

Boys now face the same pressure as girls to “look the right way in order to be successful”.

THE SECRET BODY CRISIS AMONG OUR BOYS

GETTY IMAGES. PHOTOGRAPH POSED BY MODEL NOT ASSOCIATED WITH THE STORY.

Eating disorders used to be the exclusive preserve of girls, but now boys as young as seven are being hospitalised with anorexia nervosa. **Tiffany Dunk** reports on the body image crisis among our boys.

UNTIL LATE LAST year, I was the editor of Australia’s leading teen magazine for girls, *Dolly*.

Throughout my four years on the title, we worked closely with experts to instil healthy self-esteem and positive body image practices in our readers. From a ban on retouching photographs to advice on feeling great regardless of shape or size, I was proud to see the positive impact we had on young girls.

I didn’t want my work with teens to fall by the wayside when I left *Dolly*, so I joined educational group Fresh ED (freshed.com.au). We give interactive presentations in high schools on topics such as body image, mental health, teen nutrition and more.

Wrapping up my first co-ed nutrition talk, I expected girls to start off the question session. Instead, it was the boys who peppered me with queries.

“Miss, is Boost Juice fattening?”

“What’s the best protein powder?”

“How much should I weigh?”

I was taken aback, but I’m not the only one noticing an increased focus in boys wanting to achieve the “perfect body”.

For the past four years, Mission Australia’s national Youth Survey has identified body image as one of the top three concerns for young males.

Boys as young as seven are being hospitalised for anorexia nervosa. Rates of extreme dieting, purging and binge eating are increasing faster in men than in women. Flick on the TV and you’re barraged with ads for protein powders, supplements, gyms and weight-loss programs aimed at men.

“There’s just as much pressure on boys as girls to ‘look the right way’

in order to be successful,” says Christine Morgan, chief executive officer of The Butterfly Foundation, which supports people with eating disorders and negative body images. “In the past of couple of years, we’ve seen a strong prototype for what the ideal male body is. Look at Ken dolls. Ten years ago, he used to be flat, now he’s ripped and muscled.”

Sixteen-year-old Sydney schoolboy Guy Beynon agrees that boys his age are very aware of their bodies.

“When you get older, sport comes much more competitive, so going to the gym and training a lot to get stronger and get a competitive edge comes with it,” he explains.

“You train specifically for a sport and if you train hard enough, then you look good. And you think, ‘Oh, I’m going to keep training so I look good when I go to the beach.’ Plus, girls obviously like guys who look muscular – not skinny or fat.”

This newly idealised male body shape, experts say, is a massive factor in the rise of what has been coined “muscle dysmorphia”.

“Muscle dysmorphia is almost seen as the male version of anorexia,” says Dr Sloane Madden, co-director of the eating disorder unit at Westmead Hospital in Sydney. “The similarities are very compulsive or excessive exercise and a real obsession with diet and dietary rules. But instead of restricting calories, a lot of the young men I see are obsessing about how much protein there is in their diets. They’re cutting out carbohydrates to maximise protein.”

“Where it becomes dangerous is when they’re using steroids and peptides to enhance the rate that they’re putting muscle on,” he says. ►

Eating disorders are traditionally seen as a female problem, but Dr Madden says that, today, one in four children under the age of 12 presenting with complications from disordered eating are male – and those stats are only rising.

Mitchell Doyle, now 23, remembers feeling dissatisfied with his body when he was in Year 3 at primary school.

“I was a chubby kid, but healthy. I wasn’t what would be considered obese,” he recalls. “But I wasn’t of the physical stature of the sporty guys at school, so they started to bully me about my weight.”

Mitchell began examining nutrition labels obsessively for fat content, refusing to eat anything he saw as being

WHAT SHOULD YOU BE WATCHING OUT FOR?

Just as when a girl’s dieting tips into anorexia, there are big warning signs for boys whose exercise tips them into the realm of muscle dysmorphia. “There will be mood changes, disordered eating, food restrictions, not wanting to eat with other people, an obsession with exercise, changes in size and shape, how they talk about themselves and their bodies,” Butterfly Foundation CEO Christine Morgan says.

