It's about time we started talking about the body confidence issues that affect men, and **Stevie Blaine** is the blogger getting the ball rolling. Sharing raw and uplifting snaps from his everyday life, and opening up about the issues that touch him, Stevie is part of the self-love revolution that's asking all of us to unlearn the things that have kept us down. Here, we chat about his body confidence journey, masculinity, and how to support the next generation

Writing | **Kathryn Wheeler**

Hi Stevie! If you reflect on your body confidence journey, can you pinpoint when it all began?
I grew up in the 90s, and at the time I looked at things like magazines, TV, and movies for validation. They just made me feel like I didn't belong, that my body was a problem. It started a long, horrible, relationship with my body, eating, and exercise. From there, I shifted weight, gained weight, and I was battling with an eating disorder and exercise addiction. I couldn't actually live my life.

Did you have a support system?
My family has always been amazing. I was probably my own biggest enemy. A lot of people would help me get help, but I didn't believe it to be true. I still felt like I needed to lose more weight or I needed to look a certain way.

And one of the worst things that happened to me, when I was about 16, was when I went to see a GP. I said: "I think I've got an eating disorder, I'm really struggling." The first thing they said was: "Boys don't really get eating disorders."

In your opinion, what needs to be done to better reach men?
This is what I struggle with, even now. My audience online is primarily women. A lot of women will tag their boyfriends or their husbands in my posts, and then I'll get messages from men who I would have never come in contact with normally. It's reaching them in the first place – that's the hard part.

I've had the same group of friends my whole life, but throughout everything that was going on, I didn't speak about things. When I finally started my Instagram page talking about it, they were all like, "Oh, I feel the same way." I'm like, "Why have we not spoken about this for the past 10 years?"

What do you think is holding men back from engaging in these conversations?
I think the biggest thing is how ingrained toxic masculinity is within our culture. Men believe that they need to be strong, that they need to be unmoving, and that talking about emotional things, or things that society would deem as feminine – such as our bodies and body image – is admitting that you've got a weakness, and that's emasculating.

Is that something you feel that you've had to contend with?
Yes, and I think I'm a good example, because I had the most supportive family ever, yet I still ended up struggling for years, solely based on outside pressure and expectations.

I think boys are more conscious about the way they look nowadays. We think it's perfectly normal for guys to be spending two or three hours, every day, in the gym. We're using health as a metric to judge people on, yet health is something that you can't see, and it's a privilege. I've had the same genetic condition since I was born. I'm never going to be 'healthy', never, that's it. When I was extremely underweight, and battling an eating disorder, people would praise me for being in the gym every day. It was self-fulfilling.

When did things start to look up?
One day, there was a plus-size girl on my Instagram explore page. I was like, wow, this person can just live their life whereas my sole purpose, for the past 10 years, has been to change my body. I'd lost the weight, but I was left with all these other things that men don't talk about, such as stretch marks and excess skin.

That was when Instagram went from being a really negative tool to being a positive one, because then I reached out to her and said, >>>

"You've honestly saved me." It was actually bodyposipanda [Megan Jayne Crabbe], now one of my best friends.

We often talk about body confidence as a journey, not a destination. Is that something that rings true to you?

Definitely. The most common thing I get asked in every Q&A or DM will always be: "How do I be body confident?" I try to remain completely honest on social media. I talk about days where I'm feeling terrible. You're never going to reach the endpoint of being completely happy, but what I think is important is working through that.

If you're having one of those days, do you now have strategies to take care of yourself?

Yes. I always talk a lot about self-care being really important. Every morning, I used to find something in the mirror that I liked about myself. I was never allowed to use the same thing twice. At first, I would go: "I like my eyes, I like my hair." But over time, I'd have to look at my surgical scars, I'd have to look at my stretch marks, and things that I've done all I can to hide.

These are all things you talk about online. If you'd had access to these kinds of resources when you were young, do you think things would've been different?

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That's why I do what I do. If I'm able to help one person who's like I was when I was 10, then that's enough. Whether that's being able to point somebody in the direction of fantastic resources, working with youth charities, or going into schools.

So, tell us about your work with schools.

Last year, I was invited to Bodykind, which is the UK's first body empowerment festival. Two girls, I think in year 10, were campaigning in their school to get a group of us to come and speak there. We went, and it was me, bodyposipanda, and a few others. We spoke to every single class in the entire school.

   Then we did small workshops, which are where we'd each focus on something. I did mine all about self-love. That was more intimate, with 10 kids. When I came back, I thought, this is something I really want to do more, even if it's just me.

Do any experiences at these talks particularly stand out?

I remember I was explaining how, when I was at school, I would sit at the back of the room wearing an oversized hoodie. My hair would cover my face. I would do anything I could to divert attention away from me. Coincidently, there was a girl who was in an oversized hoodie and had a black fringe covering all of her face. Her teacher came over to me afterwards, and was speaking to me about how she's going through a hard time, and asked what they could do to help. Being able to provide the help that I needed is the big thing for me.

Do you think that people are now better equipped to deal with the issues that you went through?

Yes, 100%. I think a lot of it is that no single person has the resources to help everyone, but being able to provide them with the tools or the language for them to label what they've been going through, makes a huge difference. Comparing it to me coming out, being able to use 'gay' as a label, gave me such empowerment. It's the same with language related to my body. To be like, "This is body shaming," or, "I've experienced body worries." Being able to provide that dialogue, I think it allows people to start having conversations.

Are you hopeful for the future?

I think so. Nowadays, I think we're a lot more self-aware. You can see how these communities on social media pop up where people don't have access to all of the right people, in their day-to-day lives. Being able to have a place online for them to go to find like-minded people who can give them the support they need, give them the encouragement, or give them the tools to help themselves, that's only going to become more of a thing, right? It can only help. ▪