

Men and eating disorders: why it's time to get talking

REGISTERED COUNSELLOR AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST, SHARON HINSULL, SHARES HER EXPERTISE.

Whilst official statistics would suggest that an estimated 1.6 million people in the UK have an eating disorder, the true figure is believed to be far higher than that. Furthermore, of that estimated number, around a quarter of those affected are understood to be young men. In a recent study conducted by Instagram and suicide prevention charity CALM almost half of men aged 16 to 40 said they had struggled at one time or another with their physical appearance, with only a quarter of respondents saying that they felt satisfied with the way they currently look.

According to the latest available NHS data, the number of young males being hospitalised with eating disorders in recent years has been rising exponentially. Meanwhile, the use of anabolic steroids amongst young people in the UK has undergone a reported four-fold increase. Health experts have

attributed these worrying trends to the growing pressure being placed on young men to emulate the kind of ripped and muscular physique that is now perceived as being the aspirational norm across popular culture and social media.

The National Centre for Eating Disorders (NCFED) has been seeing a steady increase in the number of men reaching out for support, something which, until very recently, had never previously been the case. As illnesses like anorexia and bulimia nervosa have traditionally been seen as affecting mostly teenage girls and young women, it has made it especially hard for men and boys to know how to ask for help.

“Once an eating disorder develops, it is exactly the same illness whether the sufferer is male or female. Thus, men benefit from the same treatment as women. However male reluctance to seek help is compounded by many believing that their particular issues about being male will not be addressed. This makes it very hard for men to seek help for what they think is regarded as a women’s problem.”

RISK FACTORS

Men, just like women, can develop eating disorders of any kind, including anorexia, bulimia and compulsive overeating. Negative body image is frequently the prime motivational force behind disordered eating, and according to recent research conducted by Anglia Ruskin University, a diagnosis of body dysmorphia (an anxiety disorder related to physical appearance) is likely to accompany an eating disorder in around three-quarters of reported cases.

When it comes to some of the underlying factors that can put certain boys and young men at greater risk of developing eating disorders, the NCFED suggests there may be any number of negative life experiences that could potentially play a part, including:

- **Being bullied or criticised for being overweight**
- **Comments from an athletic coach**
- **Being in a sport which requires extreme weight control**
- **Illness and loss at home**
- **A relationship breakdown**
- **Not coping with pressures, such as exams**
- **A career change**
- **Unbearable pressure at work**

Given the known relationship between eating disorders and anxiety, any kind of stress that an individual experiences may potentially serve as a trigger for developing a disordered relationship with food.

The eating disorder charity Beat provides help and support for men who find themselves experiencing issues around negative body image, recognising that whilst the behavioural symptoms of



illnesses such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa may be primarily concerned with outward physical appearance, the underlying cause(s) will usually be much more deeply rooted.

“It’s important to remember that eating disorders are not all about food itself, but about feelings. The way the person treats food may make them feel more able to cope, or may make them feel in control, though they might not be aware of the purpose this behaviour is serving. An eating disorder is never the fault of the person experiencing it, and anyone who has an eating disorder deserves fast, compassionate support to help them get better.”

WARNING SIGNS

Eating disorders can take a wide variety of forms, including avoidant or restrictive food intake, orthorexia (an obsession with eating healthily), bingeing, purging, or only consuming meals at certain times of the day or night. As with any other form of mental illness, eating disorders can vary in intensity from mild to severe, and symptoms may often change or fluctuate over a period of time.

Saul Katz is a London-based personal trainer who works with fathers in their 30s and 40s, helping them to improve their overall physical health and fitness. As the dad of two young children himself,

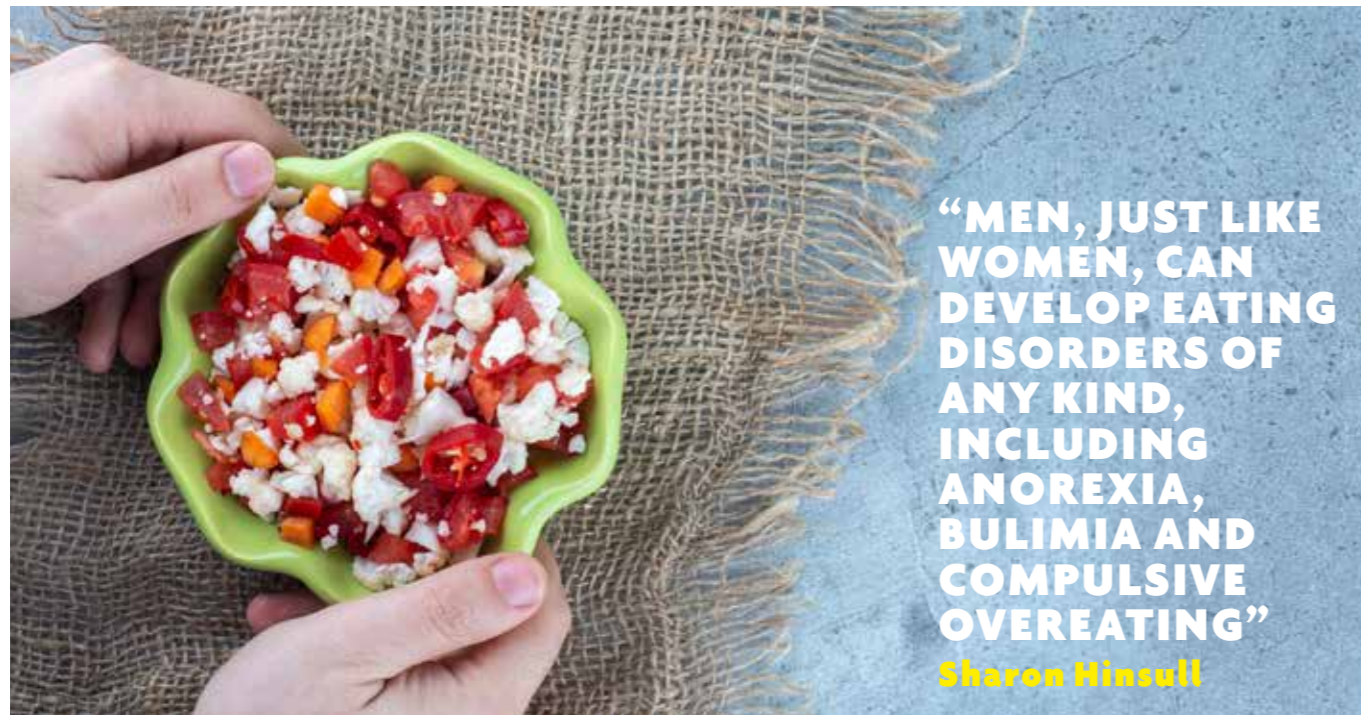
Saul knows only too well the challenges involved in maintaining a fit and healthy lifestyle whilst trying to balance the responsibilities of full-time parenthood. For a long time, however, Saul found himself struggling with a very negative body image which resulted in him taking his diet and exercise routine to dangerous extremes.

