

ARE YOU MAN ENOUGH?

Words Mark Bailey

Dealing with anxieties about your body? Welcome to the club. So what's caused this crisis in modern masculinity - and how can we overcome it?

If you stand in front of the mirror and wish you had a better body, you are not alone: paragons of masculinity such as American all-action hero GI Joe and Jedi master Luke Skywalker have felt the pressure to shape up too.

A muscular physique has become such a key part of the masculine ideal that even those fictional icons have beefed up to meet cultural expectations. A Harvard Medical School research team monitored the changing body shapes of action toys and found that - with the proportions extrapolated to those of a 5ft 10in (1.78m) man - GI Joe's chest expanded from 112.8cm to 139.2cm between 1973 and 1998, and his biceps from 31cm to a T-shirt-splitting 68.1cm. The Luke Skywalker action figure also gained meatier shoulders and a broader chest.

And the pressure to perfect your body is there every time you see Channing Tatum or Daniel Craig take his shirt off in a movie, every time you overhear women discuss a man's body, every time you and your mates tease each other about beer guts and moobs. Such angst used to belong to women. Now it's our turn.

BIGGER AND BETTER?

According to surveys by the magazine *Psychology Today*, the number of men dissatisfied with their appearance rose from 15% in 1972 to 47% in 1997. A 2014 survey by NBC's *Today* show and AOL revealed that more men worry about their appearance than

about their family or profession - 53% didn't like having their picture taken and 44% felt uncomfortable about being seen in swimming trunks. Research published in the *American Journal Of Psychology* suggested European and American men ideally want an extra 13kg of muscle.

'More men worry about their appearance than about their family'

Normally an interest in physical appearance triggers a positive drive to shape up, eat healthily and increase strength and fitness. In extreme circumstances it can lead to 'muscle dysmorphia' (a pathological preoccupation with muscularity) or eating disorders (nicknamed 'manorexia'). But most of us have at some point felt a sense of physical inferiority and apprehension about our bodies.

Where does this pressure come from? And can we ever hope to master it?



PAST WINNERS

This is not, strictly speaking, a new issue. In Ancient Greece, the athletes who competed in the classical Olympic Games, the men who trained at 'gymnasiums' - which then meant facilities that promoted athletic development alongside intellectual advancement - and the muscular heroes of mythology were revered for their physical prowess. 'Today it may feel as if it's always been women who were pressured to achieve physical perfection, but that actually came much later,' says Miles Groth, professor of psychology at New York's Wagner College. 'If we look back to the beginnings of western culture, the male physique was the model of perfection in Greek sculpture.'

Psychologist Dr Phillippa Diedrichs, who works at the University of the West of England's Centre for Appearance Research, says we don't know enough about this subject 'because historically body issues have been seen as an issue just for women, so men weren't asked the questions to begin with.'

MFERS ON BODY IMAGE

Joel Snape, associate editor



'Having started to lose my hair in my early 20s and finally embraced the "Shaolin thug" look at 27, it's not my biggest concern.'

What is? My chest, which only grows if I do literally hundreds of press-ups and dips a week, and then immediately shrinks again once I fall off the wagon. Oh, and my twice-broken nose, which looks shocking if I catch it from the wrong side in a mirror.'

MFERS ON BODY IMAGE

Mark Bailey, feature writer



'I've got multiple scars and I've broken my nose twice, but I've always considered such imperfections to be masculine souvenirs

of a life well lived. What I hate are my skinny wrists. Even when I build up my arm muscles, my wrists don't change, perpetually taunting me that I'm a scrawny charlatan pretending to be bigger than I am.'



Research now shows that a significant proportion of men are unhappy with the way they look.'

Dr Roberto Olivardia, a clinical instructor in psychology at Harvard Medical School, believes concepts of masculinity have changed in recent years. 'Women historically have been encouraged by societal standards to conform to certain body ideals as a way of measuring up to what it means to be feminine, but masculinity has largely been defined by income potential or being a fighter. In the 1980s we began to witness another emerging expression of masculinity: the fit and muscular body. This was reflected in movie actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger and in advertisements from the likes of Calvin Klein.'

The media has been central to this shifting paradigm. 'TV, films and celebrity culture tend to offer very narrow ideals of what we consider attractive and they are not representative of the wider public,' says Dierdrichs. 'As humans we have a natural tendency to compare ourselves with other people to work out where we stand in life. If we compare ourselves with people who seem to embody an ideal - a celebrity or an athlete - we will almost certainly fall short.'

