

Why are Australians up against a body image crisis?

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The pandemic exacerbated eating disorders among Australians. Amid an era of permacrisis where constant and regular disruption is to be expected, there's a need for increased conversation and more support when it comes to the ability to talk about health, wellbeing, and negative self-image.

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LOCATIONS:
AUSTRALIA

SECTORS:
HEALTH AND FITNESS
MENTAL HEALTH
PHYSICAL HEALTH



EXPERTS

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** The impact of COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on people's routines, something that has been a trigger for those who suffer from eating disorder symptoms
- 02** With a recession in Australia, people are finding it harder to afford healthy food and find time to cook it
- 03** Increased time spent online has meant that people's self-esteem and body confidence have been negatively affected

DATA

- Compared to before the pandemic, 74% of Australians reported increased food restriction
- 48% of girls in Australia reveal they often wish they looked like someone else
- 60% of young girls in Australia wish they had more information about how to avoid or deal with idealised beauty content

SCOPE

COVID-19 changed the way many people think about their bodies and appearance. With more time at home, often spent online scrutinising their looks, the lenses through which people see themselves has completely changed. And not necessarily for the better. Tania Nichols, a clinical psychologist and the clinical supervisor for Butterfly's national helpline, says that the pandemic had a major impact on people's mental health. "In 2020, contacts to Butterfly's web chat support service increased by 116%," she says. "School services have also seen a 150% increase in demand since the beginning of 2021 (compared with 2020), reflecting the spike in students' eating disorder and body image issues that schools are identifying." [1] There was also, she says, a 63% increase in the volume of total contacts to Butterfly's national helpline, compared with the year prior to the onset of the pandemic.

It started with video calls: hours looking at a (reverse) mirror created a new phenomenon dubbed 'Zoom fatigue' by Stanford University academics. It compares all the hours we spent using video calling forums in the pandemic to someone following you around with a mirror, and the Stanford findings explain that when people are shown a mirror, they become much more critical of our appearance, as opposed to when asked to describe our appearance without one. [2]

There were also all kinds of other emotional and physical disruptions: food insecurity, limited access to wellness spaces like the gym or even normal outdoor areas, and an increased amount of time spent on social media, looking at toxic images or forming parasocial and comparative relationships with strangers. According to Dove's Self-Esteem Project,

52% of girls in Australia say they constantly check how they look in photos and wish they looked better – and 48% reveal they often wish they looked like someone else. [3]

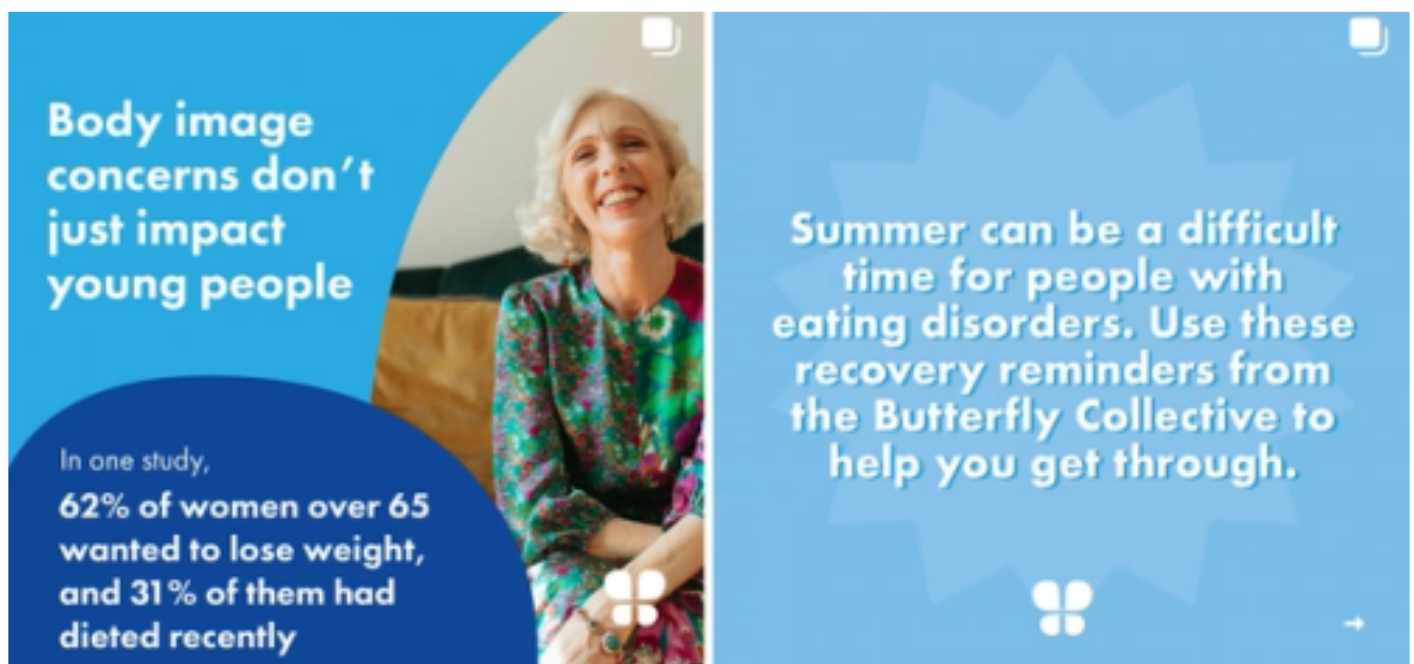
Now faced with an economic downturn and a cost-of-living crisis – with rents in some parts of Australia rising as much as 42% on last year – there are fears that a heightened strain will be put on the ability to eat healthily. [4] After all, there are strong links between a suffering economy and worsening quality of people's diets. [5] How will this state of permacrisis put Australians at higher risk of health issues and negative thought patterns? And what can brands do to soften the blows?

