

Exercise

For most of us, exercise is a valuable aspect of our lives, and is a healthy way to relieve stress, promote restorative sleep and maintain physical wellbeing. However, for a number of people, exercise has a more sinister application. Used addictively, exercise becomes a way to 'get rid' of or avoid unwanted feelings such as anger or distress, achieve a 'high', or compulsively burn off body fat and food – in short it is a self-destructive mechanism for attempting to cope with feelings, which in turn unwittingly reinforces a negative self-concept.

It is generally understood that a low level of chemicals such as serotonin is linked to depression, anxiety and poor sleep control, and that exercise causes the release of these chemicals in the brain, providing a 'feel good' factor as a result. Strenuous exercise activates the sympathetic nervous system, causing a rise in the concentration of the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and serotonin, whilst the pituitary gland secretes beta endorphins that block pain signals from reaching the brain.

Exercise, and crucially over-exercise, can promote a feeling of euphoria similar to a drug high, and a similar cyclical pattern of 'withdrawal' for which the only solution seems to be further intensive exercise.

The standard mental health diagnostic manual, (DSM-IV-TR), defines excessive exercise as that which "significantly interferes with important activities, occurs at inappropriate times or in inappropriate settings, or when the individual continues to exercise despite injury or other medical complications."

The exercise addict will not only exercise when they are injured, but will directly cause themselves injury due to excessive exercise.

Individuals with an eating disorder will often over-exercise in order to burn off the food they have eaten in the same way a bulimic purges or an anorexic achieves weight loss. Exercise is also commonly used to 'burn off' difficult emotions such as anger.

Many exercise addicts are perfectionists and find their own human imperfections disgusting and unacceptable. The use of excessive exercise is used to attempt to compensate for these unwanted perceived imperfections, and starts to become prioritised in the compulsive exerciser's life to the exclusion of anything else.

Relationships and work suffer, a day away from exercising causes profound distress, or feelings of being 'charged' or 'explosive', and health levels can decline as overtraining leads to injury and illness.

Recovery comes in the form of abstinence from excessive exercise, and going through a process of finding an appropriate voice with which to respectfully represent one's feelings. It is a long and difficult process, as the individual frequently experiences a profound sense of shame and guilt not only about the circumstances of their life but their very existence. With support an exercise addict can learn to accept themselves as they are, and to handle their feelings in a gentle and compassionate way.

If you identify with these symptoms see if these two suggestions help:

- Try to reduce your weekly exercise by half, and introduce mediation instead.
- Keep a feelings diary for a week noting how you feel 3 x per day. Do you find it difficult to cope with how you feel?

If you think you suffering from over exercising then give us a call, we can help

Call 020 7323 4970

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