Manhood Impossible

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Published by Rutgers University Press


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Seeking Growth

The Penis Health Club

Look at those hands. Are they small hands? . . . If they are small, something else must be small. I guarantee you, there is no problem. I guarantee.

—Donald Trump at a 2016 Republican presidential primary debate

Donald Trump’s comment was a response to competing candidate Marco Rubio’s less-than-subtle taunt that Trump might have a small penis. The exchange was a first because it took place during a live, televised debate and not between middle school boys. Watching it later, though, I imagine millions of middle school boys (along with older boys and men) examining and perhaps measuring their hands, or maybe jamming them into their pockets if anyone was nearby. That Rubio would deliver the taunt and Trump would respond speaks volumes about both men, but I will refrain from psychoanalyzing either. More important, the exchange opens a window into our culture: penis size and performance are inextricably tied to contemporary American manhood. Trump sought to assure everyone he was, in essence, “dick proud,” not ashamed, that he doesn’t have any “problem” down there. This implies that it would be a problem if he had a small penis. And it would be for a man in general in our culture (and many others), and one running for the world’s most powerful office in particular. The argument that the phallus is a symbol
The Body Dilemma

of power was never made so abundantly and publically clear. I briefly wondered if Trump could be goaded into tweeting a photo if his opponents or the media continued questioning him about his size.

Then I thought about the members of the online Penis Health Club in this study. They, too, are consumed by the possibility that they might have a problem and how to avoid situations that might confirm it. So many of these men, especially the younger ones, feel inadequate, regardless of how they actually measure up or perform. They fear exposing their bodies to men (in locker rooms or as sexual partners) and women alike. Some have been mocked, some bear the burden of racial stereotypes, and many compare themselves unfavorably to porn stars. Some internalize such a deep sense of failure they suffer from depression and even suicidal thoughts. They join the Penis Health Club for similar reasons as those that cause some men to gravitate to the Gentlemen’s Fighting Club: to try to fix what they see as their broken bodies and broken manhood. There they find advice and workout routines to increase their size and improve their performance. This produces in some members a restored sense of control over their bodies and thus a source of manhood repair. They also are coached to free themselves of their distorted views about size, performance, and manhood.

Penises and Manhood

Gendered norms and the legacy of patriarchal relations have produced separate, unequal heterosexual expectations for women and men. Men are assigned the role of initiators (active, assertive, aggressive) and women the role of gatekeepers (reactive, passive, defensive).¹ Men are supposed to desire sex and always be ready to have sex. If they have sex with many women, they are mostly rewarded and celebrated by other men. Women’s gatekeeper role has been altered since the introduction of the pill and the women’s rights movement. Both challenged men’s control over women’s bodies and sexuality, making sex more a source of pleasure than shame for women. The results have been uneven. Women’s pleasure, and especially women’s orgasms—which Saturday Night Live once joked were first discovered around 1970—has led to men being more conscientious lovers—that is, they are expected to put on a good performance. Women certainly have much greater sexual freedom today than they did before the 1960s. They, too, are expected to be sexually skilled and initiate more. Women enjoy greater autonomy as well as some pressure to perform, less frequently serving as passive objects upon which men exercise their desires. Sexy, in-control women are a cultural phenomenon and force. However, women’s sexual agency and demand for sexual pleasure have also led to a lot of flaccid penises.² Some men—expecting and used to being in control—have a hard time with women taking on the masculine-marked initiator role and demanding to be pleased. And young men in particular
have increasingly felt like they are competing with and losing against each other: “They worry that perhaps they’re not doing it enough, or well enough, or they’re not big enough, or hard enough.”

Significant power differences remain. Girls and women are still widely sexually assaulted and raped. Data reveal that most of this sexual violence is committed by men who are their husbands, partners, boyfriends, friends, and acquaintances. Women’s gatekeeping role, their power to say no, is often trumped by men’s coercive and controlling behaviors, physical and otherwise. Progress is also contradicted by the gatekeeper-based phenomenon of “slut-shaming.” Women are still judged, chided, and ostracized for enjoying sex too much—certainly casual sex.

Not everyone buys into or complies with these gendered norms. The dichotomous roles do not even apply to people who do not identify as straight, or as women or men. These norms do exist, though, and they can be made shockingly clear when people violate them. Straight men who fail to pursue—or worse, turn down—sex with women have their manhood and sexuality questioned (“Is he a fag?”). Women get ostracized for the same actions that elevate men (“What a whore!” versus “What a pimp!”). Men brag about how big they are, how many women they’ve had, and how impressive their performances are. In school locker rooms, popular music, and fraternity houses, men’s sexual bragging conjures images of domination (if not violence) and so often takes away women’s humanity: “I had her screaming.” “She was begging for more.” “I put her ass to sleep.”

We know that sex is a performance and a manhood act because impotence is so emasculating. Impotence is the inability to achieve or sustain an erection for the purpose of sex; a demonstration of incompetence. But being impotent is also alternatively defined as being powerless, helpless, weak, without force or effectiveness, or lacking vigor, power, strength, and ability. These secondary meanings read like a list of antonyms for manhood. To be impotent is to not be masculine. Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo observes that we “define it as the inability to achieve an erection that is adequate for ‘satisfactory sexual performance’! Not pleasure. Not feeling. Performance. Eighty-five-year-old men are having Viagra heart attacks trying to keep those power tools running.”

Men’s pressure to perform during sex and their accountability to that performance causes them to view their penises as their manhood. Researchers have found that men have greater concerns about their penis size than their height or weight, this concern decreases little with age, and men’s overall views about their bodies and appearances are influenced by whether they perceive themselves as having a larger or smaller penis. Even though “impotence” has been replaced with “erectile dysfunction,” many men still seem aware that their erection problems lie in their heads more than their physiologies. But
now, instead of years of psychotherapy to identify and address their under-
lying issues, men can just take a pill—a magic “masculinity pill.”

Viagra led the booming industry of pills and devices that prey upon men’s size and per-
formance anxieties. Viagra’s ad campaigns used several different appeals, one
of which was that it would help men reclaim their masculine identities by
reclaiming their youth, restoring their control over their bodies, and accessing
sexual power and performance. The new medicalized “ED” problem framed
men’s bodies as machines (power tools) to be tweaked and optimized for per-
formance. Viagra promised the ultimate in tool repair. When penises become
tools—when they are wielded to acquire power and control—they lose their
source of pleasure. Beyond ads and spam email selling various ED- and penis
size-related products, internet pornography further fuels men’s anxieties. Por-
ography’s nonrepresentative and often camera-distorted bodies cause deflat-
ing comparisons for men, too.

Unless and until we decouple manhood from size and sexual performance,
men will continue to feel emasculated by every sexual encounter that does not
go well and women will continue to be sexual objects—dehumanized con-
quests used as proxy measures of manhood. If sex continues to be viewed by
men as an accomplishment—a scoreboard for their masculinity—instead of
a source of pleasure and intimacy, men will inevitably find that a perfect score
is unattainable. They will internalize a sense of manhood failure and chastise
themselves for it. Worse, they may literally project that anger onto others,
usually women. What they most assuredly will continue to do is find ways to
alleviate their size and performance anxieties. ED pills and penis exercises are
Band-Aid solutions to the fundamental problem of how destructive body and
general manhood ideals are.

The Club

The ubiquity and popularity of U.S. health clubs is one indicator of our body-
obsessed culture. I studied a unique health club that targets all men over the
age of 18, one that exists only online and focuses solely on penis exercises
and health: the Penis Health Club. Despite the broader emphasis on penis
health, increasing size is most members’ foremost concern.

The Penis Health Club (hereafter, PHC or the Club) mirrors a brick-and-
mortar gym in many ways. New members join daily. Some stay for years, but
many quickly become inactive. Others come and go over the years because
of injuries, life changes, and guilt from inactivity. Cliques and friendships
emerge based on shared exercise and personal interests. Conversations extend
to dating and relationships, work, politics, music, sports, and more. Regular
and longtime members establish close bonds, meet up (online) regularly, pro-
vide advice and support, and hold each other accountable to their workouts.
“There’s so much more to it than just pulling on your dick,” one member told me.

Like most fitness centers, all stereotypical groups are represented at the Club: hardcore gym rats, extroverted greeters who welcome new members, well-sculpted exhibitionists. The insecure are rampant. Anxieties about imperfections are compounded by the sprinkling of ideal bodies on display (clothed and unclothed) as well as some men’s belief that they alone suffer such body shame. There are even personal trainers: for a fee, they will assess members’ individual concerns and perceived deficiencies, develop long-term goals and a workout regimen to achieve them, and provide feedback on form and technique.

Despite these many similarities, the Club isn’t exactly your local YMCA. There are no membership dues. Voluntary donations are supplemented with ads for penis enlargement devices to keep the site running. The Club’s unique topical focus makes it distinct and results in virtually all club members concealing their identities behind a pseudonym. (Whatever clever penis pun you can conjure has already been claimed as a user ID by a PHC member.) Member profiles allow users to share information such as their locations (usually country), join dates, site activity, measurements (beginning, current, and goals), groups they’ve joined (smaller, larger, older, too thin, erectile dysfunction, hangers, etc.), and for the bold few, photos. The Club has its own vernacular, highlighted by a military-like cluster of acronyms and slang terms like growers versus showers (for men with greater or lesser disparities in their flaccid versus erect penis sizes), and the derisive size queens (for women deemed unduly obsessive about penis size). Other than its distinctive content, PHC looks and behaves much the same as many other online forums.

