

The unhealthy reason men go to the gym

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Body image issues are becoming increasingly common among men.

I dated a guy once who used the sort of language I was only ever used to hearing women use about their bodies.

He was fat and disgusting, he would say, he was getting a gut, his muscles weren't defined enough. He went to the gym religiously, not out of self-care, but out of self-hate.

The self-criticism was in no way steeped in reality, but then it rarely is, we rarely consider that many men are as driven by insecurity about their appearance as women.

A [small new study](#) by researchers at Curtin University explored how much body image issues fuel gym attendance and found that body shame motivated men to work out more often.

"Results however, demonstrated male attitudes towards muscle and body mass index (BMI) didn't predict how frequently men attended the gym, but their perceptions of body fat did," health psychologist and lead researcher Kim Caudwell said.

While the participants reported they were motivated by enjoyment or by results, when they were pressed, they also reported feelings of obligation, guilt, and pressure.

"This may mean that feeling guilty about missing or skipping workouts, and negative attitudes towards body fat, may lead men to participate in unplanned, sporadic workout sessions to alleviate these concerns," Caudwell said.

"We suspect portrayals of the 'muscular ideal' are a contributor to image concerns in men, so while it's great that more people are interested in exercise and fitness, there is a risk men may be susceptible to these concerns when engaging in exercise behaviours."

A [2010 Mission Australia survey](#) of Australian male youth aged 12 to 25 years found that body image was their No. 1 concern. Body dissatisfaction even in young boys has been linked to engagement in body change strategies such as dieting and body bulking strategies.

Body image issues are becoming increasingly common among men and while women's fitness articles often speak to the shame women can feel about their bodies, encouraging exercise for confidence and self-care, men's articles rarely address the issue, keeping the focus on the physical.

"The main point of exercise, I always thought, was for people to like you with your shirt off," writes one health writer, Nick English, who says he worked out daily out of insecurity about his body.

"I shredded my abs, shaved my head, and managed to graduate from self-loathing drunk to self-loathing narcissist. But nothing I read or did brought me closer to actually loving myself; I just became more critical. It took years for me to deal with the underlying insecurities driving me to restrict my diet and maniacally hack away at my body fat."

The focus on appearance is an issue both sexes face when it comes to fitness. Paradoxically, it ignores the fact that physicality is often not driving it, but poor self image.

The Australian Psychological Society says that, for boys and men, many factors can spark shame including perfectionism, peer pressure and being teased about their appearance.

"Desire to feel and be seen as masculine is also a big factor and this is becoming increasingly difficult for men as fewer issues differentiate men from women apart from appearance," the society says. "Where in the past men demonstrated masculinity through their jobs, providing for their family, being the bread winner and the Mr Fix It, women are now able to achieve in all these areas.

"So it's little surprise that men turn to their appearance for reassurance of their masculinity. However, achieving muscularity and leanness is hard work and unrealistic for most men, so many are left feeling less than masculine with little that defines them uniquely as a man."

For English, it was a matter of recognising that what was driving him to exercise was unhealthy. He spent time addressing the insecurities and shame and changed his approach to exercise; focusing not on the physical but on how fitness improved his health and made him feel.

"I eventually let go of my frantic, two-hours-per-day workout schedule and fell in love with powerlifting. Instead of chasing a six-pack for its own sake, I embraced strength: It felt more like I was adding to my body, rather than taking away from it. I'm a little doughier, but I'm a lot happier."

Based on his research, Caudwell agrees that motivation makes a difference to whether fitness is healthy.

He explains that extrinsic motivators – body image and how you appear to others – can not only make the pursuit of fitness mentally unhealthy, it makes us less likely to keep it up than when we are intrinsically motivated by feeling good, feeling healthy, valuing the benefits and seeing fitness as a balanced part of our lifestyle.

"Going to the gym should be something you do as part of a healthy lifestyle," Caudwell says, reiterating that we need to remember the physicality of fitness is motivated by our mentality.

"Those healthy behaviours can be unhealthy, can be maladaptive."

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