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Fighting fit: how Gen-X men are tackling their mortality

Julie Hare
Education editor

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Voluntary starvation is in and the men who follow the regimen have no qualms about letting the world know about it. Whether it's the 5:2 or 16:8 intermittent fasting diets or the Omad diet; modern starvation promises weight loss and improved cognition.

From singer Bruce Springsteen and Twitter founder Jack Dorsey to titans of the corporate world, intermittent fasting has become a go-to for first-world, stressed-out, time-poor individuals seeking to be their best selves in the executive suite, the gym and at home. Part of the appeal is it's really simple: don't eat or consume any calories on these days or between these hours and health gains are guaranteed.

Andrew May, a performance coach and strategist for elite athletes and senior executives, says his corporate clientele usually arrive when they've been promoted or had the ante upped at work. **Louie Douvis**

The rigid structures imposed by this form of dieting can be both effective and addictive. Adding complexity to this basic framework has its own appeal and adherents tend to gravitate towards data as part of the process and the tech that delivers it.

Unlike women, who often become weight and diet obsessed from their teens, men usually become health conscious later in life. The reasons are myriad, but for many it's the realisation that after four decades of looking and feeling okay without ever really trying, eating and drinking the same old things just doesn't work anymore. Paunches and expanding jean sizes are a wake-up call. So are diagnoses of high cholesterol and, as the big 5-0 draws nearer, appointments with cardiologists.

It's not just about looks. Work promotions, which intensify demands and require greater mental and physical acuity and endurance, have a way of focusing mens' minds. It all adds up to a call to action that is turning many male Gen-Xers – especially those in the corporate world – into borderline obsessive dieters and experts in fitness tech.

But the quest for better health can have a dark side, too. A condition known as body dysmorphia can and does consume lives. And, even the most earnest and health-conscious can find themselves heading for a premature heart attack.

There are some extreme examples among the middle-aged men taking dieting very seriously. Take US tech entrepreneur Bryan Johnson. He spends $US2 million a year on a team of 30 doctors in an attempt to reverse the ageing process and make himself 18 again (many people's worst nightmare, but I digress).

Johnson, who is actually 44, made a fortune selling his payment processing company to eBay which he then spent on ways to achieve eternal youth.

"What's interesting to me is, my team and I have built a system based upon science and measurement that better cares for me than I can care for myself," he told *GQ* magazine.

"The enemy is entropy. The path is goal alignment via building your autonomous self; enabling compounded rates of progress to bravely explore the Zeroth Principle Future and play infinite games," his website reads. No. Seriously.

Which is great if you are rich enough, obsessive-compulsive enough and vainglorious enough to want to cheat time, but reading his daily plan is simply exhausting for mere mortals like the rest of us.

Although Johnson doesn't starve himself, per se, he does limit his daily calorie intake to 1977 – precisely. The recommended amount is 2500 calories, or 10,460 kilojoules. His diet of smoothies, nut puddings, vegetables and supplements is eye-wateringly complex.

Growing trend

Of course, Johnson isn't the only tech bro, entrepreneur or celebrity to have made public their strange daily eating habits.

Pyschologist and author Jordan Peterson and his daughter Mikhaila Peterson subscribe to the "beef only" diet. Both are probably quite bored at mealtimes, but they're still alive.

Springsteen and Dorsey use a form of extreme intermittent fasting. Called the Omad diet, adherents can only eat during a one-hour window each day before 4pm. Not particularly great for a sociable family life or spontaneity of any kind.

The side effects include headaches, poor circulation and bad breath, but it's been embraced by Silicon Valley and big finance types because extreme hunger increases alertness (in case there is a passing bison that needs to be hunted to the ground and gobbled up raw).

The point is, says Clare Collins, a Laureate Professor of Nutrition and Dietetics at the University of Newcastle, people need to find a diet and exercise regime they can stick to.

And men and women come at it from different approaches.

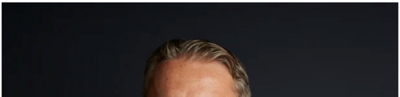
Food delegation

"Blokes generally come to the realisation that they may need to do something specific about their weight, health and wellbeing later than women. But when that realisation comes, they can be much more factual and focused," Collins says.

