



Gay Males and Eating Disorders ~ As Seen through a Filmmaker's Lens  
by Travis Mathews

Coming out of the closet isn't usually someone's idea of a good time. There's always the perceived risk that the receiver of the news is going to drop you into a box labeled *discard*.

What's helped me during those more difficult disclosures was the idea, the hope, the promise of a community that would support me if any worst case scenarios materialized. The resources for men coming to terms with their sexuality are plenty and help to soften feelings of isolation and shame. I knew this, and I knew that I wasn't alone, even if I sometimes felt that way.

So it was difficult to grasp why my struggle to come forward, to *come out*, about an eating disorder fell on deaf ears, cowering under the shame of a having a *woman's illness*. I knew that eating disorders affected women disproportionately but I also knew from the most cursory scan of the gay community that we were a body-obsessed bunch.

In time, I began meeting men who candidly spoke of their struggle with body image and food and I heard some constants that helped in explaining the lack of support. For instance, many men felt emasculated or bullied for some part of their lives and were reluctant to align with something that would further feminize them. "I might be gay, but I'm not *that* gay," was the message. In short, I uncovered internalized homophobia within a community rampantly silenced behind rainbow pride stickers.

As a filmmaker, I began sleuthing about the community to not only understand the many facets of eating disorders amongst gay men, but also to create a resource that was absent.. Over the course of two years I focused on seven gay men who had or were struggling with body obsession and eating disordered behavior to get a personal understanding of the larger community's silence. I also traveled to Rogers Memorial Hospital – at the time, the only residential center in the country that had a separate treatment program for men – to get a clinical understanding of the issues. These accounts are the crux of what became the documentary, *Do I Look Fat?*

As I've traveled with the film, people continue to ask me how prevalent this is. My answer remains the same: it's difficult to know with real certainty. Men, both gay and straight, are generally reluctant to seek medical attention for *any* health related issue, eating disorders being no exception. Our culture feeds this reluctance by its steady framing of eating disorders as a woman's issue.

It's also hard to gauge how prevalent this is because the language to discuss eating disorders amongst men is limited. For example, it's easy to miss that crystal meth can be a method of weight control or that contracting HIV can be seen as a free ride to weight loss when you haven't heard the words describing such phenomena.

Numbers may be hard to nail down, but studies consistently show gay men disproportionately represented among men with eating disorders. Considering that gay men are thought to represent about 5% of the male population, it's alarming that they represent up to 42% of the male eating disordered population, according to research conducted by Dr. William Howard at the John Hopkins University School. The reasons behind the high numbers are complex, painful, and in part, unflattering to the community, but the alternative to facing them head on is continued isolation and shame, both of which feed our proverbial friend, the closet.

It occurs to me that I'm asked to come out of the closet with each screening by disclosing my relationship to this material. It's a real turnaround because the audience response has been almost exclusively positive, less the cautionary tale I was fearful of meeting. It's been the start of something I was fretfully searching for just a few years ago: language, support and awareness. For this beginning, with my own healing and with that of the community, I'm grateful. To learn more about the documentary, *Do I Look Fat?* visit

[www.doilookfatthemovie.com](http://www.doilookfatthemovie.com).

NOTE: An earlier version of this material appeared previously in a Gürze newsletter. Remember to renew your membership to NEDA for a free subscription to *Eating Disorders Today*.