

COVID-19 anxiety linked to body image issues

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A new study has found that anxiety and stress directly linked to COVID-19 could be causing a number of body image issues amongst women and men.

The research, led by Professor Viren Swami of Anglia Ruskin University

(ARU) and published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, involved 506 UK adults with an average age of 34.

Amongst women, the study found that feelings of [anxiety](#) and [stress](#) caused by COVID-19 were associated with a greater desire for thinness. It also found that anxiety was significantly associated with [body dissatisfaction](#).

Amongst the male participants, the study found that COVID-19-related anxiety and stress was associated with greater desire for muscularity, with anxiety also associated with body fat dissatisfaction.

Negative body image is one of the main causes of eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, and this new study adds to recent research indicating that fears around COVID-19, and the consequences of the restrictions introduced to help tackle it, could be contributing to a number of serious mental health issues.

Lead author Viren Swami, Professor of Social Psychology at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), said: "In addition to the impact of the virus itself, our results suggest the pandemic could also be leading to a rise in body image issues. In some cases, these issues can have very serious repercussions, including triggering eating disorders.

"Certainly during the initial spring lockdown period, our [screen time](#) increased, meaning that we were more likely to be exposed to thin or athletic ideals through the media, while decreased physical activity may have heightened negative thoughts about weight or shape. At the same time, it is possible that the additional anxiety and stress caused by COVID-19 may have diminished the coping mechanisms we typically use to help manage negative thoughts

"Our study also found that when stressed or anxious, our pre-occupations

tend to follow gender-typical lines. During lockdown, women may have felt under greater pressure to conform to traditionally feminine roles and norms, and messaging about self-improvement may have led to women feeling dissatisfied with their bodies and having a greater desire for thinness.

"Similarly, our findings reflect the way in which stress and anxiety impact men's relationships with their bodies, particularly in terms of masculine body ideals. Given that masculinity typically emphasises the value of toughness, self-reliance, and the pursuit of status, COVID-19-related stress and anxiety may be leading men to place greater value on the importance of being muscular."

More information: Viren Swami et al, COVID-19-related stress and anxiety are associated with negative body image in adults from the United Kingdom, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2020.110426](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110426)

Provided by Anglia Ruskin University

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