Women, she says, have a much more emotional relationship with food.

In general, men tend to have qualities that make them much more effective once they decide to lose weight. These include taking a factual, analytic approach (ergo Bryan Johnson) and using data – and technology – to achieve the results.

"They are more likely to be dieting naive. They are often healthy-lifestyle virgins in the sense that food is a whole new area they have never ever thought about. Food has been delegated to other people; they've never had to work out what to heat for dinner," Collins says.



Matt Comyn is among the executives who work with performance coach and strategist Andrew May. **Natalie Boog**

Andrew May, a performance coach and strategist for elite athletes and senior executives, says his corporate clientele usually arrive when they've been promoted or had the ante upped at work, and "they've got a really hot butane burner on their backside".

"They've just had a massive step-up and it's not just having the cognitive capacity, but the impact they have on people when they are constantly switching channels going from one complex situation to another," May says.

His clients include a bevvy of ASX100 CEO's and founders, such as Matt Comyn from the Commonwealth Bank, Melanie Evans of ING and Adam Watson of APA. But he says those that are driven primarily by ego or body image will find any gains they make unsustainable.

"I can get someone to lose weight or to look better, but for senior executives that is just a bonus. It's more about performance, impact, relationships, productivity, psychology, connectivity and teamwork," he says.

"But if you stick to the principles – sleep properly, don't drink too much alcohol, cut out sugar and eat the right macronutrients – you are going to look good as well."

Surprisingly, May says even though exercise is important, it is only three or four on the list of things that will make a difference.

"There is a bit of a mindset for people because they think if they are going to lose weight they need to run, swim, paddle, ride a bike. But step number one is cut out the rubbish, particularly booze and sugar. Then look at stress management. Eat the right diet. Then maybe exercise."

He also makes the point that, contrary to popular opinion, too much cardio exercise can lead to premature heart attacks due to hardening of the arteries and plaque build up.

For chief executives and those at the top of the corporate ladder, there is no point telling such people to avoid stress, he says. In fact, stress can be an "awesome way of fuelling performance".

"It's only bad when you don't have recovery time. Athletes are stressed as part of their training. Sometimes, training is made even harder than competition. But they also need downtime to regulate and recover. So do executives," May says.

Adam Driussi says wearable tech such as the WHOOP band helped him track progress and remain competitive with his friends. **Dominic Lorrimer**

Healthier habits

Adam Driussi is the co-founder and CEO of Quantium, Australia's largest data science and AI company and his approach to his health is to track everything via a WHOOP band.

The slice of black hi-tech awesomeness wrapped around his wrist measures his exercise, recovery, sleep, training and what he has consumed. It even provides recommendations and coaching feedback.

Best of all, Driussi says, it benchmarks his activity against a group of his best mates, driving the competitive urge to out-do each other.

"I just like measuring things. So, the WHOOP band gives me all sorts of data around high-intensity exercise and how well I sleep, and it really pushes me to have healthier habits," he says.

As a director of the Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs NRL team, Driussi says he is intrigued by the strict diet and fitness regimes of elite athletes and the technology that measures their every move.

But his own fitness habits, while less extreme, are as important to his weekly schedule as being his very best self at work – weekly touch footy with a group of mates, skiing and squash.

"Chasing a ball or making the next turn on a ski slope is all about being in the moment. It's about having a complete mental break from whatever else you might be thinking about because you are just focused on that moment," Driussi says.

"Lying on a beach is my idea of hell," he adds.

Too much of a good thing

Myles Young, a psychologist from the University of Newcastle, devised a program specifically for men to lose weight. Their first port of call is exercise because they can be reluctant to consider diet, which they see as "feminine".

Young's program uses images, statistics, data and health information which can "target deeper values-based concepts and give men autonomy and options on how they can apply it and lose weight in their own time".