It has tens of thousands of members from all over the world, although it caters primarily to English-speaking users, mostly Americans. Only a small fraction of members who have joined over the years continue to be active. Literally hundreds of thousands of posts are accessible, organized by topic and including conversation threads such as penis enlargement exercises and products, erectile dysfunction, size anxieties and studies, masturbation, foreskin restoration, curvature, pornography, multiple male orgasms, relationships, sex, politics, balding, and much more. An endless stream of new posts and threads appears each day. Volunteer site moderators and administrators welcome new members, provide advice, organize threads and posts, and keep the peace, which sometimes includes banning members who are rude or obvious trolls. The overall tone is one of support and community, not unlike the Gentlemen’s Fighting Club.

Many men log onto the Club multiple times per day to read the latest posts, private message their friends, and see if anyone commented on their latest posts or pictures. It’s their Facebook, or at least a second social networking
site. It is both more intimate and less. Pseudonymously, men share with strangers and online friends their anxieties, humiliations, relationship struggles, battles with depression, life dreams, sexual fantasies, penis pictures, detailed logs of workout routines and gains, and an endless array of intimate thoughts and experiences, most of which they withhold from their offline friends and family—even their partners. This depth of intimacy is offset by the fact that almost no one reveals their actual identities and virtually all interactions are confined to the website. Anonymous forums like PHC allow men to safely navigate potentially dangerous terrain: they can share their insecurities and feelings with other men and cultivate close connections, but by doing so behind pseudonyms, they aren’t, ahem, fully exposed. The vulnerability they demonstrate comes with the cloak of anonymity. Nobody can identify them, so nobody can exploit these men’s perceived weaknesses in person.

The Club is a kind of bizarro world of straight men. Everyone sees, knows, and matter-of-factly comments on each other’s genitals—“great starting numbers,” “nice hang,” “massive,” “good wood,” “same size as mine”—but has no idea what their clothed bodies or faces look like. Self-identified gay and bisexual men participate, too, as do a handful of women, often in conjunction with their male partners. They, too, sometimes comment on measurements and photos. These aren’t pornographic “dick pics,” though. Men are not undressing or posing provocatively, and the photographs are not taken with special lighting or in exotic locations. They are documentary. Even for people who are otherwise titillated by images of men’s bodies and penises, the pictures and conversations lean more medical than erotic. Plenty of other websites better fulfill people’s sexual desires.

Longtime members and moderators continuously stress to new members patience and safety. They attempt to disabuse (mostly younger) members of their bloated average size myths as well as the belief that size is synonymous with pleasure and performance, that making gains will suddenly transform their sex lives and relationships. New members are encouraged to follow a generic three-month stretching and conditioning program (45 minutes per day, five days per week) before attempting more advanced or strenuous activities or incorporating devices into their routines. Extenders, pumps, clamps, weights, and other devices, including do-it-yourself versions, complement an assortment of manual exercises (jelqs, kegels, edging). Creams are discussed. Enlargement pills are dismissed. Surgeries are discouraged. Workout routines are painstakingly documented, shared, studied, and tweaked. Time commitments vary but approximate those of fitness buffs of varying dedication. For example, novice hangers are discouraged from hanging weights from their penises more than 10 hours per week, whereas more experienced hangers may do 10 hours in a couple of days. Researching routines, exchanging suggestions, ordering or building devices, and carving out time to do the workouts (often
during limited windows of privacy) all add up to a significant commitment. Reported gains vary, with many men seeing little to no changes.

My interests lie not in the efficacy of penis exercises but rather in men’s motivations for doing them and why it is a collective process. Interviews and forum posts reveal that many men endure doubts and anxieties about their size and performance. These arise from comparisons with peers and porn stars, negative or humiliating comments directed at them or overheard, and problematic sexual experiences. Oftentimes (mis)perceptions are more powerful influences than objective truths about their penis size. Many Club members who self-report average to well-above-average measurements suffer from the same self-doubts and sense of emasculation that haunt men with smaller penises. They internalize their perceived size and performance failures, exhibiting anxiety; emotional, social, and sexual withdrawal; reduced self-esteem and confidence; and sometimes depression and even suicidal thoughts.

Some members report no negative experiences and appear quite comfortable with their bodies. Although not fueled by anxiety, they still tend to adhere to a “bigger is better” philosophy. Almost all continuously active members, and especially those who have internalized a sense of failure and inadequacy about their size and performance, enjoy modest to life-changing benefits from participating in the Club and penis exercising. PHC helps them reinterpret their penis size and performance concerns as normal and provides them with a road map to make improvements. Both contribute to the restoration of their sense of manhood by repairing what they had perceived as body failures. Five of the fourteen men I interview report starting below or just below average in penis size as adults, but only two of those five say they remain below average. The majority say they began at or above-average penis size before doing exercises, and many say they grew well above average. They also vary in their commitment level to the exercises and forums, from nonexercising lurkers to multiyear, deeply committed exercisers and forum moderators.

Internalizing: Not Measuring Up

When I asked PHC members to recall their earliest memories about their bodies and penises, most shared stories from late elementary school and middle school, as puberty approached and began to alter and distinguish their own and their peers’ bodies. There were some earlier memories, including playing doctor with other kids and seeing older siblings naked. Middle and high school locker rooms and showers, though, had the greatest impact during boyhood. Feeling and looking different heightened boys’ awareness of their own bodies. Later, in high school and into their 20s, sexual play and partners began to wield more influence over young men’s self-perceptions.
“Small-penis syndrome” or “locker-room syndrome” is attributed to men with average-sized flaccid penises whose anxieties about their size affect their emotions and behaviors in ways that seem to exceed what would be expected for their perceived flaw. Men’s anxieties and physicians’ responses include both flaccid and erect size concerns. Small-penis syndrome tends to emerge during secondary school, along with puberty and greater scrutiny of one’s own and others’ bodies. When boys and men perceive themselves as small in size, it may reduce self-esteem and cause anxiety, and lead them to conceal their penises in public settings, avoid potential sexual encounters, and suffer from erectile dysfunction.

Men who have grown up in the digital age encounter not only this intense scrutiny of and cultural emphasis on their bodies but also countless images of men’s bodies, penises, and sexual conquests in online pornography. Viewing pornography is like looking at bodies and sex through a carnival fun house mirror. With few exceptions, it provides a distorted, unrealistic view of what people actually look like, desire, and do. Of course, porn producers are not sex educators; they are motivated by profit. Conversely, what is supposed to be sex education is widely viewed by U.S. teens as warped in another way: a joke—uninformative and often ideological (e.g., abstinence only). The puritanical thread in American culture leaves schools and parents uncomfortable with and even fearful of discussing these issues with kids. The conversations are stilted, superficial, and ineffectual. Young people desire and need knowledge about their changing bodies and emerging sexuality to alleviate their anxieties. What will happen—what seemingly always happens—is they will acquire that knowledge somewhere else.

Today, porn and peers are the primary sources. Both are dubious. Our current cultural approach is analogous to gang life—when communities and families are unable to fulfill kids’ basic needs, gangs composed of other young people fulfill that role. Our children are receiving the sex equivalent of street socialization, coupled with a heavy dose of unhealthy input from the porn industry. What teenage boy could navigate such a cultural maelstrom and emerge intact, comfortable in his manhood and free of anxiety about his size and sexual competence? With few exceptions, the men I interview internalize body or penis size and performance flaws, whether real or, for the most part, perceived.

Comparing to Peers and Porn Stars
Middle and high school locker rooms and gym classes are usually the first places where boys begin sizing each other up, especially their penises. In the context of many years of gendered socialization, the comparisons feel more like competitions. PHC member Tomás, a 56-year-old Latino man with a wife and two children, has endured a lifelong series of bodily and sexual
challenges. He grew up in a very conservative household, which contributed to his masculinity and sexuality struggles. Tomás describes himself as smaller, rounder, softer, less developed, less masculine, and less endowed than other boys and men, beginning in elementary school: “I just noticed that [my penis] seemed to be a little bit smaller, even at that time, and I just felt a little bit off.” Admiring older boys in various states of undress, he recalls, “It just seemed like I wanted something else than what I had.” He says that he does not have a micropenis, a medical term referring to rare cases of exceptionally small penises, approximately two to three inches erect. “I guess I’m just smaller than the average,” he says.

The internet provides him with a sexual outlet that he believes allows his marriage and family to stay intact. The downside is that when he sees other men’s erect penises in photos or on webcam masturbation sites, or women’s desire for bigger men in online pornography, it “damages” him and reinforces his inadequacies. Tomás, though, really suffers from locker-room syndrome: dissatisfaction with his flaccid length: “I just notice when I’m not more erect or aroused, then it tends to be [comparatively] smaller in that situation.”

Travis, a 40-year-old, straight white man, first thought about his flaccid penis size in high school, when he was on the water polo team. “We’d compete in Speedos,” he says, so “[there] was not a lot to hide.” Later, while showering during military training, he saw that his flaccid size was smaller than other guys’ flaccid size, but his average erect size mostly alleviated his concerns. Kenneth, white, gay, and in his 50s, felt fine about his penis when it was erect, but he was uncomfortable in his high school locker room. “I’m a grower, not a shower,” he says, “so basically, I feel uncomfortable in locker room settings or anything like that where I have to be exposed to other people because I don’t have the flaccid hang that other men seem to have.” He was showering in a fitness center a few years ago when a young man with a big flaccid penis entered the showers, “and the look on his face, I just felt like crawling into the locker. I mean I just felt so inadequate, or embarrassed.”

The practice of comparing and ranking genitalia might strike some as a peculiar activity. Odder, still, seems to be doing so in a state of nonarousal. After all, we ogle and celebrate Olympic-champion sprinter Usain Bolt as he races ahead to the finish line, not when he’s lounging trackside. But worrying about flaccid length and hang is similar to trying to look jacked 24-7, not simply during a workout or while flexing and posing. Even in relaxed physiological states, we are displaying our gendered bodies to others, receiving feedback, and evaluating and adjusting how we present ourselves. Boys and men’s pursuit of dominance is amplified in the context of a homosocial setting like a middle school locker room, where boys’ bodies are in flux and their masculine identities are at their most tenuous. It is in these pressure-cooker contexts that boys and men jostle for rank order and bond, all too often via homophobic taunts
and by sexually objectifying and demeaning girls and women. The primary, nearly sole, source of teenage masculine identity is the size and performance of their bodies. With such a limited cultural repertoire for establishing boys’ identities, penis size—even flaccid penis size—is of great importance.

