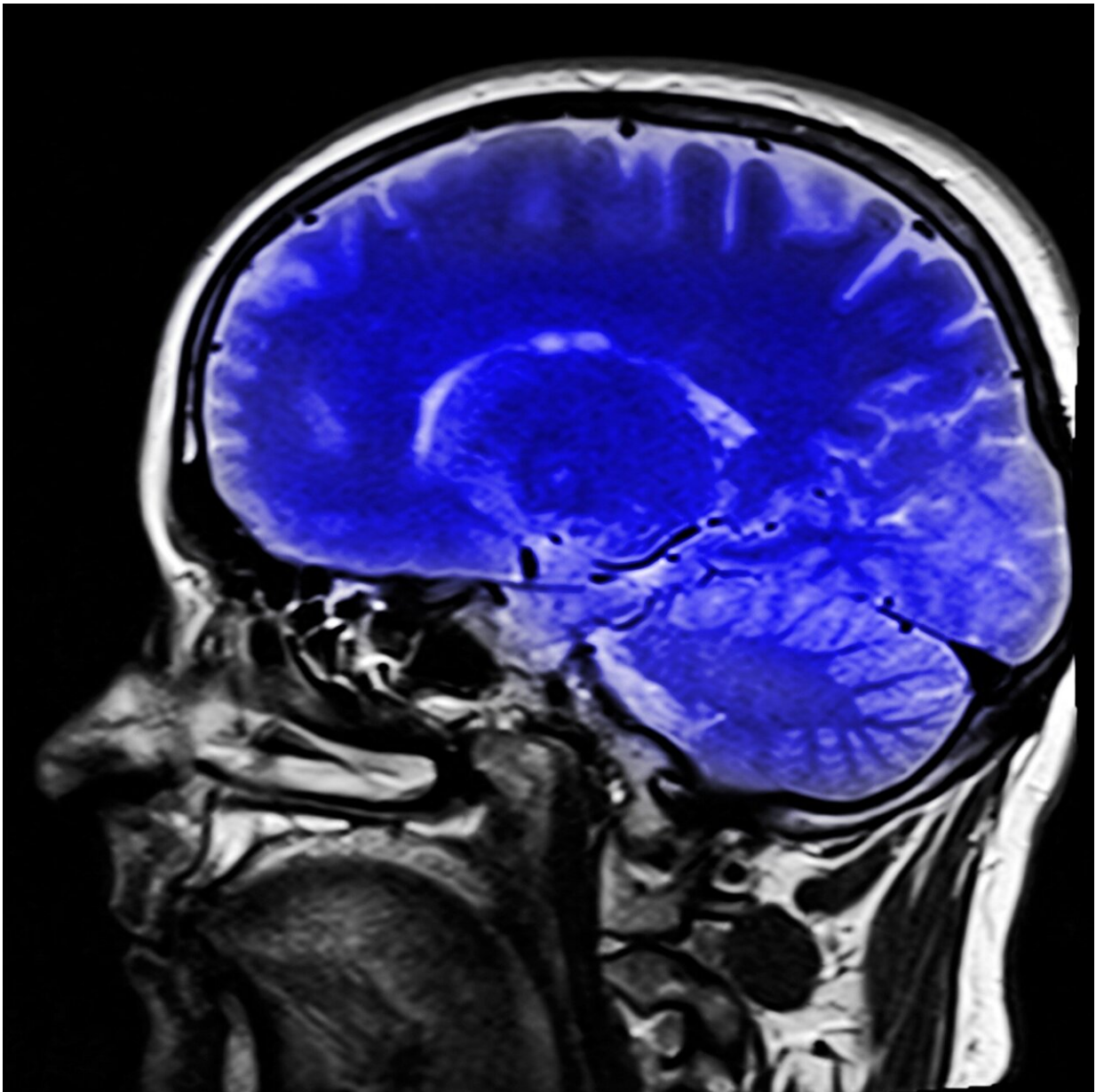


Understanding how to improve body image in queer men

June 1 2023, by Wes Grey



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Gay, bisexual, and queer men have worse body image than our heterosexual counterparts—a finding I, as a gay man, can personally attest to.

By body image, I mean our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward our bodies and appearance, for better or worse.