“I first started noticing that I was struggling with body dysmorphia in 2011 when I was 21. I started as a personal trainer and was around a lot of boys who were older and more experienced with much bigger/leaner physiques - however, I didn’t actually really acknowledge it until quite a few years later, and even then didn’t do anything about it.”

Like a lot of young men, Saul had always enjoyed keeping physically active and, as a naturally athletic teenager, he never had cause to question the way he looked. It was only when the combination of an injury and certain lifestyle changes suddenly started taking a toll on him that Saul began to look at himself differently.

“I had grown up playing rugby from the age of 10 and was always heavily involved in the sport so was always in pretty ‘good shape’ - athletic and strong. However, a shoulder reconstruction, plus drinking at university, saw me put on a lot of weight in one year, before losing it the next. There was definitely some teasing by my friends (playful banter rather than true bullying).

“Then after university, when I had lost all the weight I put on and got back into athletic shape, I started as a PT. I wanted to get bigger and leaner like the other lads, so began a course of injectable steroids - which didn’t do too much as I



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didn't really know what I was doing. Then over the years I dabbled a few more times with injectable and oral steroids, and also competed in fitness modelling shows (like bodybuilding, but much smaller muscle mass).

“This is when I really realised I had a problem as I was checking my abs in the mirror at least 30 times per day in case they had disappeared, and would go through stages of extreme bingeing (approximately 8000 calories in a day!)”

Like so many other young men, Saul kept his illness secret for a number of years. Here in the UK, the Body Dysmorphic Foundation recognises that young males, in particular, tend not to seek help for the condition, often leaving it anything up to 15 years before eventually accessing support for associated mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

All too often, it isn't until someone finally finds the courage to break their silence and start talking about their difficulties with food and body image

that others will feel encouraged to do the same. In Saul's case, it was hearing about someone else's experience of disordered eating that ultimately helped him to start opening up about his own private struggles.

“It wasn't until about three months ago when a friend/client of mine who suffered with bulimia was telling me his story, I felt completely fraudulent giving him advice as only my wife really knew about my issues, so I posted about it on social media as a kind of accountability and to let other people know who may also be suffering that it's ok.”

The advice from the NCFED is to seek out professional help at the earliest opportunity, perhaps by firstly enlisting the support of a trusted friend or family member. Alternatively, there are various organisations that can be contacted for help and guidance in accessing appropriate treatment and support, full details of which can be found listed (below?) As someone who specialises in helping dads of young children to work

on their physical health and fitness, Saul has some very sound advice for anyone who might find themselves struggling with disordered eating or a negative body image.

“For any fathers, I would absolutely say either go and seek professional help, or if you aren't ready for that yet, tell some loved ones. I thought my family would be angry about the steroids I took and look down on me, but they have been nothing but supportive and proud. I also thought my friends might kind of think it was a bit daft and attention seeking to tell people about my eating disorders and issues, but not at all, again they have been unbelievable. So I really recommend telling at least one person who you can feel won't judge you and then go from there.”

Further information about Saul's Coaching for Fathers fitness practice can be accessed via **Instagram** or **Facebook**

ORGANISATIONS OF SUPPORT

The Body Dysmorphic Foundation provides a wide range of helpful information and guidance for anyone struggling with negative body image, including recommended treatment options and online support groups.

Beat, the UK's eating disorder charity offers a variety of support services, including a dedicated national helpline, peer support and coaching, advocacy and a host of downloadable self-help and information resources.

The National Centre for Eating Disorders provides a comprehensive

range of information on all aspects of eating disorders, including treatment and professional training. The organisation also runs a national support line and has its own nationwide database of qualified therapists.

Anorexia and Bulimia Care is a national UK eating disorders organisation with over 30 years of experience, providing on-going care, support and practical guidance for anyone affected by eating disorders and eating distress.

CALM recently launched its Body Talks campaign, opening up the discussion about men's body image issues and ways of becoming more body positive. CALM runs a free anonymous helpline seven nights a week.

Seed is a user-led eating disorder support service providing a wide range of resources, including a dedicated advice line, workshops and buddying schemes.

Overeaters Anonymous Great Britain is the national branch of a worldwide support organisation aimed at helping anyone who is struggling with compulsive overeating.

Eating Disorders Association Northern Ireland offers various types of information and support ranging from a 24-hour helpline to a drop-in centre and advocacy service. ❖

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