego a bit, at least in the short term. Otherwise, if they perceive criticism, it can send the more severe NPD sufferer into angry and demanding behavior on the outside, and feeling



Vera Gaines
Owner
SkinFit Face Spa
Wooster, Ohio

Do you anticipate obsessive client behavior will become more common in the next five years?

“Yes, the more technological advances that occur, the more likely clients will want treatments without understanding the contraindications.”

hurt on the inside.”

Borderline Personality Disorder

BPD can also lead to an unhealthy preoccupation with appearance. It affects 1% to 3% of Americans, and can include emotional instability or addiction, according to the Mayo Clinic.

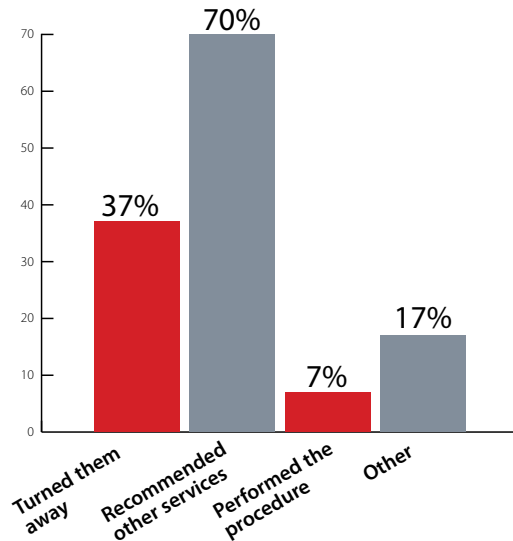
Clients with this condition may be fundamentally unstable. They may have a history of multiple procedures, and of poorly controlled judgment or acting on impulse. They're prone to emotional ups and downs, and can have problems with self-identity, which causes them to go overboard with cosmetic procedures.

They also see things as black and white, which means they may overvalue someone and then undervalue her just as quickly. These clients may highly praise you while complaining about other estheticians. They, too, may not realize that altering their appearance won't solve their problems. When a person with these characteristics wants more for no justifiable reason, Yardley's Fried asks, "How do you envision your life will be different if you have additional treatments or procedures?" Confronting the truth in her answers can sometimes help change her point of view.

Addiction is also common in people with BPD. You may be able to uncover those behaviors when you take a client's history. This person may abuse drugs, gambling, drinking, smoking or sex, or engage in excessive tattooing or even self-destructive behavior, such as cutting herself. "This person gets a rush, thrill, or sense of reward from the cosmetic treatment or procedure," UCLA's Feusner says. "However, the feeling is short-lived. She keeps coming back to get her fix, as opposed to the BDD sufferer who

going overboard

If you've had clients who've requested inappropriate procedures, what did you do?



never feels gratification.”

Unfortunately, the needs and desires of an addictive personality will never be satisfied. Not only are these clients bad for business, but they're impossible to please. They'll often seek retaliation as a means of venting their dissatisfaction, so refusing to perform the service is sometimes the only option. "They may bad-mouth your esthetician specifically or your spa in general," Fried says. "There's an old expression that 10 satisfied customers will tell one person, but one dissatisfied customer will tell 10."

Saying no to a client, and dealing with her reaction, are realities you and your staff must face. A seasoned esthetician is cautious, though. "I need to do a skin assessment and evaluation, and understand her home-care routine," SkinFit's Gaines says. "There are treatments I'm not going to do the first time I meet someone, so I tell her, 'What we should do today is ...' and most people understand that you're determining what will make their skin most healthy. Then we can talk about future treatment options and expectations."

In the end, it's not easy coming up with simple strategies for dealing with people who exhibit complex personality disorders or overzealous behavior. "Many therapists with years of training still aren't able to do it," Feusner says. ●

Rhonda J. Wilson is executive editor of *DAYSPA*. Email her at rwilson@creativeage.com.

E-networking

If you have questions or need advice about this issue, email the industry experts cited in this article:

Marguerite Barnett drbarnett@mandalamedspa.com

Selena Belisle ladyselena@prodigy.net

Juli Culver julif@hotmail.com

Jamie Feusner jfeusner@mednet.ucla.edu

Richard G. Fried dermshrink@aol.com

Tamara Friedman tamaraspa2@aol.com

Vera Gaines vgaines@sssnet.com

Nancy Holmes nancyheals@aol.com

Jann Henry jannhenry@sanantoniomassage.com

Margaret LaPierre skintherapyinc@yahoo.com

Roxanne Paterson roxanne@iatria.com