Brandon is a white, straight 24-year-old. He remembers making explicit, hierarchical comparisons between himself and his high school classmates: “I thought my size was OK, and then after high school, as far as like, relationship-wise, nobody really complained about my size. But then there were times when I felt like [my penis] wasn’t big enough. As I got older, and then going to the gym, and then seeing the other guys shower, I was like, ‘Holy shit, like, this dude has a huge dick!’ So then I bought a pump.” Brandon’s self-reported initial penis size, before attempting penis enlargement, was just a shade below average.

His fellow Club member, Ed, began much smaller. At age 60 and straight, Ed’s sources of knowledge about erect penis sizes were limited when he was growing up. Finally, shortly after high school, he bought an educational book on men’s bodies and health. It provided visual representations of small-average, average, and large-average penises: “Well, I fell out of my chair. I said, ‘Oh, shit!’ I placed myself in the small-average.” Ed’s later exposure to porn also affected him. Pornographic images of men with perfect bodies are monolithic and pervasive: “That’s all you see. So your perception is that everybody is well-endowed and you’re the only one that isn’t, which of course isn’t true, but man, it’s hard to break through that barrage.” Prior to the at-your-fingertips availability of porn, most men (especially straight men) had to go out of their way to see another man’s erect penis.

A recent medical study obtained a sample of more than 1,600 men (mostly 18- to 39-year-olds and disproportionately white) and provided them with the necessary instructions and materials to do self-measurements and submit their data. The reported average erect length was 5.6 inches and the average erect girth was 4.8 inches, which are consistent with the limited data available from previous studies. A recent metastudy using health professionals’ measurements resulted in even smaller averages. These are not the average measurements of porn actors. Some research has found that men are so insecure that they tend to underestimate penis length in survey research.

As boys become men and their careers, relationships, and families take on greater importance, their lives and identities are anchored less to their bodies. However, this source of masculine identity remains important. Club members often provide positive feedback and support on the forums, encouraging men to appreciate and not be ashamed of their bodies. However, the seemingly disproportionate number of Club members with above-average penises can have the opposite effect, exacerbating feelings of insecurity and anxiety that parallel overexposure to porn.
Disparaging and Intimidating Comments

Boys and men’s awareness and anxieties about their penises come not only from visual comparisons but from others’ bragging, teasing, mocking, and fantasizing about penis size and performance. A hurtful comment by a cousin still evokes an emotional response in Glenn nearly half a century after the incident. He and his younger cousin were changing in a van after a day at the beach when his cousin ridiculed Glenn’s size.

I ask Glenn if he can recall how he felt in that moment, and he responds, “I do, still, very strongly. It’s like, you know, ‘fuck you.’ I remember being embarrassed. You don’t know it at the time, [but] it’s like, it’s genetic roulette. You don’t know at that young of an age. You almost feel like you did something wrong or that [it] was your fault.” Glenn internalized his cousin’s mocking comment and felt embarrassment, despite never having thought or worried about his prepubescent body before then. A single criticism is a flashbulb memory of failure. Decades later, it still channels strong emotions. After that incident, Glenn never had a conversation with anyone about his penis size, including any of his boyfriends over the years.

Locker-room syndrome is triggered not only by comparisons but also by bragging, joking, and mocking. A couple of Club members have lucid memories of middle school friends who entered puberty early and whose penises were much bigger than average. One boy was known as “Big Dick Martinez,” and another was “the Incredible Hulk” because he had a “hulk dick, giant compared to the rest.” Twenty-two-year-old PHC member Stephen, who is white and straight, laughs at his earliest memory of middle school boys bragging about their penis sizes while hiding behind their towels. They would shout out fantastic numbers (“I have a 10-inch penis!”), so Stephen “decided to measure my junk.”

A few of the older Club members share the painful school experience of jockstrap-fitting sessions. Glenn, observing that schools would never allow such a thing today, remembers the “humiliating moment for everybody” when he and his peers “would stand in a line in [our] underwear, and then the coach would come down and yell, ‘large, medium, medium, small, large.’” Tomás went to a sporting goods store to purchase his gym class jockstrap. That memory set off a chain of painful recollections that spanned his high school and college years:

[The guy at the sporting goods store] says to me, “Really all you need is a rubber band and a peanut,” or something like that, and I just remember those things as just cutting right through you, and being very hurtful. Yeah, it even got worse. As I got into junior high and high school, it was mandatory that you take group showers after PE. I really noticed the big difference, jumps in the guys—that
more of the guys were getting hair, more of the guys were getting larger in their penis size and everything, and mine was still staying small. And again, having some people that would be next to you in gym, kind of teasing you, saying, “My God, what’s wrong with you, you’ve got a little kid’s penis.” [And then in his college fraternity house] every once in a while, you would have some idiot that would come up, and make a comment [like], “I was walking around the shower, and I just saw you, and my God, you’ve got a . . . what’s wrong with you? You need to have the doctor take a look at you,” and, “You need hormones, you need this, you need that.” And that would hurt. And sometimes [strangers] would call you names, so you’d get the “fag,” “he’s queer,” “he’s this or that,” but you just live through it.

This “fag discourse” is less about Tomás’s perceived sexuality (he was and is closeted) than his failed masculine performance. Boys who do masculinity inadequately, due to their actions or bodies, are policed by other boys using fag discourse. In her research on high school boys, sociologist C. J. Pascoe found that their perceived incompetence (e.g., while doing repair work in auto shop class), lack of heterosexual prowess, and physical weakness attracted negative comments from other boys. Given stereotypical equations of gay men with femininity, fag discourse subordinates and emasculates its intended targets. Boys play a game of hot potato with the fag label, elevating themselves in the hierarchy by weighing down others with this stigma. Calling someone else a fag is both an offensive and a defensive manhood act.

As straight young men become sexually active, young women and prospective sexual partners wield more influence over men’s self-perceptions about their size as well as their sexual performance. Club member Dreamgirl believes men’s identities are as fragile as china. She writes, “Every man has an Achilles’ heel, and it’s sitting in his pants. Even the most skilled man in bed can be reduced to nothing if you tell him he has a small dick or he’s a terrible lay.” Travis agrees, saying, “The male ego may be the most fragile thing on the earth. For a woman to question whether you are a man would be stomping on a delicate flower.” Women’s belittling comments about a man’s penis size can have far-reaching and long-lasting consequences, but so can women’s mere mention of other men’s larger penises. An ex-girlfriend’s fleeting reference to another man’s “big Polish sausage” made Ed “turn red in the face” and feel humiliated.

Colin overheard some young women talking about big penises, and he hasn’t been the same since. He is a 22-year-old white college student who is currently single. He has had casual sex and sex in relationships and has never received a negative comment about his size; one girlfriend told him he was big. He was a multisport star athlete in high school, valedictorian of his class, and well-regarded and liked by peers, coaches, and teachers. His penis size, though, is just average. His accomplishments on the field and in the classroom and the
significant sexual interest he attracts from women are undermined by his own perceived size inadequacy. Before he began doing penis enlargement exercises, Colin exhibited some symptoms consistent with small-penis syndrome. Being just average on this one, albeit crucial, measure of manhood was a crushing blow to his confidence.

Colin attributes some of his struggles to misrepresentations in pornography; his friends bragging and, he admits, likely exaggerating about their size; and most important, women’s comments about desiring huge penises. When he was a high school freshman he was intimidated by the older, more developed boys. Not only were they stronger and presumably more well-endowed, but high school girls flocked to them. Even when Colin became that star athlete, though, he worried about what girls thought and said about boys’ penis sizes:

Maybe I hang out with the trashiest girls, but sometimes you’ll hear them say something like, “Oh, yeah, I heard he’s got a big dick,” or something like that. And you know, it kind of is like, “Oh, man, I wish that was me.” One time, a couple of girls were talking about it and then another one just blarts out, “Oh, I have to try that!” I mean, isn’t it pretty much confirming your worst fears, right? If you’re worried about size, the fact that it’s like a conversation between them is worrisome. It definitely doesn’t help.

I ask Colin if he’s thought about men’s frequent conversations about women’s bodies. He acknowledges that men and the culture at large worship women with larger breasts, among other features. He does not buy into the widespread double standard that slut-shames women and strips them of their sexual agency, including attacking them for desiring particular physical traits in men, yet simultaneously places women’s bodies under constant scrutiny and evaluation under the guise that men can’t help but ogle women because of male wiring. Colin says, “I can’t imagine that girls wouldn’t enjoy seeing a large penis. It doesn’t seem unreasonable that they would want that. It’s hypocritical even for us to say that, ‘Oh, you shouldn’t want [a big penis],’ when we’re here, you know, having our wives get boob jobs or whatever. If a girl prefers large penises, who’s to say that’s any different from somebody that has a foot fetish or something? You could look at it like that. I don’t think every girl is a size queen, though.”

Although our culture’s emphasis and pressure on men to improve their appearance and bodies have intensified and many women do publicly and privately comment on men’s penises, the situations are not equivalent. Women’s bodies continue to be exponentially more likely targets of evaluation and judgment. Following Colin’s point, one might say there are a lot more “boob men” than “size queens.” The latter is a decades-old term that appears to have
The Body Dilemma

originated in the gay community (thus, “queens”). Some gay men have used this label to describe men who desire sexual partners with big penises. As with the straight men who’ve adopted the term and deployed it against women, it is used as retaliation by prospective/rejected sexual partners with average or smaller-sized penises. When men use it to label women, the implications are clear: these women are shallow and slutty; maybe they desire big penises because they have a big vagina from having so much sex. The term reinforces the sexual double standard, undermining women’s agency and power.