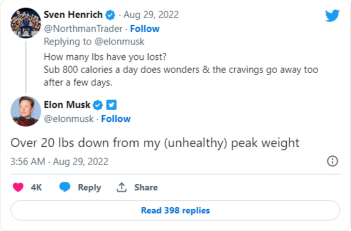
Perhaps, most importantly, Young's study found that weight loss in men was strongly associated with improvements in mood for those who were downcast or suffering from depression.

Of course, there is a flip side – when too much of a good thing is never enough, which can then turn into a bad thing.

Jordan Martenstyn is undertaking a PhD at the University of Sydney on finding treatments for a condition known as muscle dysmorphia. In many ways, it is very similar – if also the polar opposite – of anorexia. It's a mental condition in which individuals are obsessed with their flaws and perceived weaknesses and so obsessively exercise, particularly in the gym, and diet to build extreme buffness.

"In a sense it's the pathological pursuit of muscularity," Martenstyn says. "It's when that preoccupation with wanting to become bigger, more muscular, just starts to overwhelm your life."

Martenstyn says muscle dysmorphia is most common in the 18-30 age group and, similar to eating disorders, is characterised by a sense of wanting to be in control.



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3:56 AM · Aug 29, 2022

While the condition is not confined to the gay community, research suggests it is where it is most prevalent.

Photographers such as Tom Bianchi and Robert Mapplethorpe's idealised images of perfect male bodies have helped contribute to the notion that hard work in the gym is rewarded with status and power.

The greatest risk of muscle dysmorphia, Martenstyn says, is steroid use.

"Pretty much everyone who has muscle dysmorphia takes some form of supplements that might be legal like creatine or protein powder, or illegal. But there tends to be a bit of a progression where they might start with creatine or whey protein, then as the desire to get bigger and more muscular keeps growing, eventually they might take peptides or anabolic steroids and stuff like that. And the side effects of taking steroids, for example, are pretty well documented."

Chronic hunger

For all the bad press, Insta-celebrities and doctor shoppers have brought attention to the lack of supply of a new generation of prescription weight loss drugs known as GLP-1 receptor agonists – more commonly known by the brand name Ozempic in Australia. Collins says this is a real game changer.

She says when GPs start seeing the results of what these drugs can do, they will start prescribing them for the overweight and obese and not just for people with Type-2 diabetes.

"It's expensive, but it works," Collins says. "It's fantastic that these medications are now available; there is finally some hope for people who live with chronic hunger."

She notes a word of warning that this new class of drugs is so effective in suppressing appetite, that there is a risk of "poor nutrition-related health complications because people just stop eating".

But the upsides, in a world where obesity is accelerating and life spans are shortening, are unimaginable.

Semaglutide, the drug's clinical name, was first developed by Danish pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk under the brand name Wegovy. It's not yet available in Australia, but Ozempic, a lower dose version, is available in limited supplies.

Eli-Lilly is due to release another GLP-1 drug later this year.

Amazingly, analysts have predicted the global market for GLP-1 drugs could be bigger than the market for cancer drugs within just a few years and could reach $US150 billion ($223 billion) by 2031. That's because half the world's population – 4 billion people – will be overweight by the middle of next decade.

When diets fail, and they almost always do, turning to the new generation of drugs should not be seen as a moral failing. In fact, the theory goes that we evolved to store fat, so we could survive the feast and famine cycle of pre-industrial life.

We are also hard-wired for our bodies to return to our previous heaviest weight and in a world of desk-ridden jobs and easily available processed foods, that weight has been going up and up and up.

Elon Musk has boasted about his use of Wegovy, and May says he'd be naive to think some of his clients weren't on the Ozempic bandwagon.

However, the philosophy he preaches is one of "always natural".

"It generally takes two to three months to get a stressed out exec back to homeostasis – or equilibrium. We go as natural as possible," he says.

"I say to executives, if you want to have a so-called work-life balance, don't come and see me because I'm not going to support that. It's unrealistic. You're going to work 50-60 hours a week. Go for it. Knock yourself out, work bloody hard. But put the recovery strategies in place – the nutrition principles, the mindset, the flexibility – so you can shift gears and get that bounce between up and down.

"Burnout is static linearity when people are on all the time, and there's no down regulation or no changing gears."