



A Resource For Parents Early Intervention and Prevention: Compulsive Exercise



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What is compulsive exercise?

Compulsive exercise (sometimes called exercise addiction) happens when a person is driven to exercise too much.

This exercise is aimed at preventing some dreaded consequences such as weight gain, or done to prevent or reduce distress and is often based on distorted beliefs about exercise.

Activities with friends, bad weather and even injury or illness will not stop those who compulsively exercise.

Patterns of compulsive exercise are linked to certain profound personality traits and serve as a way of coping with deep-rooted emotional problems including stress and anxiety.

What are the **signs** to look out for when someone's **relationships with food and exercise start to become unhealthy**?

You may notice:

- ! **Exercise is something they are driven to do:** they would feel fat or like a bad person if they missed a workout routine.
- ! They have started to **track the number of calories taken in** and/or steps they are doing each day.
- ! They have started to **exercise more after eating**.
- ! They **eat less** if they cannot workout.
- ! They **skip seeing friends, give up other activities and abandon responsibilities** to make **more time for exercise**.
- ! They **cannot take time off** and **seem anxious** or **guilty** when missing even one workout.
- ! They have started to **lose weight**.
- ! They **use exercise to manage emotions**.



Some who compulsively exercise may also show signs of a serious condition called the **FEMALE ATHLETE TRIAD**.

The female athlete triad:

This is a combination of three interrelated conditions:



Social media and exercise

With widespread access to various fitness apps and social media sites, activities online can also contribute to an unhealthy global body image and as well as body training regimes, as they can encourage people to exercise in a certain way to achieve a particular ('perfect') body shape.

Wider societal standards and portrayals of the body may force an individual to strive for the 'perfect' body or the 'perfect' self.

Even if an individual has a fit and healthy body this is not always congruent with the way that person feels, and this may explain why some people compulsively exercise to escape from negative emotions, as extreme exercise can produce the experience of "**A HIGH**".

Associations between drive for thinness / muscularity, compulsive exercise, and body dissatisfaction have also been found in a study exploring female 'fitspiration' bloggers.

All of this indicates that both eating disorder symptoms and compulsive exercise at least share some characteristics and may therefore be part of the same underlying syndrome.

Risk factors for compulsive exercise

- Obsessive-compulsive traits / OCD
- Perfectionism
- Anxiety and depression
- Stress
- Body dysmorphia

It is also important to recognise the types of athletes who are more prone to compulsive exercise because their activities place a particular emphasis on being thin.

ICE SKATERS, GYMNASTS, DANCERS and **WRESTLERS** can feel even more pressure than most athletes to keep their weight down and their body toned.

RUNNERS ALSO FREQUENTLY FALL INTO A CYCLE OF OBSESSIVE WORKOUTS.



How can I prevent my child from over-exercising?



The best way to prevent over-exercising in children is to understand the difference between a healthy amount of exercise and too much exercise. Children should aim to get a balance of aerobic, muscle-strengthening and weight-bearing exercise. Focusing too heavily on one type of exercise can result in injury.

Parents should also encourage free play, such as playing tag or climbing on a play-set, because it usually provides a natural balance of each type of exercise.

Parents Should

- Involve kids in preparing nutritious meals.
- Have fun being active together as a family.
- Be good body-image role models and avoid fixating on your own physical flaws
- Be honest with compassion and without judgement or criticism: **E.G. “I HAVE NOTICED YOUR DIET AND EXERCISE ROUTINE HAS CHANGED RECENTLY. COULD YOU HELP ME UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT THAT?”**
- Try not to criticise other people's weight or shape.
- Reassure your child: e.g. “You don't seem yourself. I am here for you”. Help your child find new ways to cope with any problems or emotions they may be experiencing.

- If you think that your child is exercising too much, talk to your doctor.

Other ways to deal with stress and anxiety for your child:

- Yoga - introduce yoga to your child. Yoga helps to slow down the mind and encourages focus. It is great for reducing stress and anxiety.
- Breathing exercises - slowing down and taking deep breaths may help a child to be less anxious. The 7-11 breathing technique helps with anxiety and stress.
- Walking in nature - choosing a lighter form of exercise especially walking in nature, has been shown to have excellent benefits for our mental health.
- Really try to understand and empathise with your child's feelings without judgement or criticism.
- Ensure that you're available to talk and provide support.

How might JenUp be of support?

I have recently launched JenUp as an educational hub - primarily to provide early intervention, as well as to support those who are at the earliest stages of having an eating disorder.

As well as resources like blogs and podcasts, I also offer educational workshops and programmes - and to a select number of schools I can provide group coaching. See the website for latest details.



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