The comments that trip up Isaiah, a 20-year-old, sexually inactive but straight-identifying African American college student are about race. He says he regularly hears his mostly white peers and sees popular media discussing and debating widely held beliefs that black men “are gifted down there.” In a separate conversation, fellow young Club member Brandon confirms Isaiah’s worst fears. Brandon says, “I just wish that I had some black in me, so I could have had a bigger dick,” because guys with big penises “are the ones that get more pussy than the rest of us.” This stereotype dates to the end of slavery, when whites labeled freed blacks as more animalistic and sexual than whites and as sexual predators and a constant threat to white women. Framing black men as rapists reinforced the racial status quo and was used by Southern whites to justify their continued violence and discrimination against African Americans.19

One of the only other African American students at Isaiah’s school was known to have a huge penis and brag about it along with his sexual exploits, which weighed heavily on Isaiah. When a friend raised the topic with him, he quickly dismissed the racial stereotype, until it became personal: “She asked me how big I was, and of course, I didn’t feel comfortable explaining that fact, so that was the only time it really came up, ever, with a girl. I think I lied and I said that I was like around eight inches or something like that, just so I could get the heat off my back.” Isaiah was quick to dispel the stereotype until he was held personally accountable to it. He likely ended up reinforcing it when he simultaneously claimed he had (what would objectively be) a huge penis, but black men are not bigger than other men. And he can’t help but admire porn stars, whom, he points out, have the same size, sexual prowess, and ripped bodies that are celebrated among black athletes. “It just seems like the kind of thing that any guy would want,” Isaiah says. All these pressures have prevented Isaiah from dating and having sex.

African American PHC member Andre says the racial stereotypes thrust upon him, combined with not having a porn star–sized penis, “[create] such a disgusted feeling . . . almost as if I let my race down.” Some of his nonblack male friends take offense to the stereotype because of its implications for them, “but in my mind, they are lucky [because] those idiots don’t have the expectations of being big and great in bed like we do.” Cultural critic Wesley Morris
observes, “There is no paradigmatic white penis. To each man his own. But there is a paradigmatic black one”.

There are many desperate-sounding forum posts by new Club members, overwhelmingly young and perhaps disproportionately black, who report average or above-average measurements but suffer from feelings of inadequacy. Eighteen-year-old Club poster LittleP, also African American, says his erect penis is 7” long and 5” in diameter, but he worries about his “small cock” after having his pants pulled down at school. He says he needs help fast—a red flag for veteran Club members preaching patience—because his classmates are relentlessly texting him small penis jokes: “Please help me ASAP! Life is not worth living right now.”

Of all penis size comments overheard or received, the ones offered by sexual partners cut deepest. Men with average and slightly below-average penises share countless stories of mostly younger women cracking jokes, expressing dissatisfaction and disappointment, and terminating sexual encounters and relationships due to men's small penises. Shaken young men say women have seen their penises and had the following reactions: “I thought you were going to be bigger.” “Yeah, you’re small.” “You shouldn’t ever go streaking.” “Are you a little kid?” In an extended, candid, and somewhat divisive forum discussion about the merits of trying to increase penis size versus obsessing over it, one poster, PEfan1994, says the decision is basically out of his hands. He was mockingly asked by a woman if he was a “baby” when he revealed his penis in an online sex forum. She saw it and immediately logged off. “Imagine the pain I felt when she said that to me. After that, who could possibly convince me that the size of my cock isn’t important?” he asks. Other posters chime in with support and empathy, some sharing their own similar occurrences of being mocked and humiliated by sexual partners.

Repeated or, worse, consistent negative feedback on men’s penis size multiplies the pain, but many young men say that a single comment can “mind-fuck” them, causing them to completely reevaluate their feelings about their size and what is normal. A 10:1 ratio of effusive praise to negative comments is meaningless. The single emasculating remark calls into question their manhood. Some men are in loving relationships with partners who express tremendous sexual satisfaction, yet they are haunted by a former sex partner’s nasty comment, even if it was delivered in spite at the culmination of a bad breakup.

Brandon is young, dates a lot, and is sexually active. He recently had sex with a young woman who told him he was her first sexual partner. Afterward, she expressed disappointment:

She was like, “Well, I thought you were going to be bigger than that.” I was like, “Wait, what? Nobody’s ever complained. Nobody’s said anything about my size. You’re the first person to complain about it.” I was like, ouch. Definitely that’s
kind of... left a hole in me. Yeah, I have gotten good feedback [previously]. Nobody's really complained. [They said] it was a good size, my stamina, people didn’t complain about how long it took. I’ve tried to let it go, but then it’s like, it just sticks in my head; I can’t let it go. I haven’t had complaints after that, but you would think that [you'd] just brush that one off and then continue from there, but I mean, it is kind of hard to hear.

It is men, rarely women, who think much about, let alone obsess over, penis size. An unusually large but nonrepresentative online survey found that 96% of women thought their current partners had average or large penises.²¹ One in seven women wished their partner had a larger penis, and a tiny fraction wanted their partner to be smaller. The (sizeable) minority of women who desire larger penises have a disproportionate impact on men’s psyches. They are the “size queens” upon whom men project their fears and, sometimes, anger. Steeped in porn, men can’t untangle size, performance, accomplishment and a warped sense of what women desire.

Worrying about Performance

A vocal majority of Club moderators and senior members take the position of “it’s not what you have, it’s what you do with it that matters.” Alongside endless threads and posts offering a dizzying array of penis enlargement advice are discussions about sexual performance and ways to pleasure women (but not other men). Young men are advised to be conscientious lovers. They are coached on various techniques and counseled to consider the many reasons beyond penis size—such as emotions, familiarity, and love—that contribute to women’s sexual desire and satisfaction. “Having a big dick doesn’t mean you can be a big dick,” Club member Travis says. Of course, cockiness and overconfidence are not what attracts men to the Club. Insecurity is the primary motivator.

Younger men’s inexperience adds to their performance doubts. For older men, declining erection quality—they are literally becoming soft—and their partners’ diminishing sex drives are more likely causes of concern. Older men simply aren’t the same as their younger selves, but our culture doesn’t accept that. Neither do they. All men’s episodes of erectile dysfunction serve as reminders that their penises could fail them at any moment. Flaccid penises are feminizing. They convey weakness, inaction, an inability to perform.²² Men’s sexual performance—their manhood—is tenuous and not entirely under their control.

Anxiety, self-doubt, and performance problems are absent in pornography. So is rejection. Instead, porn targeting young, straight men consistently conveys the following mix of false and misogynist messages: women are sluts who secretly, or not so secretly, desire sex with men with huge penises; most men
have huge penises and are always ready and able to perform; sex is aggressive and multiorgasmic, oftentimes involving multiple people. In other words, it’s nothing like your or anyone else’s actual sex life. The narrative of heterosexuality, amplified many times over in porn, does not align with men’s experiences. They are left confused and melancholy by—or worse, respond violently to—the unkept promises of heteronormativity.23

Fifty-eight-year-old Paul is bisexual but chooses to conceal his same-sex interest and live straight in a committed marriage. He thinks younger men’s consumption of porn is so distorting that it’s ruining their sex lives: “They think that an average sexual encounter involves double or triple penetration, and all of the guys involved have 10-inch schlongs, and the women just . . . and it’s just a 40-minute long orgasm. Then [young men] all think, you know, gosh [the woman I just had sex with] didn’t scream and writhe in obvious passion, so I’m a failure.” Twentysomething Andre is impervious to the numerous Club posts challenging men’s size myths and obsession, and critiquing the negative effects of porn. He regularly compares himself to porn stars and, unsurprisingly, finds he doesn’t measure up: “The issues have grown and grown to the point where I doubt my ability to give maximum pleasure due to my average or relatively thin girth.”

Colin was motivated to try penis exercises because he thought his average size would underwhelm and disappoint young women. Size and satisfaction aren’t one and the same, he says, but they are connected: “I don’t think that instantly, you know, if you have a large penis that it’s just like an orgasm producer for every girl, you know, without even trying. But I do think that it helps. I can’t imagine it hurting, put it that way.” None of the men I speak with has ever been told his penises is too small to provide pleasure. However, the Club is littered with stories of such exchanges. MountainBiker says his girlfriend confirmed for him that he had a small penis and, worse, told him he was only erratically satisfying her. He has “lost all hope” because of his tiny flaccid size and inconsistent performance.

Stephen committed a Penis Health Club cardinal sin when he, like many men in their teens and early 20s, asked his first girlfriend, Jenny, about her previous sexual partners. She told him about one guy, who Stephen knew, whose penis was so thick “that she described [it] as incredibly painful during sex.” He adds, “But nonetheless, hearing that made me think, well, I guess I’m too thin if I don’t feel like my penis is experiencing much pressure from her vagina during sex. My only comparison is my hand at that point, [so] I assume that it must not be good for her either. And I [didn’t] express that to her, because I [felt] too bad about that. So it sort of was an inner turmoil. I bottled it up, and it festered.” Jenny’s description of “incredible pain” from an ex-boyfriend’s thick penis isn’t enough to dissuade Stephen from believing he needs to increase his girth. Stephen comes across as a sweet guy and a caring
boyfriend and is a well-respected poster at the Club, but his masculine insecurities filter out his girlfriend’s desires. He sees himself on the losing end of an imaginary competition with her ex-boyfriend. Stephen (mis)interprets Jenny’s unpleasant sexual experience with a thicker penis as an indication that she may not desire him. His assumption about ideal size incites jealousy and is compounded by the couple’s lack of communication. An opportunity for further intimacy is undermined by fear: “The more preoccupied with control men are, the more lovers recede as full people with feelings, thoughts, will, and soul and become vehicles for bolstering manhood and relieving anxiety.”

