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Failure Influences How Men View Their Bodies

What is this research about?

Traditionally, research on 'body image' (the way people view themselves) has focused on women – in particular, women who are preoccupied with getting thinner. But men appear to be more concerned than ever with their body image. Unlike women, however, who often seek to lose weight, men have become increasingly obsessed with building up the muscle in their bodies. 'Threatened masculinity' theory provides one explanation for this recent trend. The theory, first proposed in the 1980s, suggests that the growing equality of women in Western societies has caused an identity crisis among men whose sense of what it means to be a 'man' is no longer clear. As a result, more and more men are defining their 'masculinity' based on the amount of muscle they have – their muscularity. But this preoccupation with muscle building can lead to serious health problems. For example, the use of steroids, to build up muscle mass, can have deadly side effects. Surprisingly, there has been little research on the influences on male body image.

What you need to know:

When men fail, they feel bad about their general appearance and physical ability – but when they fail to a woman, men see themselves as less muscular. Men view their masculinity through the amount of muscle they have. The way women and men view their bodies is susceptible to social influence.

What did the researchers do?

York researchers tried to find out if, after failing at a task that had just been successfully completed by a woman, men felt a need to increase their muscularity. They looked at sixty-six male undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 25. The men had to unscramble word puzzles. After being told whether or not they had done better than a woman, they were asked questions about their self-esteem and body image. The researchers did not look at how sexual orientation or ethnic differences played a role.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that men who failed at their assigned task felt less attractive than those who were told that they had done well. Failure, however, didn't impact men's self-esteem in other areas – just their body image. This suggests that men externalize their failures. In other words, their sense of failure has an impact on how they see their bodies. After failing at a task that a woman has just successfully completed, men feel particularly unhappy with their muscularity.

How can you use this research?

This research expands our knowledge of how men view their bodies. It provides a timely reminder – given the intensity of our media culture – that the body image of both women and men is shaped by social influences. Future research should see if sexual orientation or ethnic differences have an impact on male body image.

About the Researchers

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