

Compulsive Exercise

What Is That?

It's impossible to draw a clear line dividing a healthy amount of exercise from too much. Experts say that repeatedly exercising beyond the requirements for good health is an indicator of compulsive behavior, but because different amounts of exercise are appropriate for different people, this definition covers a range of activity levels.

However, several workouts a day, every day, is overdoing it for almost anyone.

Compulsive exercise (also called obligatory exercise and anorexia athletica) is best defined by the exercise addict's frame of mind: she no longer chooses to exercise but feels compelled to do so and struggles with guilt and anxiety if she doesn't work out. Injury, illness, an outing with friends, bad weather - none of these will deter her. In a sense, exercising takes over her life because she plans her life around it.

Much like with eating disorders, many people who engage in compulsive exercise do so to feel more in control of their lives, and the majority of them are female. They often define their self-worth through their athletic performance and try to deal with emotions like anger or depression by pushing their bodies to the limit. In sticking to a rigorous workout schedule, they seek a sense of power to help them cope with low self-esteem.

Although compulsive exercising does not have to accompany an eating disorder, the two often go hand in hand, particularly with anorexia nervosa. In these cases, the excessive workouts usually begin as a means to control weight and become more and more extreme. As the person's rate of activity increases, the amount she eats decreases.

This behavior can also grow out of student athletes' demanding practice schedules and their quest to excel. Pressure, both external (from coaches, peers, or parents) and internal, can drive the athlete to go too far to be the best. She ends up believing that just one more workout will make the difference between first and second place . . . then keeps adding more workouts.

Eventually, compulsive exercising can breed other compulsive behavior, from strict dieting to obsessive thoughts about perceived flaws. The exercise addict may keep meticulous journals about her exercise schedule and obsess about improving herself. Unfortunately, these behaviors often compound each other, trapping the girl in a downward spiral of negative thinking and low self-esteem.

Why Is Exercising Too Much a Bad Thing?

We all know that moderate exercise is an important part of physical health. But few people realize that too much can cause physical and psychological harm.

Excessive exercise can damage tendons, ligaments, bones, cartilage, and joints, and when minor injuries are not allowed to heal, they often result in long-term damage. Instead of building muscle, too much exercise actually destroys muscle mass, especially if the body is not getting enough nutrition, forcing it to break down muscle for energy.

Girls who exercise compulsively may disrupt the balance of hormones in their bodies, changing their menstrual cycles (some girls lose their periods altogether, a condition known as amenorrhea) and risking premature bone loss (a condition known as osteoporosis). And of course, working their bodies so hard leads to exhaustion and constant fatigue.

An even more serious risk is the stress that excessive exercise can place on the heart, particularly when a girl is also curtailing how much she eats. In extreme cases, the combination of anorexia and compulsive exercise can be fatal.

Psychologically, exercise addicts are often plagued by anxiety and depression. They may have a negative image of themselves and feel worthless. Their social and academic lives may suffer as they withdraw from friends and family to fixate on exercise. Even if they want to succeed in school or in relationships, working out always comes first, so they end up skipping homework or missing out on time spent with friends.

What are the warning signs?

- They won't skip a workout, even if they're tired, sick, or injured.
- They don't enjoy the exercise sessions but feel obligated to do them.
- They seem anxious or guilty when they miss even one workout.
- If they do miss one, they exercise twice as long the next time.
- They are constantly preoccupied with their weight and exercise routine.
- They don't like to sit still or relax because they worry that they aren't burning enough calories.
- They have lost a significant amount of weight.
- They exercise more when they eat more.
- They skip seeing friends, give up activities they love, and forsake their responsibilities to make more time for exercise.
- They seem to base how they feel about themselves on how much they work out or how hard they train.
- They are never satisfied with their physical achievements.