Sexually active gay men are more attuned to realistic distributions of penis sizes and, at least for themselves, how size correlates with attraction and pleasure. Still, though, there are some intracommunity stereotypes about gay men being well-endowed, Glenn says. Most of the guys he’s dated “were blessed, you know—quite large.” (As Club members point out, it’s possible that men may perceive other men’s penises as larger, even those of sexual partners, due to the perspective of looking down at their own penis). After visiting a gay bathhouse in his late 20s, he questioned why anybody would want him when there were so many other and bigger options: “You know, it was a veritable candy dish from what I could see.”

Glenn wonders if his thinner body and smaller penis have determined his “bottom” status, and what he sees as his feminized, subordinate sexual standing in relationships. He explains,

There can be negative connotations to being called a bottom as opposed to a top, and it seems with that body image of the more masculine [in the 1990s], that stuff sort of happened at the same time. It became really obvious that when I was dating people I was the bottom [laughs]. You know? And it was like, hmm . . . that made me wonder. I mean, it makes me wonder, does the size of your dick determine, you know, [being a top or bottom] during sex? It became really obvious that nobody was interested in oral sex with me. They were only interested in fucking me, you know, as a bottom. And I started wondering, well, what’s up with that?

Being assigned a passive role removes Glenn’s option of putting on a fully masculine performance; it threatens his manhood. His interpretation of penis size, gender, and sexual position reflects some patterns among men who have sex with men (MSM), but it’s far from universal. Among MSM themselves, there is a correlation between feeling more masculine as well as having a bigger penis and being a top. But many men, especially younger men, reject these gender norms, instead adopting more gender fluidity and versatility in their sexual behavior.”
distinctions between tops and bottoms. Tops are dominant, in control of the action, masculine. Bottoms are passive recipients, dominated and controlled, viewed and labeled as feminine (“queens,” “punks”) or essentially women. Even though American culture tends to label MSM as gay, regardless of whether they take on the (masculine-labeled) top role or (feminine-labeled) bottom role, these distinctions reflect patriarchal gender relations that expect and celebrate men’s power over women, especially sexual power.

Explicit conversations about size and performance are more common in long-term relationships. Young people are having sex mostly without communicating about it. This is compounded by sexual inexperience and general lack of knowledge, leaving young men questioning their performances. Having sex for the first time is widely regarded as a stressful moment for everyone, but the added burden of revealing their erect size and being expected to perform well makes it even more of a ritual test of gender for men. Twenty-six-year-old Andre says, “While it felt good to lose your virginity, I still felt unsure of how good of a job I did. It took me a while to actually get erect, due to nervousness, and during the act, I was very concerned about her level of pleasure.” Sex, here, is a two-step feat: first, get it, and second, be great at it. What’s missing is enjoying it, and communicating with your partner to make sure they’re enjoying it, too.

“What I see on the website is a lot of guys who have the same issue that I often had,” Stephen says, explaining, “They relate penis size to manhood more because they relate penis size and sexual performance. They’re worried they’re not giving enough, and no matter how much they give, they want to give more. You know, they want to be able to be better, because it’s not about having sex, and getting off and enjoying it. It’s about being the girl’s best sex they’ve ever had, kind of attitude. And it’s the wrong attitude.” Stephen says his first sexual encounter was marked by fear that he would “mess up” and do something wrong:

I think it was a source of anxiety and concern to the extent that sex itself was a source of anxiety and concern. I felt awkward around women, and once I learned not to be awkward around women, I still felt awkward about sex, because I didn’t have much experience with that, and I didn’t know what to expect, and I was a perfectionist. So it was kind of like I saw it as a performance rather than a fun activity kind of thing. It took a long time to break those feelings and realize that it’s not about making mistakes and stuff like that. It’s about actually experimenting. So with that, penis size became a concern, the idea that, well, given the amount of importance I’ve been taught to put on it, it must have some importance in bed. Therefore, I worried about it, because at the end of the day, the thing I really worried about was being able to please whoever I ended up having sex with.
Travis has seen his marital sex life cool off in middle age. His wife is less interested in sex, which he thinks might be due to his declining performance. He asks himself, “What can I do to help her like it more than she does now?” and one conclusion he reaches is that she might be more interested if he was bigger. He is somewhat skeptical of her previous positive comments about his size because she’s never had sex with another man: “I thought, like any other guy, bigger might be better, and I wanted to see if it was possible to make it bigger. So that’s why I started doing [penis exercises].”

Older men are less worried about size than they are erection quality, erectile dysfunction, and a sense of lack of control. Performance encompasses size, firmness, and the ability to “get it up” as needed and to go all night (or at least long enough to provide satisfaction). Younger men flock to the Penis Health Club not only to increase their size but to increase control over their orgasms. They are frustrated and embarrassed by the unpredictability of how long they last—“anywhere between 15 seconds and 15 minutes.” The randomness of each performance gnaws at them (“it’s wrecking my life!”). Sometimes they feel like sexual rock stars. Other times the show is over before it gets started—or at least too soon after the audience arrives.

Rarely is anything “wrong” with them: their testosterone levels are fine, blood work returns normal, they get erections in the morning or at other times they aren’t trying to have sex. They are in their own heads, especially if they have failed before. They don’t understand how their sexual performance remains so elusive, while they can master and control other aspects of their bodies. Despite older Club members’ best efforts, younger members struggle to see sex as anything other than a performance. Doing penis exercises to increase their size and improve that performance is essential to restoring and maintaining a sense of control over the bodies.

Ed’s health, financial, and aging struggles all added up to a severe case of erectile dysfunction. He was a failing breadwinner, and his already poor body image was deteriorating. Ed was feeling bad about himself, dissatisfied with his body, and let down by his performance with his wife. “Our sex was almost nonexistent and very unsatisfactory. I could barely get it up, and it was all stress-related,” he says.

A handful of retired Club members in their late 60s and 70s report experiencing similar problems. Older men, even the privileged wealthy and white, are often unable to fulfill the two most important hegemonic ideals: vibrant careers (breadwinner) and physical strength (body).27 The antiaging industry preys on these men’s insecurities by promoting their products’ ability to help men exert greater control over their bodies. Atop the list are Viagra, Cialis, and other similar drugs, which equate restoring erections with restoring manhood and control.
Larry’s sex life before and after getting married and having kids was also closely connected to his stress levels and accomplishments at work: “If everything else in my life was going great, [sex] wasn’t a problem. If I was undergoing a difficult time in my career, or in my family relationships or other aspects of my life, then it tended to [accentuate] those difficulties.” When he was much younger he saw sex as a last refuge, a place of emotional escape when life was difficult. With those personal troubles spilling over into the bedroom, sex started to become an “anxiety” and he was easily “distracted.” His erections were “not as spectacular as they used to be,” and he was having difficulty ejaculating. Although this might sound like nirvana to younger men who wish they could last longer, he observes, it was unpleasant for his wife, and her interest in sex deteriorated. She interpreted his inability to orgasm as a reflection of his lack of desire for her. Larry’s less-than-ideal performance created a negative control loop: an inability to orgasm, his partner’s insecurity, stress and anxiety about his performance and her feelings, less firm erections, and some fear-based avoidance.

The Consequences of Not Measuring Up

Men who mostly meet body-based manhood ideals enjoy many benefits, including greater status, attention, self-esteem, and even social and economic power. Conversely, men who fail to live up to cultural standards lose out on all of the powers and privileges, instead enduring shame and embarrassment. Cultural ideals are, by definition, virtually unattainable. Perfectly sculpted and performing penises are no exception. This nearly impossibly high cultural standard is made even worse by its relative importance. No man will always measure up, and these inevitable failures spark numerous problems for men and others. Some GFC fighters and PHC members share the inevitable experience of falling short of body ideals.

Severe consequences follow men who internalize their perceived or actual shortcomings as a sense of failure. All of us have at least fleeting moments where we question something about ourselves. A minority of us suffer from crippling emotional and behavioral disorders. I use the term internalizing here to include a range of men demonstrating everything from consistent self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy about their size or performance to suffering from debilitating anxiety, fears, phobias, and depression. The consequences are many, including masculine insecurity and identity problems; concealing, withdrawing, and isolating their bodies and selves from others; and depression and suicidal thoughts. As I discuss in the next chapter, the consequences for women and others can be even worse when men externalize their perceived body failures.
Masculine Insecurity and Identity Problems

Coupling penises and manhood while setting unrealistic expectations for both fosters men’s insecurities. Club members illustrate this dynamic by writing and talking about their own and other men’s size and performance issues, as well as the benefits of fulfilling body ideals.

**ANDRE:** [I shouldn't have these thoughts], but I do have times where I feel less of a man because I am not swinging a big dick between my legs.

**BIGLOVE:** There's nothing that will make you feel more secure about yourself than having a huge meat pipe dangling down to your knees. And when a woman sees that monster cock, I bet she thinks you have incredible confidence and power.

**OHIOBOYYY:** My wife says I'm big, and she's totally satisfied in bed. I'm a man though so I want to add some size and the bragging rights that come with it.

**GOTTAGROWNOW:** Of course guys like me who have small dicks feel so inadequate. These idiots with large dicks are insecure too!

**PLZGETBIGGER:** I joined [the Club] because I couldn’t get my dick hard and it is tormenting me. There's nothing more psychologically disturbing than a man with a broken dick. It's just like losing your soul.

Security, power, confidence, soul, ego, and manhood are inseparable from penis size and performance for these and many men. As Susan Bordo explains, unlike someone suffering from a headache or some other malady, we say that men are impotent rather than they have, caught, were stricken with, or contracted impotence. In this way, we attribute the problem to a character flaw, not external factors. She examines how penises are viewed globally, concluding, “The magnificently large penis . . . is an icon of cross-cultural potency. So it’s not surprising that size matters very much to men.”

