



Social Dominance Increases Testosterone

Testosterone and social dominance

Testosterone, the hormone primarily responsible for male sex characteristics, is known to increase social dominance and aggressiveness in animals, including man. In turn, social dominance increases testosterone.

The male sex characteristics that testosterone (T) changes in men include body mass (higher), muscle mass (higher), voice (lower), body and facial hair (more).

Since men compete with other men either directly, such as in fights or combat, or indirectly, such as the achievement of higher status, and since the results of these competitions determine mating success to a large degree, it might be expected that T affects psychological characteristics that play a role in male-to-male competition. Indeed it does.

In rodents, [T increases aggression](#), or physical violence directed at other animals. But it doesn't necessarily do so in humans. Humans win competitions in the status hierarchy less by aggression with intent to cause harm than by dominance – placing others in submission or on a lower level of the hierarchy.

In competitions for status, [T rises in the winners and declines in the losers](#). T also rises in anticipation of the competition, regardless of who ultimately wins or loses.

Dominance and T affect each other, reciprocally. That means that acting dominant can raise T levels.

Sports cars, testosterone, and the Handicap Principle

Conspicuous consumption is a type of status display. Flaunting a large display of wealth (or other resources) is a signal that one has such high status that one can afford to do so.

Conspicuous consumption could be said to be an example of [the handicap principle](#); essentially, you have so much wealth (or power, strength, or other resources) that you can afford to waste some of it on your conspicuous displays. The peacock's tail is the classically cited example: he is so strong, his genes are so great, that he can afford this costly tail which attracts predators and hinders his flight, all just to attract a mate.

Luxury cars are an example of both conspicuous consumption and the handicap principle.

Can luxury cars, or sports cars, raise T levels?

[Indeed they can.](#)

Scientists had men drive either a Porsche 911 Carrera, worth over \$150,000, or a "a dilapidated 1990 Toyota Camry wagon having over 186,000 miles that was borrowed from a friend of the second author".

When they drove the Porsche, T levels rose, about 5%; T levels dropped about 5% when they drove the old Toyota, but only when it was driven downtown, and not the highway, presumably because there was more of an audience downtown.

A display of dominance, that is, showing that one occupies a high rung on the ladder of the status hierarchy, raises T.

Fake it 'til you make it? Social dominance hacks

The evidence from this study, along with others that show that winning, either directly or vicariously, increases T, shows that a perceived jump up the status hierarchy can increase T. The sports car study shows that the jump doesn't even have to be real.

That leads to the idea that you might be able to fake social dominance or higher social status to raise T. In turn, higher T increases the chances that phony social dominance could become real.

Posture: It's been my observation that many men, most of them in fact, have poor posture. I attribute this either to laziness or ignorance of how they appear to others. Many of them, if they knew what it looked like, would stand and walk a lot more upright. Social signals like good or poor posture

register subconsciously to most observers; I'm probably among the minority who sees them more directly, since I've become very aware of it.

Probably the first and easiest social dominance "hack" is improvement in posture and other body language. "[Power poses](#)" may increase T and lower cortisol, but this particular research has been disputed and may not be valid. Nonetheless, as social dominance increases T, this seems very unlikely to hurt. By standing and walking upright and not bent over, one signals pride in oneself, and others get the message.

Sports cars: You can get an actual sports car. If you can't afford one, get a well-maintained used one – hardly anyone will know the difference. (Personal communication with the author.) Getting rid of my sensible Japanese compact car and buying a 2-seater sports car was definitely a social dominance hack.

Dress for success: This adage is well-known, and even has the distinct message of faking it 'til you make it. If you dress like you're successful, others think you are, and then you'll become successful. These days, it doesn't take much either: merely dress like you haven't just been shopping at Wal-Mart and you'll look more socially dominant than most men out there.

Conclusion: Attitude matters

The research presented here shows the connections between mind, body, and society. Physical health is not merely a matter of diet and exercise and other physical inputs, but of one's own outlook and attitude.

Taking pride in oneself and acting like it could reap big benefits.

PS: To get a dominating body, read my book, [Muscle Up](#).

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