

Disordered Eating in Male Athletes

Why disordered eating in male athletes matters:

Eating disorders are very common among male athletes, but they often go unnoticed. Disordered eating in male athletes does not get much attention because people tend to only focus on or associate disordered eating with women; athletes are rewarded for traits like obsessing over healthy food consumption, spending long periods working out to stay in top physical shape, and perfectionism. Male athletes are expected to meet certain standards to perform successfully in their sport. According to Run Fast. Eat Slow. Men make up 25 percent of people with anorexia nervosa and 40 percent of those suffering from binge-eating disorders. Disordered eating often goes unnoticed in male athletes because eating disorders are often seen as an issue that either only affects women or is based on vanity. However, eating disorders or disordered eating can stem from many different places and are often associated with or found in people with perfectionistic traits.

Although athletes rely on their bodies for their performance, sometimes this reliance on their physical fitness can turn into an obsession with their bodies. Research from the University of Almeria, surveying athletes ages 12-16 (61.1 percent were male), shows that 77.7 percent of young athletes presented a risk of ED as a result of highly distorted body image. According to data from Contemporary Pediatrics, “eating disorders appear to be significantly high in US collegiate athletes, with up to 84% of them having reported engaging in maladaptive eating and weight control behaviors, including binge eating, excessive exercise, strict dieting, fasting, self-induced vomiting, and the use of weight loss supplements.” Men in sports like wrestling, track, rugby, and football often face pressure and expectations to either gain or lose weight, and their ability to perform is reliant on their weight and muscle mass. The impact and commonality

of eating disorders in male athletes are often overlooked, but they impact these men nonetheless. Raising awareness about the issue is vital to make a change and help those struggling.

Marketing to college men:

KU students need to know about this issue so they can offer support to their classmates who may be struggling, feel safe reaching out if they are struggling themselves, and develop a more sensitive and informed perspective on how their comments affect the mental health of those around them. This campaign will focus mainly on male athletes at the University of Kansas and male sports fans attending the University of Kansas, and male athletes attending the University of Kansas. This market consists of Gen Z men who live in the state of Kansas. The average KU college student is 18-22 years old.

The campaign will target men who care about sports, fitness, and their professional and academic success. These men often do not consider how their relationship with food could be harmful or negatively affect their mental health, and if they do, many do not feel comfortable talking about it or seeking help. According to the University of Kansas' 2021 Fall census, 47.7% of undergraduates attending the school are men. Although men take up nearly half of the student body, they're often left out or feel like they do not belong in conversations around topics like body image and disordered eating. A study comparing attitudes surrounding disordered eating between college-aged men and women shows that men's views around anorexia and binge eating disorder were more stigmatized than their female counterparts. This campaign must work to shift their points of view and destigmatize eating disorders in men, so they are educated on the issue.

On top of this, male athletes often struggle with issues around food without even realizing that they have an issue, as shown in the statistics from the previous section. According to a 2022 article from *Curriculum Review* on student athletes, student athletes are often overachievers in other areas in

their lives and they, “can often feel burned out and exhausted, which can often lead to mental health issues” (Phelan). These issues can easily go unnoticed, especially if they do not affect their academic or athletic performance.

Organizations making a difference:

Organizations like Eating Disorder Hope [Eating Disorder Hop](#), [National Eating Disorder Association](#), and [Run Fast. Eat Slow](#). Provide information, resources, and host events to spread awareness and help for male athletes who struggle with disordered eating. Eating Disorder Hope is an online community and recovery blog providing information on eating disorders for those suffering and for people who are close to someone who suffers from disordered eating. They have an [Instagram page](#) that shares information about different types of eating disorders, upcoming events with professionals, and spreads awareness with their hashtag, #weeklyhope. The account’s second most recent post on their Instagram may appeal to the target demographic, it is an infographic for healthy holiday eating, however, I think the post could be applied to everyday life, and the phrase “healthy eating” is much less threatening or harsh than other phrasings, while still providing the message.