COVID-19 AND BODY IMAGE

Annual presentations of anorexia nervosa in Australia increased from 98.7 in 2017, to 161 in 2020, which represents an increase of 63%. The paper's authors write: "The influx of patients with no apparent predisposing mental health or medical conditions in 2020 suggests that many of these patients may have not otherwise developed an eating disorder given a normal year." [6] Indeed, compared to before the pandemic, 74% of people reported increased food restriction, and 88% had experienced an increase in body image concerns. [7]

However, it's not just restrictive behaviours around food that thrived. Some 66% of Australians reported an increase in binge eating. [8] Already, binge eating disorders (BED) are the country's most common form of eating disorder, despite the few people seeking help for it – or who even know they have it. In Australia, 47% of all people with an eating disorder have **BED**, compared with 3% living with anorexia nervosa, 12% with bulimia nervosa, and 38% with other eating disorders, and it's as common in men as it is in women.

According to studies from all over the world, changes in daily life because of the lockdowns had adverse consequences for people's mental health – often including increases in 'maladaptive eating habits and body dissatisfaction'. [9] "Contributing factors included disruption to food shopping and food availability, gyms being closed leading to fear around body changes, inability to receive face-to-face support, home isolations, increased exposure to food which may have resulted in bingeing or not eating, and comparison to others while being stuck at home," says Nichols. [1]



Butterfly's helpline has seen a 63% increase in the volume of calls it receives

Butterfly Foundation | Instagram (2023)

THE RISING COST OF FOOD

The price of food is on the rise in Australia – with grocery prices rising 9.2% on 2022 alone. [10] Faced with an economic downturn and a cost-of-living crisis, it's no wonder that people find it hard to stay healthy in what they eat and how they stay active. Fresh food is expensive and time consuming to make, and people are increasingly tired from the more they have to work. Making fresh and healthy food may therefore be getting harder and harder to manage. [11]

"To make food from scratch is both time consuming and is financially harder too," says Talia Carvajal – head pastry chef at Hart in Copenhagen. "While it's proven that cooking from scratch, with all the right ingredients is, in the long run, more cost effective because a lot of ingredients can be used time and time again, the mental effort it takes to work out how to cook a balanced meal, make something different with similar ingredients each night, finding the desire to eat leftovers often seems like far more work than a pre-prepared meal, which is only marginally more expensive. Of course pre-prepared meals contain higher salt, higher saturated fats, and higher sugars. It should also be stated, too, that at the moment the price of ingredients is actually higher and so what might have once seemed expensive for a tomato, or a stick of butter, will seem even more expensive now," she says. [12]

Rents in some parts of Australia have risen as much as 42% on last year. [13] With a 7.3% rise in inflation in 2022, wages in real terms fell 3.9% in Australia – the biggest fall on record, and there are fears of the heightened strain that will put on the ability to eat healthily. [13] Countless studies show the link between the economy going down, and the quality of our diets. [5]

People eat less protein and green vegetables and more sugar and fatty foods during a recession, according to researchers from Sacred Heart University who collected data from over 60,000 adults and children living in the US. They looked at people's diet and household food security before, during, and after the Great Recession of 2007 to 2010. [14] "The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented increases in food insecurity, and a dramatic increased need for emergency food resources and other types of food assistance," says Dr. Jacqueline Vernarelli, director of research education and associate professor of public health at Sacred Heart.

