

## **Exercise Addiction: Even Something Healthy can be Abused**

By Joe Flaherty

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A workout regimen can relieve stress, keep you in shape, and may even justify eating large amounts of ice cream.

For those not afraid of a little physical exertion, it's a fun way to continuously test your body's limits and keep improving. For a certain group of people, however, exercise is no longer an option. It's an addiction.

According to Dr. Amal Chakraborty, MD, as many as 10% of distance runners and bodybuilders become addicted to exercise. What was once a hobby now becomes the focal point of their lives, superceding all other priorities.

A day without exercise can lead to mood swings, temper tantrums, and depression. A day with exercise, however, can pose even more problems.

Addicts don't exercise for short periods a few times a week. It is a daily activity done for hours on end. Addicts continue their routine in the face of injuries, exhaustion, and permanent adrenal damage.

They are just like any drug or alcohol addict. Though they're addicted to something healthy, they are still chasing the same high.

"Dopamine release is actually what drug addicts become addicted to," said Brian Garlick, an Expert Reviewer of supplements for Supplementreviews.com. "Dopamine is in charge of blocking specific pain signals, which is why it's released during workouts. You don't immediately feel sore after you work out because dopamine blocks pain signals from getting to proper sensors."

While the rush of dopamine prevents pain, it is also highly addictive. The body will crave the same level of dopamine release and will go to great lengths to achieve it. Therein lies the problem.

"The reaction to dopamine lessens the more it's released," said Garlick. "The person with the addiction would have to increase the amount they're releasing each time in order to stimulate the same effect."

This causes addicts to continue their exercise past a healthy limit. They will purposely overtrain their body, which derails any progress that would have been made with their workout, in order to get that same rush.

Many theories exist as to what leads to this addiction. Some sports psychologists believe people who feel an extreme need for control in their lives are most likely to resort to excessive exercise. An intense regimen makes for a rigid daily schedule, and improvements in athletic ability are easily observable.

One expert on the topic sees negative body image as a major cause.

“Exercise can be self-medicating through a mental health perspective,” said Mandy of Exercise Addicts Anonymous.org. Mandy withheld her last name in order to maintain anonymity among her group.

“If somebody might be feeling poorly about themselves, they might find out exercise makes them feel good for a while, so they’ll keep going back to it. The core of addiction in general is looking for something to provide us relief.”

Mandy has adapted Alcoholics Anonymous’ 12-Step process to aid others in breaking their unhealthy compulsion with exercise. She has consulted with nearly 50 individuals over the first five years of operating her website.

Formerly obese and developing an exercise addiction as a way to cope with her eating disorder, Mandy has been free of her unhealthy habits for the past decade. She knows first hand how an exercise addiction can be just as destructive socially as it can be physically.

“Exercise can become your God,” said Mandy. “You may feel like you’re not an okay human being unless you workout. Your friends want to go out, but you have to go to the gym. You lose the ability to maintain relationships and outside interests. It blocks you from the world and experiencing life.”

Mandy believes the key to overcoming this addiction is to have a strong support system, such as the one provided by her anonymous group. Each member has dealt with the same issue, so they can help guide other members through their toughest times and give them encouragement.

A way to prevent the addiction in the first place involves constant monitoring of your behaviors and reminding yourself of your priorities. This is how Lance Hare, a 22-year-old natural competitive bodybuilder, was able to stop his unhealthy tendencies before they turned into a full blown addiction.

“I let exercise rule my life in previous years and it had a major negative effect on my social life,” said Hare. “Now I just remind myself that I am a student first and a bodybuilder second. It's a lot like when your parents wouldn't let you go outside and play until your homework was done; I won't allow myself to go train until my assignments are out of the way.”

Like Mandy, Hare believes exercise addiction and eating disorders can go hand in hand. In a culture where skinny is beautiful, over eight million Americans currently struggle with anorexia or bulimia, according to the South Carolina Department of Mental Health.

Societal pressure nearly forced Hare to become one of those eight million. He dropped 65 pounds in three months by teetering on the brink of anorexia and exercise addiction. He did all this just to feel accepted.

But Hare has been able to overcome these unhealthy tendencies and has made exercise an enormous part of his life. He trains three to five days a week, competes yearly in bodybuilding contests, and believes his passion for training brings balance to his life.

For others who work out as frequently as Hare, outsiders may view their tendencies as those of an addict. But the vast majority of people who exercise fall far short of the line between benefit and detriment. For these folks, consistent exercise doesn't control their life, but enhances it.

"I go to Halas [Recreation Center] once or twice a day," said Shannon Prendergast, a sophomore at Loyola University Chicago. "Working out is the best way to vent. It's the place to go for some 'me' time and to think clearly."

For Prendergast, frequent exercise reduces stress and enhances well being. It helps her take on the hectic workload of a college student.

For Loyola junior Katie George, exercise provides her with a sense of empowerment.

"Exercise has definitely made me a lot more mentally tough," said George. "The workouts aren't easy, and I know it's all in my head when I think I want to give up. Learning to push harder has made me realize that I can do a lot more than I thought I could."

The benefits from regular exercise can even carry over into the classroom. In a recent study conducted by the American College of Sports Medicine, college students who exercised for 20 minutes per day, seven days a week, maintained a GPA 0.4 points higher than their non-exercising counterparts.

While exercise offers an array of physical and mental benefits, the key is moderation. If at any time someone notices their exercise routine starting to overtake their social life, they need to take a step back and re-assess their priorities and motives.

If left unchecked, chasing a high from a workout can become a race that nobody wins.