APPEAR PRESSURE

The emergence of the 'metrosexual' male in the 1990s further increased men's interest in their own bodies - and their inherent dissatisfaction. 'Through celebrity athletes like David Beckham, you could be interested in

fashion, appearance and body shape and, for the first time in a long time, that wasn't associated with being effeminate,' says Dr Helen Fawkner, senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University.

The development of the internet and social media only accelerated the issue further. Today's Instagram-conscious, Tinder-dating modern man feels a relentless pressure to look good. 'Men see a constant stream of advertisements and content on social media, with friends sharing their success in the gym, at work or with the opposite sex,' says Chris Beastall of male grooming blog *Ape To Gentleman*. 'We see only the best aspects of others' existences, meaning the recipients of this information have abnormal aspirations. Ten years ago we compared ourselves with local friends whose flaws we could see.' In short: we're comparing our behind-the-scenes DVD extras to everyone else's highlight reel.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Men's physiques are now objectified in the same way as women's. A study in the journal *Psychotherapy And Psychosomatics* revealed that the proportion of ads using undressed men rocketed from 3% in the 1950s to 35% in the 1990s. An analysis of *Playgirl* magazines showed that between

MFERS ON BODY IMAGE

Ben Ince, deputy editor



'At 173cm I'm not the tallest, and despite my best gym efforts I've never been able to put much muscle on my skinny upper body. I also struggle to grow a proper beard, despite having thick (if greying) hair, an ape-like chest rug and feet a hobbit would be proud of.'

'Corporations make money when men feel ashamed of their arms'

1976 and 2001 male centrefolds shed 5kg of fat and gained 12kg of muscle. 'Traditionally women were seen as the sexual objects but men have moved into that sphere too,' says Groth. 'That is a new thing and leads to greater self-consciousness. Men start to think: how am I being seen?'

Glen Jankowski, a researcher on body image at Leeds Beckett University, believes big corporations are to blame for the development of this ideal. In post-industrial society, companies began to target a new market of male consumers. 'The corporately produced beauty ideal of the muscular young white man with a full head of hair, minimal body hair, and a symmetrical and unblemished face is everywhere,' he says. 'Corporations make money when men feel ashamed of their arms, their fat or

their hair loss. Follow the money and you find the origin.' Fawkner agrees: 'Men are now being sold to in a way that women have been for a long time.'

More sweeping economic and cultural changes are involved here too. With the advance of feminism and the move towards financial and employment parity, men have relinquished their exclusive roles as breadwinners and bosses. As a result, a man's body may have grown in importance as a last defining symbol of his masculinity. 'It is maybe an indication that men are feeling smaller in a psychological way and less prominent in society,' says Groth. 'Men have been the leading sex for most of human history so to be big physically was a sign of that. If men are not so sure they are doing well in the job market at least they can have their body representing them as accomplished.'

James Collins, a nutritionist at the Centre for Health and Human Performance, says this doesn't mean we are driven by failure but by a passion to succeed. 'Our biggest increase in clients is actually in men aged 35 to 40s who want to regain their body. These are successful, high-performing business people who do cognitively demanding jobs and use their analytical mind and attention to detail to get the body they want.'

TAKE ADVANTAGE

There are obvious health benefits to having a strong body that conforms to the ideal - but it would be crazy to pretend there aren't

MFERS ON BODY IMAGE

Sam Rider, senior staff writer



'My biggest concern is my warp-speed metabolism. It makes putting on muscle a perpetual struggle, regardless of how much I eat or how long I spend in the weights room, and has left me with drainpipe legs and a pigeon chest. Of course, this could all change once I pass 30 so I should probably make the most of it while I can.'

social benefits too. 'A smartly dressed man who is in good shape and well-groomed will be better placed to get a job than an overweight, unkempt candidate who possesses an identical skill set,' says Beastall. Indeed a 2013 Italian study, which analysed job applications sent with accompanying photographs, showed that the average call-back rate for attractive men was 47% against 26% for unattractive men. 'People who are attractive get a better deal in life so it is not just a matter of vanity for people to be concerned with their appearance,' says Faw-kner. 'We know attractive people are advantaged in so many situations, from social to employment to dating.'

Men can at least be relieved that their issues remain less problematic than those women continue to face. 'Women still fare worse,' says Jankowski. 'The pressure for them is relentless and has been going on for a very long time. Men still aren't having the gap between their thighs or the wrinkles on their knees scrutinised - or not yet anyway.'

MFERS ON BODY IMAGE

Nick Hutchings, editor 'The main issue for me is hair - both the gradually thinning mane on my head and the kind that's speedily taking over my chest, stomach and back. What I really want is to wake up one day and discover all my body hair has magically transplanted itself to my scalp. If I could afford it, I'd definitely get a hair transplant and laser hair removal.'