Kenneth says he is “kind of obsessed” with penis enlargement. He regularly examines and compares other men’s clothed packages while walking around. I ask why he does this, and he says, “[Because] I’m gay, but also because I think [bigger penises are] really the masculine ideal—the measure of a man, so to speak.” He equates feelings of gender inadequacy among less-endowed men like himself to women who have smaller breasts: “It just makes me feel less secure about myself. [Although it isn’t paralyzing], it’s just like an issue that’s always in the back of my mind.” He believes that penis size contributes to men’s identities and their confidence levels:

The way you conduct yourself, [present] yourself, or the way you do things, I think, is affected. Sometimes I’m more timid about things than I should be. [And I wonder], is that why, is it deep in my subconscious that [I feel] I’m less
masculine than [other men] are? Yeah, it plays with your head. [A guy I work with] is a very confident person. And voila, he’s got a big dick. OK, are they related? I don’t know. I’m sure there are plenty of men with little dicks running around that are very confident. Good for them. I just, it just is something that’s in the back of my mind.

Speaking with Club members and reading the forums suggests there are actually very few men with even average-sized penises who have much confidence. Colin felt great about himself until he measured his penis. Unlike everything else that was important to him and at which he excelled, on this measure, he was “just average, mediocre, whatever term you want to put to it; it’s a blow to your ego.” High school student Whatshisname was so intimidated by his girlfriend’s negative comments about the size of her ex-boyfriend (who seemed to be average) and her gossiping about it with her friends that he ended the relationship before they had sex. His confidence was undermined and his anxieties were fed. He feared what she would say about him if they slept together and later broke up: “I really wanted to lose my virginity but I had to protect my honor and be saved from humiliation.” This teenager’s dignity, identity, and penis size are inseparable.

As though not having a huge penis isn’t stressful enough, Club members internalize their performance anxieties and failures as reflections on their manhood. Ed’s lifelong body shame and adult erectile dysfunction have chipped away at his masculine identity, leaving him feeling powerless and not in control of his body. For Ed and many others, every other guy who has a bigger penis, lasts longer, or gives his partner multiple screaming orgasms is a source of comparative shame and failure. Masculinity is organized hierarchically: some men are winners, others losers. This is why, despite its intentions otherwise, the Club sometimes perpetuates feelings of inferiority among men. Members write about being inundated with unattainable measurements and intimidating photos. Combining this with the site’s obsessive focus on increasing size proves toxic for a subset of men who already feel inadequate.

Concealing, Withdrawing, and Isolating

Boys and men suffering from locker-room syndrome, especially those with smaller-than-average penises, internalize their issues by finding ways to conceal their flaccid penises in intimate and public settings. PHC members say they avoid changing in locker rooms, looking at themselves in mirrors, sleepovers, public showers and urinals—especially the pig trough–style urinals—and often other men with large flaccid penises. Skinny dipping, nude beaches, and sometimes just wearing shorts or swim trunks are nonstarters. They hide behind towels and lockers when forced to change in public, suffer from shy bladders at urinals (while standing at an angle to block others’ view, with two

The Body Dilemma

hands covering their penises), stick a sock in their pants to look bigger, and quickly put on underwear after sex. One man posted that he aroused himself slightly before a doctor’s examination. Several worry about postmortem judgments of their small penises as their bodies are prepared for burial. Attending his friend’s wake made one man “more dedicated to penis exercises knowing the next funeral may be my own.” Now that is an existential crisis. Size and performance fears also cause some men to alter their behavior and experiences. They date smaller women (who they presume will have smaller vaginas), avoid dating entirely, turn down opportunities for sex, stay out of long-term relationships, withdraw from conversations about size and sex, struggle to get and maintain erections, and socially isolate themselves, occasionally escaping via alcohol or drugs.

Stephen sees younger men like himself doing more concealing of their penises in public. Older men, he says, are less concerned about it. This may be due to their age, but probably is also a cohort effect, where older men are less ashamed because they grew up before fitness crazes and Schwarzenegger movies. Still, men of all ages say they did things like take gym showers at odd times and hide in corners of locker rooms to protect themselves from unwanted scrutiny, or bullying in school. Isaiah says he was late to practice sometimes because he waited until his teammates left the locker room before changing. When he was forced to change around others, he would hide behind his full-sized locker. When Ed was younger, he often skipped taking a shower at school.

The dating and social lives of young Club members Andre, Colin, and Isaiah reveal the internal conflict and anxiety they experience daily. Because of his race-fueled size insecurities, Andre introspectively acknowledges, “I am afraid to let my guard down and be vulnerable.” He says his negative thoughts about his penis size don’t affect his ability to have sex, but he assumes his partner won’t enjoy it. “I get it with ease and can carry out the act as normal,” he says, “[but] I mentally prepare myself for the worst sexually so that if she is not satisfied, it isn’t a surprise.” More important, he is “in fear of constantly being compared to past bigger lovers [so] I see every potential relationship as fleeting or short-term. I believe it’s a defense mechanism.” Hooking up instead of entering a relationship protects Andre from his fear that his size and performance doubts will be confirmed. Constantly on the move, he reduces the likelihood of having a conversation with women about his or their past lovers’ sizes. (Recall that Andre’s self-reported penis size is above average.)

Colin, too, has shied away from long-term relationships because of his size insecurities. Worse, though, in his mind, is that he has avoided hook-up opportunities, fearing that he “would have to reveal my average endowment.” Throughout high school, it weighed on his mind every weekend and whenever he interacted with girls. I ask him how much anxiety this caused him during
his high school years. He admits, “I would say a lot. And a lot more than it should have. I can tell you that I don’t think I had a sexual encounter that I was not intoxicated for. I mean it’s not like I was drinking to kill the pain, you know, you have to drink like a bottle of vodka, but a couple beers to get the liquid courage flowing.” Colin, like so many of his teenage and twentysomething peers in hookup situations, uses alcohol because it disinhibits and reduces his stress level, lubricating his interaction and helping him escape his negative thoughts. He is in college now and is thrilled with his now above-average sized penis, but he undergoes some similar internal conflicts in his dating life. He still sometimes hesitates to make the first move: “Lately, my issue hasn’t been in the sack; it’s getting there in the first place. It’s like, you know, this ridiculous fear. It’s like worrying about getting on a roller coaster, right. You’re worried and you’re scared while you’re waiting in line. But once you get on, you wind up having a good time.” Colin’s bigger penis and pleasurable dating and sexual experiences do not engender enough self-esteem and confidence to allow him to completely escape his past. Although he appears to be on his way to repairing what he perceives as his “just average manhood,” his actions continue to be colored by his damaged self-image.

For other men, it’s much worse. Intimidating comments, pornographic images, and men’s performance pressures to “show off, and impress, and do some sort of magic trick,” as Stephen says, leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy. They doubt they are big enough or skilled enough or even able to get an erection when the time comes, and their body confirms it when they try. We define manhood so narrowly that many men view anything other than a rock-hard erection and a mind-blowing performance as a failure. And any single failure raises the possibility in men’s minds that they are total failures. Avoiding being soft—physically, emotionally, or in this case physiologically—is avoiding being perceived as lacking some part of manhood.

Many men’s short-term solution to erectile dysfunction is complete avoidance. After experiencing a few humiliating sexual encounters that culminated with him being unable to stay erect, Club member JrPE’er has chosen to avoid one-night stands: “Sadly, I’ve found excuses to avoid sleeping with several girls because I fear the outcome. I can’t bear their obvious disappointment when we try to have sex and it doesn’t happen.”

Isaiah is even further down the rabbit hole. He has retreated so far in his head that it manifests itself in social and physical isolation from others: “I’ve kind of like, turned into a hermit, almost.” He either hangs out with his roommate or spends hours online, hiding out from everybody else. He eventually found the Club’s website because he always clicks on penis enlargement website ads. Isaiah says that a few times, girls seemed interested in him, but “I couldn’t pursue them. I just squandered [the opportunities]. I just squashed them and went back to my hermit ways. ’Cause in my mind, I’m still not where
The Body Dilemma

I want to be in terms of how I view myself and my body size.” He shies away from conversations and people altogether, because he expects that his white peers will project their racial and gender stereotypes and fantasies onto him, and he does not meet those expectations: “From what I had heard back when I was younger, a black male is someone who’s confident, maybe a little cocky, knows what he wants, knows how to get it, and will get it at any cost. And I didn’t really see myself as that, and I kind of put myself down for that.” He isolates himself to avoid the possibility of having to confront others’ expectations. Although young, he is wise enough to recognize that physical improvements will not be enough to repair the long-term damage to his sense of self:

I do think that there is great responsibility put upon men throughout the world to put on a front for a lot of stuff. And no one really realizes it until that front cracks, and you see what’s in the dam burst wide open, and you see what’s really behind it.

It’s going to come out eventually, whether or not I make [penis size] gains, and whether or not my body becomes the way I want it to be. Because even if most of those things do happen—I mean, yes, I’ll be more confident, yes, I’ll be out of this phase that I’m in right now, but still, I’ll have to confront the issues that I’ve let build up over the past years. I still have to confront them no matter what.

Size and performance anxieties flood men’s psyches and often trump their ability to view sex as a pleasurable act or relationships as an opportunity for intimacy, empathy, experimentation, and growth. The pressure to impress and perform alienates men from their own bodies as well as their potential and actual sexual partners. They withdraw physically and emotionally to avoid potential shame. According to manhood ideals, vulnerability is weakness, and the weak are vulnerable.32 In truth, these young men are following a script that makes them more vulnerable: isolation and lack of intimacy damage not only their relationships but their own health.

