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# A psychological comparison of females with anorexia nervosa and competitive male bodybuilders: body shape ideals in the extreme

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## Abstract

There is accumulating evidence that young men have become as concerned with their physical appearance as young women. However, different from women who want to achieve an ultra-slender body shape, most men want to increase their muscle mass and body size. Women with anorexia nervosa (AN) and competitive male bodybuilders are those who have taken the cultural standards of bodily perfection to the extreme, and both use unhealthy behaviours such as severe food restriction, excessive exercise, and steroids in pursuit of their goals. Findings of this study confirmed our prediction that the psychological profile of bodybuilders would be very similar to that found in women with AN. Both groups were significantly more obsessive, perfectionistic, anhedonic, and pathologically narcissistic than the general population. However, the bodybuilders reported very positive perceptions of their self-worth while the AN patients had very negative perceptions. Results are interpreted in the framework of a speculative developmental model of AN and bodybuilding, which focuses on the role of personality in the initiation and maintenance of excessive behaviours. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Females with anorexia nervosa; Competitive male bodybuilders; Body shape ideals

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## 1. Introduction

During most of this century, concerns about body shape and efforts to enhance physical attractiveness have implicitly been the prerogative of women. However, in recent years, and

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with changing social values, we have seen an increased emphasis on appearance among men (Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1986). One indication of this is the significant increase in body-concern articles related to physical fitness and weight loss in popular men's magazines (Nemeroff, Stein, Diehl, & Smilack, 1994). There is also evidence that media exposure to socially prescribed body-image ideals can foster negative psychological consequences in men. A recently published study found that both men and women reported feeling fatter, less attractive, less sexy, and less toned after viewing images of fashion models that represented the stereotypic ideal for their gender (Ogden & Munday, 1996). Other data have also indicated a positive relationship between dieting behaviours and media consumption in both men and women (Harrison & Cantor, 1997).

We are becoming increasingly aware of the potentially unhealthy practices that are used by some women in their pursuit of the ultra-slender body ideal that is ubiquitous in fashion advertising and the entertainment media. Estimates suggest that at any one time, about 40% of adult women and at least 60% of adolescents girls restrict their food intake for the purpose of losing weight (e.g. Horm & Anderson, 1993; Middleman, Vazquez, & Durant, 1998; Serdula et al., 1993). These statistics are particularly disconcerting since it may be the wrong people who are preoccupied with their weight. In a recent study, 50% of the young women who were underweight on the basis of their Body Mass Index classified themselves in the overweight category (Haberman & Luffey, 1998).

Among some women, the quest for the ideal body shape takes an extreme and aberrant form. The severe emaciation that defines anorexia nervosa (AN) is the pathological manifestation of a strong desire for thinness, and the use of self-starvation to achieve that goal. Because those who suffer from this condition are typically characterized by traits such as obsessionality, perfectionism, narcissism, and anhedonia, as well as by affective disturbances (e.g. Davis, Woodside, Olmsted, & Kaptein, 1999; Deep, Nagy, Weltzin, Rao, & Kaye, 1995; Garner, 1981; Lilenfeld et al., 1998; Mitzman, Slade, & Dewey, 1994), AN has been classified as a major psychiatric disorder.

Although the media image of the sexually attractive male is also lean, it is—in contrast to its female counterpart—very muscular. Indeed, it could be said that on a continuum of body size, the gender-specific ideals represent polar opposites. Although men also engage in appearance-enhancing behaviours, they tend to employ different methods than women to alter their body shape. Studies have found that they are more likely to use strength training exercises, chaotic dietary regimens, and food supplements to reduce body fat content and enhance muscle mass (Andersen, Barlett, Morgan, & Brownell, 1995; Drownowski, Kurth, & Krahn, 1995). And it appears that these behaviours have been on the increase in recent years (Wroblewska, 1997). Of greater concern, however, is the increasing recreational use of anabolic–androgenic steroids for cosmetic muscle building. Prevalence rates among adolescent males range between 4% and 12% (Bahrke, Yesalis, & Brower, 1998). In addition to the medical risks associated with chronic steroid use, there are a number of psychological side effects. For example, during periods of drug taking, there tends to be increased irritability, aggressiveness, grandiosity, and recklessness, while depression and diminished libido are characteristic of withdrawal from these drugs (e.g. Pope & Katz, 1994; Riem & Hursey, 1995).

Among men, efforts to achieve the ideal body shape can also take an extreme form. Most would agree that the competitive male bodybuilder typifies the ultimate achievement of

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