To ensure that this remains the case, men need to untangle concepts of masculinity and muscularity. 'Masculinity is multidimensional,' says Olivardia. 'It is not essential to have a positive body image to consider oneself masculine. Certainly being healthy and having a positive body image is helpful for one's self-esteem. But one is ultimately not going to be secure in his masculinity if he feels he needs to have a particular body for others to view him seriously as a man. That only means failure to maintain that body runs the risk of diminishing one's masculinity.'

OWN GOALS

So how can men channel their desire for physical improvement in a positive way?

'You don't have to take it to Daniel Craig's level to gain more confidence'

'The key is to remember that if you simply make becoming healthier your main goal, the aesthetics will follow,' says Sean Lerwill, a *Men's Fitness* cover model and a personal trainer with a degree in genetics. 'The second point is to be realistic. Using my genetics background I know that if you have long limbs you will always look leaner than somebody with short limbs, and somebody with short limbs will more easily look like they are packing on muscle. Accept your body shape and work with it. Getting a body like Daniel Craig's in 12 weeks is not easy, but you can reduce your body fat and build more muscle. Be content with what you can accomplish. You don't need to take it to the Daniel Craig level to gain more confidence.'

It is completely normal for an amateur footballer to watch Lionel Messi play for Barcelona, then to try to copy his trickery in

a Sunday League game, without becoming depressed by his obvious inferiority. And any guy can cook a Gordon Ramsay recipe and enjoy the finished product, despite knowing it probably doesn't taste or look as good as Ramsay's original. It should also be perfectly possible for a man to admire the physique of a celebrity or athlete, and to learn from his training and diet, without feeling the pressure to develop an exact facsimile of that person's body. Through cultural pressure or personal anxiety, and the muddling of masculinity and muscularity, we have made such aspirations more problematic than they need to be.

James Collins believes that self-education is also critical. 'Many people who suffer from body image problems have a poor understanding of how the body stores fat and processes food. There is real peace of mind in understanding the basic concepts of body composition.'

GET REAL

For clues about the healthiest way to manage body image, it is worth returning to Ancient Greece. Young men did not train for aesthetic reasons, but to improve their performances in the sports in which they participated. This approach could help you today. 'Setting performance targets can make training much more enjoyable and rewarding than if you are only thinking of aesthetic changes,' says Lerwill.

Diedrichs suggests a similar philosophy is the way forward. 'It's better to focus on the more intrinsic reasons for and benefits of exercise if you want to maintain your exercise routine. It's also important to focus on the positives of what your body can do. Your body is not just something to be



MFERS ON BODY IMAGE

Max Anderton, head of digital content



'I have a dark brown birthmark, starting just under my belly button and extending down into my pants. As a kid other children would ask, "Is that a burn?", "what's wrong with your belly?", and even "Is that poo on you?" It's pretty hairy now too, which wouldn't be an issue if the rest of my torso wasn't so lacking in the man-rug department.'

looked at. If you are fit and healthy you will have the energy throughout the day to do whatever you want.'

At the gymnasiums of Ancient Greece, men took part in physical exercise but also studied literature and philosophy. Nobody is suggesting you should flick through Plato on the squat rack, but balancing physical fitness with other sources of pleasure and pride is essential to your sense of wellbeing. 'Self-esteem should come from many sources, such as our intelligence, the relationships we have, our sense of humour and our contributions to society as a whole,' says Dr Olivardia.

Above all else, next time you walk into a gym remember that your anxieties are the same as everybody else's. 'The most important intervention I have seen is when a man hears somebody else say that he doesn't feel he can attain this ideal,' says Jankowski. 'It is very reassuring. Lots of men are experiencing these problems and you are not alone.' Remember this the next time it seems as if every man in the world has a perfect body but you. ■

THE CHANGING MALE BODY IDEAL

1950s-60s

Pre-roid bodybuilders were a leaner breed, personified by Mr Universe and Hercules Unchained star Steve Reeves - still an advocate of drug-free lifting.



1970s-80s

As Mr Olympia pushed for bigger bodies, the overspill into Hollywood - led by Arnold and Lou Ferrigno - prompted a rise in sheer bulk.



1990s

David Beckham represented the move towards more athletic bodies, with crisp definition and a more groomed look taking priority over brawn.



2000s
More rugged, masculine physiques were back in, as the likes of Daniel Craig showed the appeal of broad chests and defined abs.



2010s
Actors such as Channing Tatum and Ryan Reynolds have modern athletic physiques that marry a capacity for functional movement with sculpted muscles.