Depression and Suicidal Thoughts

The consequences of Isaiah’s internalized manhood failures were the most severe of the men I interview. Other Club members, none of whom I have managed to speak with directly, post stories of more extreme consequences, including depression and thoughts of suicide. Isaiah’s social withdrawal and isolation lie at one end of a spectrum of behaviors consistent with dysmorphophobia, otherwise known as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). Individuals with BDD have “a fixation on an imaginary flaw in the physical appearance. In cases in which a minor defect truly exists, the individual with BDD has an inordinate degree of anguish.” Isaiah isn’t experiencing severe depression
or thoughts of suicide, both of which mark sufferers of BDD, but for him and many other men at the Club, “there is embarrassment and fear of being scrutinized or mocked, which often causes these individuals to avoid social situations and intimate relationships.” PHC members who believe their only psychological escape is to increase their penis size are exhibiting BDD-like symptoms. Their happiness and mental health are contingent on repairing their perceived flaw.

Similar to Colin, 24-year-old SlimJimmy has avoided pursuing sex or relationships with women: “When I meet a girl I want to sleep with, the only thing I think about is her laughing at me when I’m naked.” His body dissatisfaction has led to social isolation and depression. In an extended forum discussion about the negative effects of feeling inadequate, many posters share their struggles with what appear to be severe cases of BDD. StayAnon offers his fears and insecurities as a show of support for another Club member:

You’re not alone. I’ve been depressed and suicidal because of my small cock. I pass up chances to sleep with girls because I’m so small, which makes me look like I’m gay or just an asshole. I was so depressed about it that I stayed in my room for a year, bottomed out, and attempted suicide. I’m slowly recovering, but the anxiety isn’t gone. [The Penis Health Club] is giving me hope reading about the possibility of increasing my size. Just the thought that it’s possible to get bigger feels great! All I want is to be average, not huge. If I reach that goal, it will change my life and let me live again. Honestly, my entire future is riding on making my dick bigger.

These men’s shame about their penises and sexual virility mixes dangerously with the broader cultural expectation that men should stifle emotions and keep others at arm’s length. Their lack of emotional intimacy and inability to build relationships undermines more than just their manhood; it also prevents their accessing basic human emotional needs.

As with many psychological disorders, unfulfilled arbitrary social norms sow self-doubt and manifest themselves in self-destructive behaviors. If our culture didn’t place such undue importance on men’s size and performance and demand that men maintain control and establish dominance over others (or their own penises), fewer would suffer from BDD and other disorders. And fewer would project their disappointments and shame onto others, especially women.

Club member DrSmith regularly imagines how his size and performance compare with other men and believes he is lacking:

I often think about suicide, mostly but not only because of my small size. I just don’t see how I’ll ever satisfy a girl the way other guys can when every other dude
is bigger and better than me. I just put my tail between my legs and walk away if another guy starts talking to a girl I’m interested in. Even if she likes me as a person, thinks I’m funny or whatever, it doesn’t matter. Once we have sex, she’ll be disappointed. When I feel really bad, I go in the basement and work out as hard as I can, hitting the heavy bag and beating up a wrestling dummy. I just imagine I’m pounding away at my insecurities until they’re gone.

DrSmith and other men with smaller-than-average penises are more likely to suffer from BDD. Their perceptions are confirmed by the Club’s widely read and frequently discussed summaries of research studies on average penis size. When average is deemed unacceptable and even inadequate, below average is devastating. When physicians, spouses, partners, and penis size studies fail to alleviate men’s concerns—or, worse, exacerbate them—the Club’s multitude of exercise regimens and recommended penis enlargement devices provide these men with hope of repairing what they see as their broken bodies—and manhood.

Repairing: Size and Performance Therapy

Many men never move beyond the process of internalizing feelings of inadequacy. They feel stuck, their negative emotions slowly consuming their confidence and sense of self. For other men, internalizing is merely the first step toward change; a motivator that forces them to seek ways to restore their lost manhood. The Penis Health Club offers men two ways to reduce and eliminate their perceived body failures and ultimately repair their manhood: changing their negative perceptions about their penises—mostly by showing them they aren’t below average—and improving their size and performance. Neither provides the possibility of moving beyond arbitrary manhood ideals; instead, these repairs reinforce men’s pursuit of power and control. Down that path lies no progress toward sustainable, collective, egalitarian definitions of manhood.

Cognitive Therapy and Positive Feedback

Trying to change men’s negative perceptions about their bodies is a challenging task, but it reminds us that body ideals are arbitrary—that they can be changed. Depending on one’s culture, community, family, era, beliefs, age, and situation, a penis might be perceived as average or otherwise, a threat to women’s chastity, uncontrollable, a source of giving and receiving pleasure, something not to be touched by anyone until marriage, a source of income, a measure of manhood, and much more. The meanings we assign to penises can and do change. Of course, as difficult as it is for men as individuals to change their own perceptions, it is even harder to change cultural beliefs. The latter do change, but more slowly.
The Club tries to convince men that the world is not filled with eight-inch penises and sexual partners’ nonstop screaming orgasms and that a man’s own size and performance is likely just fine. Friends in school locker rooms brag and mislead about their size. The Club responds by sharing research studies summarizing average sizes. Pornography depicts and celebrates well-endowed men. The Club points out how camera angles and selective samples distort reality. Men hear some young women share their desire for large penises. Women members at the Club tell men that penis size is low on most women’s list of desires, and if girlfriends and wives tell men their size and performance is good, they should be believed.

Travis says, “It’s a very helpful site for men who may feel in some way inadequate or uncomfortable with themselves. And if they go on there and educate themselves, they would find out that they’re not so bad of a guy after all.” He implies what many men think and feel— their self-worth is attached to their size and performance. Travis always felt comfortable with his size and was not in need of body image repair. Still, discovering on the Club site that his penis size is above average was like “stroking my ego.” New member Just-Joined says, “I was surprised to find out that my dick isn’t small but average. I started to get over my size insecurities almost immediately!” Stephen says the most important thing the Club has provided him with is not a bigger penis but a better level of comfort with himself.

Glenn, in his 50s, wishes that the Club was around during his teenage years because “a lot of time was wasted on wondering [about size].” Knowledge about average penis sizes, especially average erect size, simply hasn’t been widely available or discussed in such detail before the internet. Upon finding out that average penis size is, well, average, one new Club member after another begins to overcome their size anxieties.

Urologists offer a number of suggestions to help treat patients with small-penis syndrome. These include not dismissing men’s concerns about their size, normalizing their feelings, and offering reassurance, providing accurate information about average size and where men lie relative to others on a normal range of sizes, noting media and societal pressures as compared to the actual importance of size (especially for sexual partners), and pointing out men’s potential biases and misperceptions about their own and others’ size. The Club does all these things. In some ways, it is playing the roles of both doctor and therapist for men. Tomás posted pictures of his penis, which he says was very difficult to do given his history of negative feedback and bullying, and his ongoing concerns about his masculinity and sexuality: “I thought, ‘You know what, I’ve got to try this to at least get some type of feedback.’ [And the feedback was] pretty good. I’ve got to say that most of the people are very kind.” Nonsexual compliments are widespread at the Club, regardless of the size, shape, or any other characteristic of the penis that is up for discussion.
As Glenn observes, most straight guys don’t sit around and talk about their penises with other men—at least not in a serious manner. The Club is different. Anonymity allows men to reveal their penises visually or through description, along with their anxieties, failures, and more. Ed’s size and performance were lifelong sources of anguish, but he dealt with them alone before discovering PHC: “There’s nobody I could talk to, I didn’t really have any confidantes that [I] could talk to about that, you know? I guess one of the great things about the internet is you have these blogs, and opportunities where you can [anonymously] share your concerns and anxieties, and it provides some great feedback.” Paul says he feels as close to some Club members as he does to his face-to-face friends, even though he has no idea who they are or what they look like. It allows him to “talk about stuff that I really never talked with anybody about,” including human sexuality, forbidden fantasies, and his own belief that he is actually bisexual. The Club’s message is the same that’s conveyed to sufferers of addiction or scarcely discussed illnesses: “It’s OK, you’re not alone, what you’re experiencing is completely normal and common, and you shouldn’t feel badly about it.”

Fixing Broken Bodies
Perceptions and beliefs are resilient, though. They take years to form and ossify over time. Abandoning them requires significant cognitive and sometimes behavioral changes. This is why, even when perceptions and beliefs appear unsustainable in the face of obvious contradictory evidence, they are slow and difficult to change. Some men find it easier to repair their sense of broken manhood by improving not their perceptions but their actual penis size and performance. For some GFC members, fighting is their fix; for some Club members, penis exercises are the source of healing.

Nine of the fourteen men I interview say they have enjoyed substantial size and performance improvements from penis exercises and devices. Their improved self-perceptions are due to both acquiring more knowledge about average size and seeing firsthand how their size and performance can change. Several of these men’s sexual partners provided further affirmation.

Club posters also frequently write about their reparative processes. After another poster gives TjrHrse positive feedback about his penis size, he says his self-esteem issues are due to his sexual partners seemingly always having bigger penises, “but [the Club] and penis enlargement exercises are relieving those negative thoughts.” Club member BeachLife is reluctant to admit that the size of his penis causes him insecurity, but he says, “Seeing my workouts lead to gains is such a massive boost to my ego!” Brandon has made only minor gains, but he is pleased to have moved from just-below- to right-around-average length and girth. His longer flaccid penis and weight training make him more comfortable being naked. He
frequently compares his body and penis to other men when he showers at the
gym. Recently comparing himself to a guy with a good body, Brandon noticed
the man’s penis get erect while showering: “I felt good about myself because
my flaccid [was] bigger than [his] hard.” Glenn, older and single, has met and
exceeded his goals. He has seen gains in his size, erection quality, stamina, con-
tr ol, and ejaculation force. He is “perfectly happy” with moving from slightly
below to above average in erection size. At his age, he says, “I am beyond trying
to impress anybody or thinking that, you know, if I get a bigger package I’ll
get more dates.” A key reason he is so satisfied with his gains is that his goals
were modest: “I didn’t have any unrealistic expectations of having some sort of
porno dick.” His new personal ideal was just a little bigger than his previous
size. Glenn’s modest goals and lack of desire to set new ones are fairly unique.

