

Men suffer body image problems of their own with drive for muscularity (w/ Video)

February 18 2010, by Cathy Keen

(PhysOrg.com) -- Slimming down for swimsuit season is an obsession for many women, and now bulking up for the beach can lead to body image problems with men today wanting to be bigger than ever, a new University of Florida study suggests.

The unhappiness runs deeper than the iconic Charles Atlas comic book ads in which a “97 pound weakling” transforms himself into a match for any buff bully on the beach. It extends to the use of sometimes dangerous supplements, obsessive exercise, gnawing anxiety and frequent mood swings, said Heather Hausenblas, a UF exercise psychologist who co-authored the research with Nickles Chittester, a psychology professor at Concordia University in Texas. The research is based on Chittester’s doctoral dissertation while a student at UF.

The similarity between the days of pioneering bodybuilder Charles Atlas and today is an excessive desire to develop muscles, which springs from society’s changing perceptions of the ideal male physique, she said.

“If you look back at what was considered the ideal male body 50 years ago it wasn’t this super hyper muscular physique that we have now,” Hausenblas said. The build that captured the Mr. Universe title when the contest began in 1959 is considerably smaller than the contemporary version, she said.

“[Body image](#) problems, such as eating disorders and striving to be thin, have always been attributed to women, but now we’re seeing a significant

rise in men who are dissatisfied with how they look and want to become more muscular,” she said.

As with extremely thin women believing they need to shed pounds, men’s preoccupation with building [muscle mass](#) may bear no relationship to their actual size, Hausenblas said. “We found that this drive for muscularity was influenced by psychological factors and not how large or how muscular a man is,” she said.

The researchers studied 113 male college students at UF using surveys and body assessment measures, publishing their findings in the October issue of the *Journal of Health Psychology*.

The study found that supplement use, low self-esteem and exercise dependence were the strongest predictors of a fixation with being big and beefy, while anthropometric measures such as one’s body mass index and percentage of body fat were not factors, she said.

The media have shifted their focus on female body dissatisfaction to include men, as a cultural transformation has taken place in the amount of muscle that is accepted and on display, Hausenblas said. “There has been almost an explosion within the last decade of research taking a look at male body issues and the causes and consequences of it,” she said.

Not only have muscle standards been raised to unrealistic heights in physical competition and on the cover of men’s magazines, but the trend has trickled down to children’s toys, Hausenblas said. Just as Barbie dolls set unrealistic expectations for girls, super muscular Spiderman, Superman and other action figures do so for boys, she said.

As these boys grow up, it’s not surprising there has been an increase in male cosmetic surgical procedures such as calf implants, pectoral implants or carving out six-packs, she said.

“Additionally, research now suggests that boys in middle and high school are engaging in some high risk behaviors, taking steroids and other supplements, and restricting carbohydrate intake, to reach a higher level of muscularity,” said J. Kevin Thompson, a University of South Florida psychology professor and co-author of the book “The Muscular Ideal,” who praised Hausenblas’ research.

Supplements are attractive because they require so little effort, Hausenblas said.

“I think it comes down to people wanting that quick easy fix as opposed to actually doing the hard work of exercising,” she said. “It’s the same thing as weight loss, in that people would much rather take a weight loss pill than to have to diet, exercise and do everything that goes along with it.”

The frequency, duration or intensity of exercise had little influence on men’s drive for muscularity, although an obsession with exercise did, Hausenblas said. “It was not how much they were doing it, but their thoughts and attitudes about it,” she said.

For these [men](#), feelings of self worth were closely tied to muscularity and exercise, Hausenblas said. With so much of their identity wrapped up in their physique, it was not surprising that low self-esteem resulted, she said.

Provided by University of Florida

Citation: Men suffer body image problems of their own with drive for muscularity (w/ Video) (2010, February 18) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-02-men-body-image-problems-muscularity.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.