The National Eating Disorder Association provides many resources for people who suffer from eating disorders of all kinds. Their website has a specific section for athletes with information on how to detect disordered eating and recovery resources. Their hashtag, #NEDA, is very popular on Instagram and Twitter, and they have been able to effectively spread awareness and create a community where people feel comfortable speaking about their struggles.

Run Fast. Eat Slow is a blog providing information and spreading awareness on eating disorders in athletes. Their website provides statistics, resources, interviews, and other very useful information on disordered eating in male athletes. The blog has a [post](#) from 2018 that specifically focuses on the topic,

The target demographic would be interested in this post because it normalizes the issue and discusses how common disordered eating is among male athletes and ways to combat disordered eating behaviors.

Communication Challenges:

Main challenges for communicating this message to the target demographic are hyper-fatigue after the COVID-19 pandemic, men unwilling or unable to acknowledge their issues around this topic, and preconceived notions about disordered eating. Common stereotypes are often associated with eating disorders. According to the eating disorder treatment center, the Meadowglade, stereotypes include the idea that eating disorders only impact women, that you have to be skinny to have an eating disorder, and that they are caused by vanity.

These stereotypes cause our audience to dismiss messaging about eating disorders and can cause the audience to shut down or believe the issue could not apply to them. Even if it does apply to them, they may convince themselves otherwise, either because they are too embarrassed or because they refuse to acknowledge their issue because of these preconceived notions about disordered eating.

According to an article from Healthline, men also feel a sense of shame around disordered eating, which causes them to ignore any issues they have around disordered eating or excessive exercise. Consumers are also feeling hyper fatigue from social media and the Covid-19 pandemic, according to a Mintel report on consumer trends in 2023, meaning they feel less motivated to care about social causes and feel a general disdain towards marketing or brands trying to get their attention.

Works Cited:

“Academic Success.” *Academic Success* | *Academic Success*, academicsuccess.ku.edu/.

Accessed 15 Sept. 2023.

"Body Image in Sports: A Spectrum of Self-Esteem". *Mars' Hill: Trinity Western University*, November 24, 2021, Wednesday.

[advance-lexis-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6454-6FR1-DY7P-T2DS-00000-00&context=1516831](https://advance.lexis-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6454-6FR1-DY7P-T2DS-00000-00&context=1516831). Accessed September 12, 2023.

“Contact the Helpline.” *National Eating Disorders Association*, 6 June 2023,

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/help-support/contact-helpline.

Crabbe, Michael; Macke, Dana; Moriarty, Simon. “Global Consumer Trends 2023.” Mintel.

Ellis, Jordan M., et al. “Comparing Stigmatizing Attitudes toward Anorexia Nervosa, Binge-Eating Disorder, Avoidant-Restrictive Food Intake Disorder, and Subthreshold Eating Behaviors in College Students.” *Eating Behaviors*, vol. 39, Dec. 2020, p. N.PAG. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.www2.lib.ku.edu/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2020.101443>.

“Home.” *Eating Disorder Hope*, 5 Sept. 2023, www.eatingdisorderhope.com/.

Ilya Petrou. "Grappling with eating disorders among elite student athletes". *Contemporary Pediatrics*, June 2023.

advance-lexis-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:68FR-WX21-JCXN-V0MN-00000-00&context=1516831. Accessed September 12, 2023.

Kopecky, Elyse. "Eating Disorders in Male Athletes." *Run Fast. Eat Slow*, Run Fast. Eat Slow., 12 Dec. 2018, runfasteatsslow.com/blogs/news/eating-disorders-in-male-athletes.

"New Eating Disorders Data Has Been Reported by a Researcher at University of Almeria (Social and Individual Factors Associated with Eating Disorders in Young Athletes: Effects on Concentration and Fatigue)". *Sports Research Daily*, July 6, 2022, Thursday.

[advance-lexis-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:68MR-07X-JBSP-10BV-00000-00&context=1516831](https://advance.lexis-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:68MR-07X-JBSP-10BV-00000-00&context=1516831). Accessed September 12, 2023.

Phelan, Vanessa. "Understanding the Mindset of Student Athletes." Curriculum Review.