Sixty-year-old Ed’s transformation is emblematic of what the Club hopes to
achieve. Ed’s discovery that his penis was below average knocked him off-kilter
when he was young. He felt humiliated and emasculated, avoided being nude
in locker rooms, lacked confidence, was less likely to pursue potential dates,
tried to date smaller women, and felt embarrassed hearing women’s comments
about other men’s larger penises. He says that for much of his life, his body
image and size concerns were a daily source of stress, anxiety, resentment, frus-
tration, powerlessness, and lack of control. Worse, he suffered a major finan-
cial setback, and his health had deteriorated in the last 10 years, causing severe
erectile dysfunction and eventually resulting in his having to be on dialysis and
later get a kidney transplant. Today, though, he is a new man. His finances
and health have greatly improved, and his penis size and performance are
bigger and better. A combination of penis exercises (PE), penis enlargement
devices, and Viagra have repaired his size and performance insecurities, sex life
with his wife, and ultimately, his shattered manhood:

Yeah, I mean, it changed my life, you know. There [have] been two major
changes in my life. One is [getting a new kidney and getting off dialysis]; that’s a
major life change. The second major life change has been my PEing and getting
a bigger dick. I know that I’m now up [to] slightly above average, which makes
me feel a whole lot better. I talked about that book I saw when I was in college,
you know, my mind always goes back to that image, right. Instead of being
on the small-average size, I’m now on the average-size, just slightly above-
average size.

I ask Ed why he thinks he feels so much better now that his penis size has
increased. He says, “There is so much emphasis on penis size and manhood
that even though I reject a lot of that, there’s still a sense of accomplishment,
and satisfaction to know that I overcame an obstacle towards being a better
man, so . . . yeah, it makes me feel like I have been able to add more to my
manhood.” I ask him if making size gains has caused him to embrace those masculine expectations a little more. “I suppose. Yeah, I suppose, to be brutally honest, yes,” he acknowledges.

Ed’s wife never complained about their sex life, but he says, “Since I’ve gone through PE, and gained substantially in length and girth, our sex is 100% better.” Much of that, he says, is attributable to erection quality, which has improved both his performance and his pleasure. After several months of PE and taking Viagra, Ed beams: “[My wife, Judy, said] ‘OK, you can take the Viagra, and you can keep doing the PE, because that was great!’ So that of course affirms what I was doing made a difference,” and it made him feel “great. Fantastic. Yeah, it was incredible.” Ed also now enjoys greater sexual pleasure:

Well, the quality is 100% better. It’s hard to describe what a difference it makes. I mean, I have unbelievable orgasms, I mean, screaming orgasms, and I never had that before, ever. I mean, it is night and day. The quality is just unbelievable. And I last a lot longer, and it’s just . . . It’s amazing. I feel a lot better when I’m performing sex. And I don’t know if it’s totally physical, or whether it’s mental as well because I feel better about myself and about my dick. I don’t know, I haven’t been able to resolve that. I have to say the physical probably weighs heavily in that equation.

Ed’s physical gains are objectively substantial. His penis is larger and is able to do more—to accomplish more—than before. The physical and physiological changes from drugs and PE overlapped with his financial and health rebounds, all of which are inseparable from the social psychological gains he has enjoyed. Previously, he felt anger, frustration, and a lack of direction when he was dealing with financial difficulties: “As I got more and more work, I got better and better results with my PE. So they went hand in hand. And I also felt, I mean, once I got the ball rolling with the PE, I really didn’t want to stop. I mean, it was a great feeling. It was a really good ego boost, self-esteem boost, and I just kept going with it.” Ed is so pleased with his gains that he recently told his wife his flaccid hang is enough that he would not be humiliated going to a nude beach. I ask him what that would be like. “Liberating,” he says. He would no longer feel “humiliated” or “out of place.”

Ed’s transformation is so profound because he has restored a sense of control over his body after feeling out of control for decades: “The fact that I know I can do something about my penis size, and actually it’s happened, is overwhelming in terms of a sense of control . . . Yeah, I feel like I have more control of my life, and empowered.”

Colin was feeling hopeless and distraught before he found the Club. He figured he was stuck with his average size for the rest of his life. Not even out of high school, he was distressed and overwhelmed at the thought of a life
with an average penis. Then he found the Club: “I know it sounds very weird, but it almost was necessary for me to find, to have to take my life back. I think it’s crazy how when it was really getting to me, that I was going to have an average penis for the rest of my life, that magically I found my way on to this website.” Colin has made substantial size gains, but he argues that the appeal of PE and the Club is primarily the idea that men can change their size and performance: “Maybe the best thing about it is not the actual increase in size so much as the thought that you can change this aspect of your life. That you’re actually not stuck with it. It’s a very empowering thought, and I think that gives you the confidence in and of itself. Although of course seeing gains does definitely help.” Despair and resignation are replaced by hope and empowerment. A sense of control is restored and the work of restorative manhood therapy begins.

What is the recipe that attracts men to strenuous and time-consuming PE workouts? It’s simple: combine the cultural importance of penis size and performance with men’s perceptions of their own inadequacies, add in a feeling of hope that change is possible, include a bunch of rewards for making those changes, and stir in the reality that the ceiling for possible improvements is limitless and thereby unattainable. It is an addictive cocktail, an intoxicating pursuit of manhood ideals, the sourness of failure too rarely balanced with the sweetness of redemption. Too few members are able to post “success stories” that are subsequently replicated by others. Results do vary.

At his peak, Glenn was doing PE 10–15 hours per week. His cousin’s stinging size comment in early childhood, along with Glenn’s size and performance gains, provide a window into his motivations for his multiyear workout commitment. Other Club members’ routines are more intense, on par with those of bodybuilders. Glenn thinks nothing of his routine compared to others: “You read what some of these people go through in their regimens or how much time they are spending, it is a little overwhelming. I look at some of these people [thinking], ‘Jesus, when do you work?’” Glenn finds that level of commitment surprising in the context of our immediate-gratification culture: “You know, we’re such a microwave society, people stand by their microwave and go, ‘Hurry up!’ So the idea of starting a process of actually changing the tissue of your body, which takes years—most people don’t have the patience for that.”

Colin knows that his penis has grown to well above average in size and, once he gets over his anxiety about hooking up, he doesn’t suffer any performance problems. His thirst for more gains feels unquenchable, though. He set an initial goal of a one-inch increase in length: “But now that my penis is actually that size, it doesn’t seem that big to me. I’m used to it. And it’s like I want some more now. It’s almost an addiction. I totally recognize that I’m above average, but for some reason it is not enough.” Surely the human body is
limited in its ability to increase in size and performance. The gendered mind, though, sees no limits. Bryan says, “I know there’s some guys who, their wives have said [about their penis enlargement], ‘Stop, enough’s enough.’ But they’re doing it for themselves, and they don’t want to [stop]. Which is kind of sad. It’s like, hey, you’re going to limit your fun time here, if you’re going to make someone sore.”

Some men can’t help but feel better about themselves after they see where they fall on the scale and after they make gains, even if they never really experienced self-doubt or emasculation. Paul had some “mild anxiety” about his body (but not penis size) when he was young. After doing PE and improving his physique, Paul sees his body comparing favorably to men 20 years younger: “I’m going, ‘Yeah, I got it, I’m OK.’ And not trying to be boastful, but I can look and genuinely, objectively say, ‘Yeah, I’m good. Yeah, my penis is bigger than yours. Yeah, I look better than you do.’” He has also received helpful comments from Club members responding to his pictures and ego-boosting ones from his wife after he made gains: “[She] would be saying, ‘Man, you’re just too big for me. You have to slow down, you’re too big.’ I’m like, yeah, I’m loving that.”

Travis invests two to five hours per day between doing PE and spending time on the Club website. Yet he says he has not had any negative experiences that stand out in his life. He has a lot of downtime in the military, but time alone doesn’t explain why he is so committed to PE. I ask him to explain why, despite his obvious lack of perceived inadequacy, he’s so invested. He says,

Can I be a bit crude? So the question, it’s along the lines of, “Why did the dog lick his balls?” Right, it’s because he can. So I PE for health. That’s why I continue to PE, and I can do that in 30 minutes, and I could do it three times a week, and I would be able to maintain very firm erections and be able to maintain good control over my arousal and ejaculation, and I would be able to maintain a very short refractory period. And those are all very positive benefits to just general sexual health, I believe, which are great. And the reason I PE to try and get bigger is because I can. And I want to see if I can do it. And it’s really, it’s really nothing more than that, you know. People go to the gym to exercise, and if someone wants to set a goal to bench-press 300 pounds, it’s not because they have a need to; it’s just because they want to see if they can do it.

Travis’s joke is revealing. Of course he, like any man, wants to grow his penis, regardless of its current size. Knowing he is above average in size and that he can continue to grow is “empowering” and has boosted Travis’s self-confidence. The Penis Health Club has improved his self-perception and his size and performance, which help remind him that those “fleeting insecurities that might crop up are really out of place.” A greater sense of control over
his already good-sized and well-performing body attracts him to PE: “I think the thing that benefited me the most [was] when I realize[d] that you can do something to change your penis size.” He felt liberated by the possibility that something he previously thought was static is actually malleable: “There’s a feeling of, I would say helplessness [when you can’t change something]. Some people might say hopelessness.” Thanks to the Penis Health Club, he was able to move penis size from his list of things he thought could not be changed to ones that can. Increasing penis size and performance are accomplishments that restore and bolster masculine identities.