

Adverse childhood experiences linked to muscle dysmorphia

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A new study published in *Clinical Social Work Journal* found that adolescents and young adults who experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) before the age of 18 were significantly more likely to experience symptoms of muscle dysmorphia.

With previous research showing that more than half of North American children and adolescents experience at least one adverse childhood experience in their lifetime, these new findings highlight the need for greater awareness of how adverse experiences in childhood (such as domestic violence, [emotional abuse](#), and sexual abuse) and muscle dysmorphia (the pathological pursuit of muscularity) are linked.

"Those who experience adverse childhood experiences may engage in the pursuit of muscularity to compensate for experiences where they once felt inferior, small, and at risk, as well as to protect against future victimization," says lead author Kyle T. Ganson, Ph.D., MSW, an assistant professor at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. "The experience of adverse childhood experiences may also increase [body dissatisfaction](#), specifically muscle dissatisfaction, which is a key feature of muscle dysmorphia."

Previous studies have shown that [adverse experiences](#) in childhood can lead to harmful health effects. While prior research has demonstrated that adverse childhood experiences are highly common in people with eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorder, few studies have looked at the association between adverse childhood experiences and muscle dysmorphia.

The study's researchers analyzed data from over 900 adolescents and [young adults](#) who participated in the Canadian Study of Adolescent Health Behaviors. In total, 16% of participants who experienced five or more adverse childhood experiences were at clinical risk for muscle dysmorphia, underscoring the significant traumatic effects that such experiences can have on mental health and well-being.

"Importantly, our study found that gender was an important factor in the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and muscle dysmorphia symptoms," says Ganson. "Boys and young men in the study

who have experienced five or more adverse childhood experiences had significantly greater muscle dysmorphia symptoms when compared to girls and young women."

The authors note that boys and young men who experience adverse childhood experiences may feel that their masculinity was threatened from these experiences. Therefore, they engage in the pursuit of muscularity to demonstrate their adherence to masculine gender norms such as dominance, aggression, and power.

"It is important for health care professionals to assess for symptoms of muscle dysmorphia, including muscle dissatisfaction and functional impairment related to exercise routines and [body image](#), among [young people](#) who have experienced [adverse childhood experiences](#), particularly boys and young men," concludes Ganson.

More information: Kyle T. Ganson et al, Adverse Childhood Experiences and Muscle Dysmorphia Symptomatology: Findings from a Sample of Canadian Adolescents and Young Adults, *Clinical Social Work Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s10615-023-00908-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-023-00908-9)

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