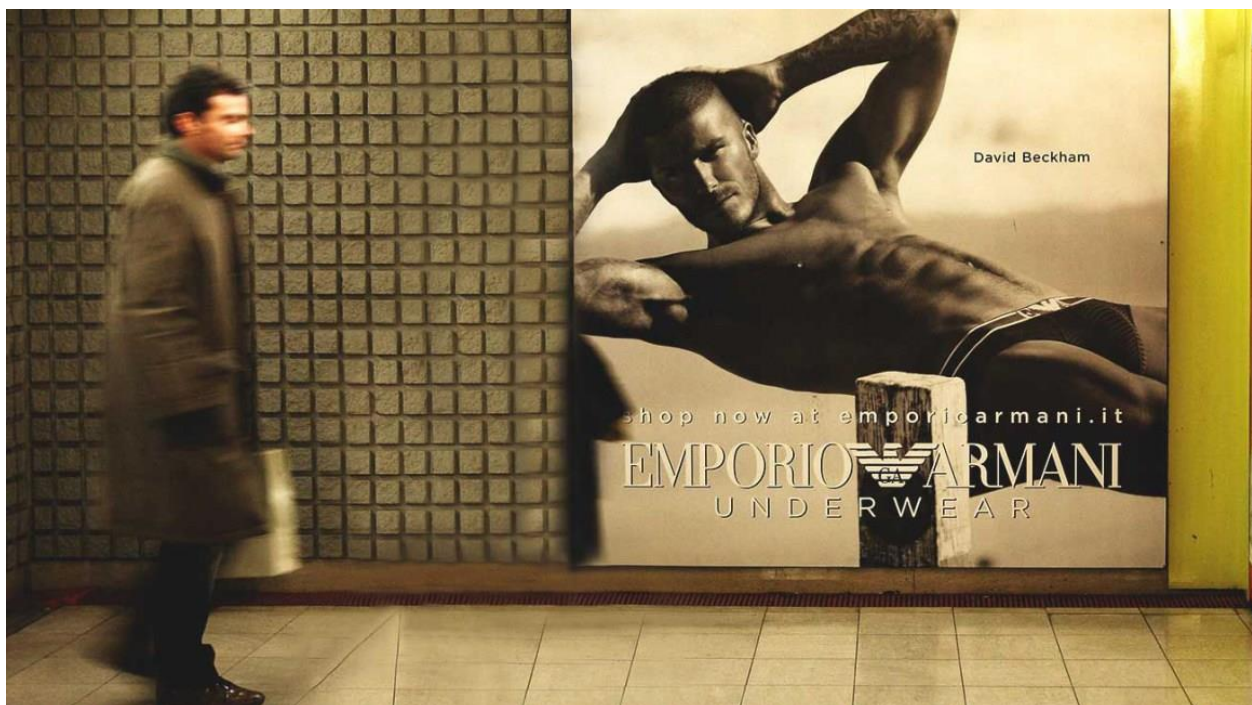


With Superheroes Comes the Pressure of Unrealistic Male Bodies

<https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/male-body-image-problems#1>

It's not just about weight and muscle, male body image affects the whole person — but there are ways to help you manage.



Share on Pinterest

About 40 blocks north of Spring Studios, where chic, slender models walk the runway for New York Fashion Week's biggest showcases, there's another kind of fashion event taking place.

The Curvy Con is the brainchild of two fashion bloggers who wanted to create a space where "plus-size brands, fashionistas, shopaholics, bloggers, and YouTubers" could embrace the curvy female figure.

The event is one of the many examples of recent efforts to lift the long-running stigma associated with having an "imperfect" body. The female body positivity movement is stronger than ever: Brands like [Dove](#) and [American Eagle](#) have launched campaigns to help women learn to be appreciative of their bodies, regardless of how they compare to media standards.

The movement's intent seems well-meaning, but it also raises a question: Is there a body positive movement for men? While there's [a plethora of evidence](#) that women are judged more by their looks than men are, research shows that body image issues facing men are [just as complex](#).

Celebrities like Sam Smith and Robert Pattinson have [opened up about their struggles](#) with the way they look in recent years, providing more confirmation that body image is a problem for men — even famous and successful ones. And similar to women, research shows men are often caught feeling either too thin or too heavy to meet the male ideal.

But what's causing men today to feel so much pressure about their appearances? What specifically are they unhappy with and how can they deal with it?

One thing is for certain: Just like the challenges faced by women, male body image issues are deeper than just weight.

The superhero effect: Why do males feel pressure to look a certain way?

Research by psychiatrists at UCLA shows that overall, [people today feel worse](#) about the way they look than they did in the 1970s. The problem goes beyond a college guy hitting the gym to try to get a date: [90 percent](#) of boys in middle and high school exercise at least occasionally with the specific goal of “bulking up.”

Most celebrities, scientists, and average guys agree that there’s one major contributing factor we can credit for the rise of negative body perception for men and boys: the silver screen. Stars like Hugh Jackman and Chris Pratt pack on muscle to transform into superheroes to join the likes of Dwayne Johnson and Mark Wahlberg. This increases male public interest in obtaining their recipes for chiseled abs and bulging biceps. A vicious cycle ensues.

[A 2014 feature](#) about today’s fitness-crazy world of Hollywood is especially eye-opening. When famous celeb trainer Gunnar Peterson was asked how he’d respond to a male actor trying to succeed on acting talent alone without being in great shape, he responded:

“All of a sudden you go, ‘Oh, maybe you can be the friend.’ Or: ‘We’ll do an indie film.’ ”

For the last three years, at least 4 out of the top 10 grossing movies in the U.S. have been superhero stories, according to data observed from Box Office Mojo. In these films, “ideal” male physiques are shown constantly, sending a message: To be brave, dependable, and honorable, you need big muscles.