There have been lots of studies on how women can improve their body image but there have been almost no evidence-based interventions for queer men's body image.

So, in my honors year, supervised by Dr. Emily Harris and Dr. Scott Griffith from the Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences, I tested whether a short self-compassion writing task could improve queer men's body image.

The results, published in the journal *Body Image*, suggest that if gay and bi men can feel more self-compassionate, their relationship with their bodies can improve.

The difficulty lies in how to help them be self-compassionate.

Self-compassion has its roots in Buddhist philosophy. In Western psychology, it's been defined as treating ourselves with kindness, recognizing our flaws and mistakes as part of a shared human experience ("No one's perfect!"), and being aware of our present feelings without judgment.

Fostering a self-compassionate mindset can improve a range of mental

health concerns like anxiety and depression. Research also suggests that people higher in self-compassion generally feel better about their bodies.

Randomized controlled trials (the 'gold standard' of evidence for interventions) show that promoting self-compassion (kindness to ourselves) helps improve body image over-and-above alternatives such as [self-esteem](#) (liking ourselves).

Most research on self-compassion and body image has been conducted on women or mixed-gender samples. Men are underrepresented in self-compassion literature, and queer men are even more so.

This makes some sense—women, on average, have worse body image than men, including gay, bisexual, and queer men. The issue, however, is that queer men also experience objectification and other appearance-related pressures that can impact our body image, but there are almost no resources tailored to our needs.

To my knowledge, only one previous paper specifically examined an intervention for queer men's body image.

Self-compassion stands out as a quick and effective way of improving body image. Previous work found that women's body image improved after as little as three minutes of self-compassion writing.

And this improvement is not fleeting. Self-compassion may improve resilience to future negative body image by helping us disconnect from critical self-judgments that can degrade the perceptions we have of ourselves.

For our study, we recruited 605 gay, bisexual and queer men (I'll group them collectively as 'queer') and compared the effects of a self-compassion writing task, a self-esteem writing task and a 'control'

writing task. This was the largest self-compassion intervention we know of, with most sample sizes in the literature hovering around 100 to 200 participants.

In the self-compassion condition, participants wrote kindly about themselves, with question prompts such as: How common do you think your feelings about your body are among other men?

For self-esteem, participants wrote about what they or others liked about their bodies, for example: Which aspects of your appearance make you feel worthwhile, confident, and empowered as a person?

The [control group](#) had neutral questions like: What activities did you do this morning?

Based on the studies with women, we hypothesized that self-compassion would be more effective than self-esteem at improving body image among queer men. But interestingly, while self-compassion and self-esteem tasks both improved body image by about the same amount, neither effect was large enough to be statistically significantly different to the control task.

The results for self-compassion and self-esteem tasks were not identical, however. To the extent that it improved body image, the self-compassion condition worked because it made queer men feel more self-compassionate.

Our self-esteem condition, on the other hand, did not improve body image through improving self-compassion. We didn't test for self-esteem, however, so we can't say whether our self-esteem intervention improved body image because of improving self-esteem.

Overall, while the results for both interventions are promising, the

effects weren't as strong as they are in women.

At first, our findings were deflating and confusing. Why didn't self-compassion seem as helpful for queer men when it showed such consistent evidence for women's body image?

Goodness knows queer men need effective body image interventions.

But this led to an important consideration: self-compassion helps improve body image in women, while queer men, despite facing worse body image than straight men, are still just that—men.

Despite stereotypes to the contrary, queer men still face most (if not all) of the expectations of toxic masculinity as our straight counterparts. Perhaps self-compassionate writing doesn't work as well for queer men because we find it difficult, on average, to be kind to ourselves.

Self-kindness, self-love, and self-understanding are not seen as masculine traits. Men, writ large, aren't encouraged to like themselves. The social expectation for men to be tough, strong, and stoic may make being self-compassionate challenging.

It might be just as tricky to foster a self-loving attitude in queer men as it is in straight men.

This suggests an exciting possibility. If we can first address the gendered barriers to [self-compassion](#), perhaps then queer and straight men's [body image](#) alike may benefit from being a little more self-compassionate.

More information: Wesley Grey et al, A randomized controlled trial of a brief self-compassion intervention designed to improve the body image of sexual minority men, *Body Image* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.07.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.07.001)

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