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'I felt like trash': How COVID-19 has affected body image in young people

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At the beginning of 2020, Afrah Howlader made a personal goal to exercise regularly. Howlader, a 21-year-old senior studying public health at Drexel University, went to the gym often during January and

February. The results were encouraging—her stamina increased and she could feel herself getting stronger. Then, in March, COVID-19 closed her gym.

"This was the only time in my life that I went to the gym regularly," Howlader said. "I spent all this time building up a good habit, so it was definitely disheartening to lose it."

Determined to stick with her goal, Howlader took up running at the beginning of quarantine and she was proud of the progress she continued to make. But on days when she missed a run, she found her mood worsened. She became increasingly concerned about gaining "quarantine weight."

"I felt a lot of personal shame for not keeping up with exercise, especially over the summer," Howlader said. "I experienced a lot of fluctuating weight, which was hard. It definitely impacted my mental health. I felt like I didn't have a productive day if I didn't go out and exercise."

When the pandemic hit the United States and the country locked down, jokes about the "quarantine 15" popped up on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok almost immediately. Overeating as a way to cope with stress became more widespread. So did the use of virtual communication on platforms where users are staring at themselves for hours at a time, dissecting flaws both real and imaginary.

Those factors, experts said, have led to increasing body image problems, particularly among young people. A survey of 8,000 United Kingdom residents published by Britain's Parliament in October found that 58% of respondents under age 18 reported feeling worse about their physical appearance during lockdown.

"Young adults are having a hard time thinking about weight gain and their bodies, especially during the pandemic," said Charlotte Markey, a psychology professor at Rutgers University. "Social media does not necessarily have a negative influence on body image, but the way most young people use it, it seems to be negative. There's a lot of research accumulating that suggests that misinformation, like Photoshopped images or posts about dieting without any evidence, is detrimental to young people's body image."

Critical messages about appearance during this stressful time are harmful, said Janell Mensinger, a biostatistician and professor at Villanova University's M. Louise Fitzpatrick College of Nursing.

"The messaging we need to hear at this time is that we need to be kind to ourselves," she said. "The concern over exercise and eating can just be an overwhelming addition to what's already a traumatic time for people."

Melissa Harrison, a therapist who cofounded the Center for Hope and Health in Ardmore, said that during stressful times, some people will hyper-focus on their bodies, while others eat more because their vices are exacerbated.

"We've seen an uptick in what we call body checking, which is behavior that people use to keep track of what they look like," Harrison said. "People are at home a lot more now and can look at themselves in the mirror or jump on the scale more often, which is one of the things that actually trigger body image issues."

Negative body image does not always come from weight gain. Kenzie Myer, a 21-year-old senior at Arcadia University, lost 20 pounds while living at home over the spring and summer when her university was shut down. But she dropped pounds because she couldn't find foods at home in Berks County that wouldn't inflame her irritable bowel syndrome, and

so she was afraid to eat.

"I felt like trash," Myer said. "I'm a swimmer at Arcadia, so during swim season, you're burning so many calories. The output is so much that you can eat whatever you want. Living at home now, I really found myself restricting myself and being more fearful of food."

At the end of Myer's sophomore year swimming season, she was proud of how strong she was.

"I could squat my own body weight," she said. "Now I'm like picking up this year, and it's like, 'Oh gosh, it's a little tough.' "

Young people are having problems with how they look from the neck up, too. Harrison pointed out that some of her young adult clients are struggling with how their faces look on camera because they've replaced daily in-person interactions at work or school with video conferencing.

"Students are staring at themselves on camera all the time, so they're having issues about their face," she said. "I hear teenagers saying, 'I can't stand my face right now, but my teacher says I have to keep my camera on.' The majority of their lives are being lived via a screen, and when teens compare their face to everyone else's face on Zoom, it can exacerbate the issue of feeling hypercritical about flaws."

The added pressure of having to be on Zoom for school and work caused Priscilla Segnini, a 30-year-old graduate student at Georgetown University, to eat more as a coping mechanism. Segnini, who is currently based in Radnor and works in social media strategy, said that she was attending up to eight virtual meetings a day for her job.

"I gained a lot of weight during COVID, so I started feeling these feelings of self-consciousness," she said. "I felt this pressure of making

sure my hair was looking good, my face was looking good, the angle of my camera was good. I started feeling burnt out, sitting in front of the computer. I felt that it was giving me anxiety."

In July, Segnini stopped having to attend Zoom meetings for work. She said her mental health improved noticeably after that.

"I ended up checking my image so much on Zoom," Segnini said. "It felt unnatural, like why am I putting so much attention on this? It wasn't something that I was doing before. I felt like having the camera on during Zoom calls eventually became a distraction because I was so focused on how I look."

For those struggling with body image, Mensinger, the Villanova professor, recommends using mindfulness techniques to stay in the present moment, rather than worrying about the uncertain future. She also said that reminding yourself of the positive things you bring to the table can be "pretty powerful," and that even though it can be difficult to see friends and family in person, reaching out online can be empowering and helpful. If body image issues lead to levels of anxiety that interfere with daily routines and work, experts suggested reaching out to a therapist.

"The message that our weight needs to be watched, I think, is a really sad indication of the values of our culture," Mensinger said. "If your weight goes up by a couple of pounds during the pandemic, the world is not going to come to an end."

Howlader has taken this advice to heart. She stopped running as often over the summer because of the heat and Philly's crowded jogging paths. But she recently started her habit back up again.

"I've been trying to be more intentional about exercising recently,"

Howlader said. "But I'm also making a concerted effort not to guilt myself over it."