“These bodies are attainable for a small number of people — maybe half a percent of the male community,” says Aaron Flores, a registered dietitian nutritionist from Calabasas specializing in male body image. “Yet they’re associated with the idea of masculinity — the notion that as a man, I have to look a certain way, act a certain way.”

The rise of #fitness

The big screen isn’t the only place guys are being exposed to unrealistic bodies. A recent GQ feature about Instagram’s influence on fitness reported that [43 percent](#) of people take photos or videos at the gym.

So thanks to the prevalence of [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#), whose combined monthly user count represents over 43 percent of the global population, our younger — [and soon to be largest](#) — generations are exposed to images and videos of others working out every day.

Some find the uptick in social fitness content motivational, but there’s a degree of intimidation involved — particularly for those new to exercise.

“Social media shows us all these folks hitting the gym, losing weight, getting ripped... you’d think it’d inspire me, but most times it makes me want to hide in a corner,” a friend told me.

It’s estimated that the average American adult now spends [over \\$110,000](#) throughout their lifetime on health and fitness costs. The Anytime Fitness franchise alone has added [3,000 new gyms worldwide](#) in the last 10 years.

Between our Instagram feeds, TV shows, and movies, it’s difficult for guys to avoid images of muscular, built men. But how much you can bench is far from

the only body image concern — male body image is far more complex than just muscle.

It's more than the shape of our bodies

The media tells men that we should be lean, strong, and muscular. But the male body image struggle is about more than the shape of our bodies. Among other concerns, men are figuring out how to deal with hair loss, height perception, and skin care.

The hair loss industry alone is estimated to be worth \$1.5 billion. No thanks to the stigma, men with thinning or no hair may face the stereotype that they're less attractive, agreeable, and assertive. Research has also found that hair loss is linked to feelings of inadequacy, depression, stress, and low self-esteem.

As for height, data indicates that people associate taller men with higher levels of charisma, education or leadership qualities, increased career success, and even a more robust dating life.

But in a newer space, male-targeted skin care brands are increasingly marketing products that target the same concerns as female-targeted brands:

- wrinkles
- skin discoloration
- face symmetry, shape, and size

Male cosmetic procedures have increased [325 percent since 1997](#). The top surgeries are:

- liposuction
- nose surgery
- eyelid surgery
- male breast reduction
- facelifts

Another sensitive area of judgment for the male body that incorporates all the above? The bedroom. A 2008 study reported penis size as one of the top three body image concerns for heterosexual men, along with weight and height.

“It’s an unspoken thing, but if you don’t look a certain way or perform a certain way [sexually], it can really challenge your masculinity,” Flores says.

Research shows that a majority of men feel their penises are smaller than average. These negative feelings about genital size can lead to low self-esteem, shame, and embarrassment about sex.

And it’s no surprise that brands have already caught on. [Hims](#), a new wellness brand for men, heavily markets itself as a one-stop shop — from skin care to cold sores to erectile dysfunction. According to Hims, only 1 in 10 men feel comfortable talking to their doctor about their looks and health.

How can we deal with male body image issues?

The darker side of the recent increase in male cosmetic surgeries, social media posts about fitness, and celebrity “transformations” is the underlying notion that guys need to improve their bodies. The corporate marketing race

to embrace body positivity can also lead to negative self-perception and may be rapidly becoming [trite and unnecessary](#).

Even knowing the problems, body image is tough to address. One of the main challenges is relatively simple — not enough people are talking about the self-image issues that men face.

“While the issue [of male body image] is no longer surprising, there’s still really no one talking about it or doing work to make it better,” says Flores. He told me he frequently takes female-centric social media posts about body positivity and makes them into male-friendly versions.

An easy first step is simply to accept your body for what it is

Flores said deciding to be happy with your physique and not devoting your entire life to “fixing it” is in itself an act of rebellion, since our society is so focused on achieving the ideal body.

It’s also helpful to adjust your social media sites to only show content that will inspire positive feelings about your body.

“I’m very discerning about what comes into my feed,” says Flores. “I’ll mute or unfollow people who exhibit a lot of diet or fitness talk, just because it’s not how I interact. I don’t care if my friends are doing keto or Whole30, or how many times they can squat — that’s not what defines our friendship.”

Other ways guys can cope with body image issues:

- **Talk about it in the real world.** Commiserating with [a male friend](#) can help ease the pressure to look a specific way. Online groups for body

positivity are great, but it's also valuable to get away from social media and spend time in places with realistic images of people, like your local coffee shop or restaurant.

- **Embrace your body.** It doesn't matter if you're an athlete or totally out of shape — try to be happy with the way you look. If you're taking active steps to be healthier through exercise or diet, embrace the journey. Instead of focusing on what you don't like, be proud of yourself for trying to change what you can control.
- **Don't be afraid of vulnerability.** "It's not a challenge to your masculinity," says Flores about being open and honest about body image struggles. "If we can learn to share our experiences, both negative and positive, that's where healing comes from."
- **Remind yourself that media-portrayed body images aren't realistic.** The media is really good at portraying unrealistic bodies and misrepresenting the average physique — and that includes male bodies. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that there's no significant difference in prevalence of obesity between men and women. It's OK to challenge the pictures you see. Confidence should be built in yourself and your efforts, not what other people say.

Above all, remember it's totally normal to feel some insecurity about the way you look. Be kind to yourself, develop positive habits, and do your best to accept what you can't change to give yourself a healthy outlook on your body.