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Men and the Mirror

by Heather Boerner



Travis Mathews, 31, always saw himself as a fat, bullied kid. It didn't matter how many pounds he lost, how many years passed, or how many people admired his adult body. In the end, it was just him and the mirror — and what he saw in that mirror controlled him.

"If I felt fat, it was just that much easier to identify with that part of myself that felt weak and child-like," says Mathews. "If I felt particularly thin that day, that was a signifier that I was strong or worthy of someone's attention."

Not feeling worthy of sexual attention was a big part of his distorted body image and the eating disorder he later developed. He said he craved sexual attention the way he craved food, looking for anything outside himself to provide a sense of self-worth. Now recovering from his eating disorder, Mathews' sexual relationships are getting better, too. He's been in a relationship with the same man for years.

Body Dysmorphia

What Mathews learned is this: His body image problems aren't about his body at all.

"It's a mental health issue," he says.

Research shows men of all ages and sexual orientations can experience a negatively skewed view of their bodies called body dysmorphia. It can make men feel either too fat, too short or too tall, or not muscular enough, and can include everything from thinning hair to penis size to the shape and appearance of testicles, says Dr. Katharine Phillips, director of the Body Dysmorphic Disorder and Body Image Clinic at Butler Hospital in Providence, RI. She is the author of *The Broken Mirror: Understanding and Treating Body Dysmorphic Disorder*.

In her research, Phillips has also found that while women are more likely to develop an eating disorder as a result of their body dysmorphia, men are more likely to be unemployed and receiving disability because of their body image issues. "On many of these measures, men's scores tended to be worse than women's," says Phillips. Even when the numbers were not statistically significant, she says, "it does raise the question of whether men with body dysmorphic disorder are more impaired or disabled because of their disorder."

Body Image and Sexual Health

Body dysmorphia can affect men's sexual health in various ways.

Phillips' most recent research — which has not yet been published — shows that 60 percent of men and women with body dysmorphia avoided physical contact, including sexual activity and close dancing. Those who did have sex said it wasn't satisfying. The study did not address whether men felt more sexually apprehensive than women.

Overall, research is just beginning to focus on the relationship between male body dysmorphia and sexual health, says Dr. Barnaby Barratt, past president of the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists.

"This is a huge and under-researched subject," he says.

Men who worry about their penis size or testicles "can't enjoy their genitals," says Barratt. "It's rather like women who worry about their breast size." It can cripple a man's willingness to have sex and his ability to enjoy it.

Some develop eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating. These men also tend to dissociate from their bodies during sex and therefore enjoy it less, says Barratt.

Jim Leone, a researcher at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, has studied body dysmorphia and drug use in men for five years. He estimates that about 10 million men suffer from severe body dysmorphia and, of those, about 100,000 suffer from muscle dysmorphia, a male-specific disorder in which men see themselves as frail or underdeveloped, even if they look to all others like an Adonis.

Men with muscle dysmorphia sometimes cope by bulking up with what Leone calls "body image drugs," such as anabolic steroids and ephedrine. In doing so, they risk erectile dysfunction, heart disease, and other serious physical problems.

Treatment

The trouble with treating body dysmorphia — and its sexual side effects — is that men don't think they're sick, and clinicians don't diagnose it. This is especially true of men with muscle dysmorphia, says Leone.

"The trouble with muscle dysmorphia is that men who have it think they're doing something healthy — they're going to the gym," he says. "It's just like washing your hands. If you do that five or six times a day, that's probably healthy. If you're washing your hands 50 times, it may be unhealthy."

Starting the Conversation

Mathews, who is recovering from body dysmorphia, says his first step to treatment was talking about it. He then went one step further and made the documentary *Do I Look Fat?* (2005). The film investigates body obsession, eating disorders, and body dysmorphia — what Mathews collectively refers to as "self-esteem disorders" — specifically among gay men. At film festivals, the discussion sparked by the film has helped move the issue into the forefront.

"People see the movie and they want to know, 'What do we do next?' They want me to have a plan," says Mathews. "I feel like the answer for now is to bring this discussion into the open in a real, comprehensive way."

Once body dysmorphia is identified, eating disorders clinics and treatment centers like

Body Dysmorphic Disorder and Body Image Clinic can treat men with the disorder. Treatment may be as simple as cognitive-behavioral therapy — during which a patient learns to react differently to stimuli that trigger body obsession — has been effective, as have antidepressants.

"The good news," says Phillips, "is that you can find help."

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Published: 06.19.06 | Updated: 07.04.06

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