As people look to meal planning and reducing portion sizes to save money, the potential to lapse back into restrictive eating habits or to develop disordered eating grows. There's opportunity here to support people through these times by finding ways to subsidise fresh, healthy food, motivate people to cook from scratch more, or to make ready meals and pre-prepared alternatives that are lower in sugar and salt.



Many Australians are finding it hard to afford healthy food

Dollar Gill (2020)

ONLINE PERSONAS AND TOXIC DIET CULTURE

It's not psychologically normal for people to have to consider their existence constantly: to be aware of physical presence, and to be considering the way we look. Even the boundary between work and home underwent a severe breach during COVID-19 times. More social media and less socialising also meant that the ways we formed comparisons with people and the ways we saw ourselves reflected completely changed over the course of the pandemic lockdowns, with no warning and few resources around how to really manage such a social and personal shift.

One-third of individuals using video calling throughout the pandemic have identified new areas of their appearance that they dislike. [15] Add to this the already toxic culture of the online world: a shocking statistic is that half of all Australians will be victims of online abuse, and the victims are disproportionately women and girls. [16] Eating disorders are most prevalent among this demographic, making up almost two-thirds of those in Australia with eating disorders. [17]

"The pandemic resulted in people spending more time online and on social media, and they were undoubtedly influenced by stressful news coverage, weight stigmatising social media messaging like 'COVID kilos', and the pressures of toxic diet culture that limits an individual's worth to nothing more than their appearance," says Nichols. "Body image issues emerged from increased video calls as people were not used to seeing themselves on screen." [1] The [Summer of Kindness](#) campaign by the Butterfly Foundation aims to tackle body image issues, with tangible tips, advice, and resources on negative diet culture while supporting positive body image and focusing on eating disorder recovery. It chimed with hotter weather in Australia, which is a time when people dealing with body image issues hyper-focus on their body and feelings of social anxiety are intensified.



The #DetoxYourFeed campaign addresses toxic beauty standards on social media

Butterfly Foundation | YouTube (2022)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

RECOGNISE EATING DISORDERS UNDER A WIDE UMBRELLA OF MENTAL HEALTH

People still crave a sense of normalcy, and control over their routine. There's an overwhelming crisis in mental health issues such as negative body image and eating disorders, and a lack of adequate provision of care and professional help. "Organisations should be committed to understanding mental health conditions and illnesses including eating disorders and strive to support those struggling compassionately and effectively," says Nichols. "More broadly, organisations should offer initiatives to support their employees' mental health including but not limited to accessible resources and support services." [1] [The Body Image Movement](#), based in Adelaide, creates educational resources, award-winning documentaries, and books, as well as organising speaking events to promote positive body image, combat toxic messaging in media and advertising and educate its global community physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

ENGAGING WITH ISSUES OF FOOD POVERTY

Economic disadvantage as a result of the pandemic is fuelling a rise in eating disorders, because Australians can't afford to eat how they want. This often means restrictive measures like smaller portions to save money, or it means finding cheaper alternatives which often contain higher levels of sugars and salts. [The Staples Bag Camperdown](#), inner Sydney's first low-cost grocer to provide high-quality nutritious food, aimed to support the community, and help those with low income or lower access to employment be able to afford food. Sadly, it permanently closed in 2022, so there is space in this area for a community focussed arm. There's also space here for brands to offer helpful tips on how to make meals on a budget, or as cost effectively as possible. The app [Yummly](#) makes recipe selection and shopping super easy – after selecting a recipe choice, the app configures a shopping list and enables shoppers to spread the same ingredients over a period of time.

MORE TOOLS TO FIGHT TOXIC BEAUTY STANDARDS

People are experiencing harm in online environments, from direct abuse to hyper-focus on their own appearance by comparison. With 60% of young girls in Australia wishing they had more information about how to avoid or deal with idealised beauty content, Dove and the Butterfly Foundation created a #DetoxYourFeed campaign, featuring a [four-step guide to help parents](#) talk to kids about toxic beauty standards that are so prevalent on social media. [3] While promotion of positive body image is important, so is turning the focus away from appearance entirely. “The [online [An Eating Disorder Looks Like Me](#) aimed to demonstrate that eating disorders have no particular look and anyone irrespective of age, gender, sexuality, cultural background, or size can experience an eating disorder,” says Nichols. “Breaking down these harmful stereotypes will encourage more people to come forward to get the help they need and deserve.” [1]

RELATED

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