

Muscle mania: young men aren't alone with body image concerns

Written by Julia Coffey Lecturer in Sociology at University of Newcastle



Youth can be a difficult phase of life, as young people attempt to forge new identities, while facing challenges at school and in their social life. Many also experience pressure and stress related to their bodies.

Given the relationship between stress and vulnerability to mental illness, it's no wonder that half of mental illnesses emerge by the age of 14. Overall, around [one in five](#) young people struggle with mental illness, but most avoid seeking help.

Body image is the third-greatest [issue of concern](#) for young people in Australia, after stress and problems at school. Around one-third of young men with a mental illness report serious body image concerns, but the issue also affects young men who consider themselves mentally well.

My research shows that while there is a high degree of awareness about the impact of body image concerns on the health and well-being of young women, young men often feel their experiences aren't shared among their peers. As a result, they consider it's something they alone have to face.

The pressure to be a particular body shape – muscular – combined with the sense of feeling alone can have serious implications for young men's mental health.

Rise of buff culture

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Social media, celebrity culture and the portrayal of men's bodies as objects of desire [all contribute](#) to young men becoming more concerned and vulnerable about their bodies.

The rise in health and beauty industries targeted to men plays to these insecurities. According to the [Australian Centre for Retail Studies](#), the market for men's grooming products is doubling each year.

To better understand the gendered differences in anxiety about looks, [I interviewed](#) young men and women aged 18 to 33 about their health, eating and exercise habits.

Of the 11 men I interviewed, eight were concerned about their appearance, and felt pressure to be muscular. Unlike [women in the study](#), the men tended to understand body pressure as an individual issue rather than something that is experienced by numerous other men.

A professional athlete, Adam*, for example, described feeling pressure to keep his muscular physique when he is no longer competing. He says:

I think people now perceive me as having muscles and that fit-looking body, I don't want to lose that... Sometimes I actually feel a bit of pressure to keep it because I don't want to be the guy who did have that body and then let it go.

Other men discussed anxiety to "keep up" their weights training to maintain a muscular body. Ben* said:

I feel like if I don't go for a few days I feel not as strong, not as confident. I have to keep going and doing it. I wonder how long I can keep that up for.

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Similarly, Jason* said:

As soon as you start to fall behind, or you start to stop going [to the gym] you start to look at yourself differently.

Due to an injury, Jason was unable to do his usual weights training session, which meant the muscles in his biceps diminished. He said during this time he felt “pretty crap”, and wore long-sleeved T-shirts to hide his arms.

The desire to appear muscular is leading [increasing numbers](#) of young men to turn to steroids. One participant in the study said steroid use was common at his gym:

The amount of people that I know who use things like steroids and things like that to look bigger, to be stronger, that's an amazing number of people. And not just athletes, but I mean an everyday type guy who wants to look better.

Seeking help

Stigma surrounding body image and mental health concerns could mean young men are even less likely to seek help for these issues. The [latest data](#) shows that nearly two-thirds of people with serious mental illnesses were not comfortable seeking information or advice from professionals.

This is particularly concerning given that suicide [remains](#) the leading cause of death for Australians aged between 15 and 44. Three in every five Australians who die by suicide are men.

Men can also suffer eating and exercise disorders as well as anxiety or depression associated with body image distress. Help is available for them, as for women, through mental health and GP pathways, or helplines such as [Beyond Blue](#) and [Kids helpline](#).

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Efforts to reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues, including body image concerns are crucial to ensure young people get the help they need. [Education programs](#) focusing on social and emotional learning and promoting positive relationships between teachers and students, for example, can help young people feel more supported.

Programs which address communication barriers between professional sources such as teachers and doctors and young people can also [increase willingness](#) to seek help.

It's also important for educational approaches to show that body image is a social, rather than just individual, problem which can affect young men as well as women. Though gender norms tend to carry privileges and benefits for young men, they also carry social harms where young men feel they must be "strong and silent".

Better understanding the social and gendered implications of body image is an important step towards improving young men's mental health.

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