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55kg”

This STATEMENT was made by *a real guy to his girlfriend*. So, we investigated to find out if **BODY IMAGE ABUSE** is becoming widespread

Imagine this: It's 7pm on a Saturday night, you're running late and have nothing to wear. Suddenly, you remember – that dress you bought three months ago! Score! You rip off the tags, slip it on and you're just about ready to go when your boyfriend says something that throws you: "I think you're too fat to wear that."

That's exactly what happened to 26-year-old Claudia*, a gorgeous brunette who, at 63kg is the perfect weight for her 172cm height. And it kept happening, until he delivered the ultimatum: lose weight, or lose him. From the outside, the answer seems simple – lose him, right now. Better still, stay away from guys like that in the first place. But Claudia wasn't stupid or desperate – it's a lot more complicated. She was a victim of body image abuse, best defined by men who pressure their partners to achieve unrealistic weight-loss goals.

Sadly, it's not uncommon. According to Vivienne Lewis, a body image expert

and psychologist at the University of Canberra, this type of abuse can happen to anyone, no matter how confident they are. It takes the form of criticism, derogatory comments about certain areas of the body, and complaints about physical appearance.

So, why would anyone choose to be involved in a relationship like that? "No one chooses to be in an abusive relationship," says Lewis. "It's just that abusive partners often aren't easy to recognise at first." In fact, the beginning of a body-image abusive relationship is often just like any other, so the danger is that by the time things have turned abusive, "The victim is hoping things will go back to how they were," says Lewis. And that's exactly what happened to Claudia. "Chris* was a great boyfriend to begin with," she says. It wasn't until four months later that he began to get nasty, with devastating effects on her self-esteem. "When you're suffering from body image abuse you're prone to feeling ugly, unloved, or thinking you're a failure," says Lewis.

On a behavioural level, "Dieting, an obsession with the scales and body image distortion (where you think you're bigger than you really are) are common symptoms of sufferers," says Susie Burrell, a dietitian who specialises in weight-related issues.

It can lead to depression, anxiety, and, as in Claudia's case, low self-esteem. "When the person you're with is meant to think you're beautiful, but doesn't, you start doubting yourself," she admits. "Chris constantly told me that I needed to go to the gym, and that I was looking 'too fat' – and after a while, I believed him. And yes, he even asked me to reach 55kg as his birthday present – and I went to the gym for hours each day, trying to be skinnier. I completely lost my sense of self worth."

If this is happening to you ...

First, protect yourself. "In most cases, the best thing you can do is remove yourself from the relationship," advises Lewis. "If you really want to stay together, you need to find a counsellor and learn to stand up for yourself when he's abusive. Saying something like, 'I don't like what you're saying and I find it very hurtful', will help him recognise the damage he's doing – as long as he's willing to admit that his past behaviour was inappropriate."

No one else will make the decision to leave for you. "No one can force you – you need to decide on your own," says Burrell.

Similarly, if you see a friend of yours suffering in this kind of relationship, you shouldn't try to control the situation. According to Burrell, the best thing you can do is be there when she needs you. "If you can, gently try and draw attention to the problem – try and get her to go see a counsellor, or a medical specialist if she's starving herself – but don't lecture her. As a friend, she needs your support."

Which is how Claudia got through. "It's thanks to my friends and family that I got out of that relationship in one piece," she says. And this is one story with a happy ending: "That relationship really made me realise that I was worth so much more. Two years later, I'm engaged – and my fiancé gives me compliments every day!"

This, according to Lewis, is exactly what the abuser wants. "It's about having control; having somebody who's dependent on them – it gives them a feeling of superiority." Translation: He's seriously insecure. **Georgia Rickard** COSMO

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