Dr Sloane Madden adds, “The other issue is that obsession often takes them away from friends, from peers. It interferes with their normal daily function at school and, as they get older, with employment.”

The experts are in agreement as to how parents can help reverse this destructive body image cycle and it all comes down to role-modelling.

“Be careful about how you talk about your own feelings about your body image and appearance,” Dr Madden advises. “Just sitting down and eating together is really critical. You’re modelling normal healthy eating, plus dinner is a really good time to sit down and talk.”

Last but not least, if you are concerned about something, don’t be afraid to ask for professional help.

“Trust your instincts,” Christine Morgan says. “You have a gut feeling when your kid is not right.”

“too high”. He also started compulsively exercising. It didn’t take long to have a devastating effect.

“At the age of 11, I was diagnosed with anorexia,” he says. “I was told unless I put on weight I would be hospitalised.”

While he spent several years in recovery from his illness, Mitchell has relapsed into disordered eating and overexercising patterns at various stages in his life. He has also struggled with self-harm and attempted to end his life more than once.

“I’ve felt the pressure of becoming more physically masculine,” he says.

“The male figure is not what it used to be, it’s growing in muscle mass.”

Adding to this pressure, Mitchell says, is a lack of awareness in the media.

“Eating disorders are associated with celebrities like Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears, Daniel Johns of Silverchair is the only male I’ve ever seen talking about having an eating disorder. That was a pressure for me. I couldn’t identify with it because I hadn’t seen it out there as a male illness.”

Christine Morgan says this lack of awareness, along with the stigma of mental illness in any form, is key for why many young men will not seek help.

“Anyone with an eating disorder is highly unlikely to reach out and help themselves,” she says. “For boys immobilised because of the stigma, it needs their mothers, sisters, partners, cousins, aunts to be aware this is an illness. And if they see the signs, they need to do something. We need to engage the girls on behalf of the boys.”

Dr Madden says he believes that being in the grips of an obesity epidemic has also led to important health messages being lost. “The focus on the dangers of being overweight and obesity has led to some unhelpful messages being given,” he says. “Rather than focusing on balanced healthy eating and activity, people became obsessed by needing to lose weight to achieve health.”

Some educators are starting to work towards arresting this worrying cycle.

Patrick Brennan has taught in high schools for 20 years. Currently the head of Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) at Sydney’s all-boys school Waverley College, he’s noticed an extreme change in the students in his charge over recent years.

“Guys always did love PE, but now they have obsessive questions about proteins and supplements, and obviously their physicality is changing,” he says.

“A lot of them are in the gym before or after school off their own back. You may have had a handful of guys who did this 20 years ago.”

To help foster a healthy balance, the school has developed a unit called Blokes’ Business.

“We spend a term on it in both Year 9 and Year 10,” Mr Brennan says. “We talk about health literacy, issues surrounding masculinity, body image, sexuality, online gambling – a whole range of issues that really affect guys in the middle adolescent years.”

Year 12 Waverley student Scott Rynberg, 16, says the unit means students have become more willing to open up about their concerns.

“Having a class like this helps because it gives you the confidence to start talking, rather than worrying if you’re going to be teased,” he says.

Only three years into the program, Patrick

Brennan is happy to report that he’s seen a change, but knows his work is far from over.

“Seventeen per cent of our students are probably on a diet at any one time and there’s so much misinformation out there,” he says. “I’m still learning myself – what you read five years ago can be totally irrelevant today.”

“Diet products, supplements and protein powders are very well marketed. There will be a lot of intelligent people fooled by the misinformation and for educators of adolescents it’s a lot to keep up with.” ■

Concerned about a man in your life? Contact The Butterfly Foundation on 1800 334 673 or visit thebutterflyfoundation.org.au.

Waverley College students (from left) Dylan Newling, Guy Beynon, Lachlan Callaghan and Scott Rynberg say the fact that their school curriculum covers issues relating to masculinity has made it easier to discuss sensitive topics.



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