


# UNFIT BEHAVIOR

A photograph of a woman from the back, flexing her right bicep. She has long brown hair tied in a ponytail and is wearing a black lace backless top. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights her muscle definition.

While many people love exercising and appreciate all of its benefits, a small percentage of people struggle with exercising too much, turning this healthy activity into an excessive and harmful addiction. Over-exercising puts a person at risk of developing a variety of health complications, including undernourishment, excessive weight loss, menstruation problems, injuries, and fatigue. By **Mira Khreino**



### WHAT IS EXERCISE ADDICTION?

There's no doubt that exercise makes everyone feel better. It reduces depression; improves mood; eases anxiety and tension; relieves aches and pains; increases physical strength and endurance; and helps maintain one's weight within a healthy range.

However, there is a negative side to exercise that can gradually outweigh the positive. When exercise crosses the line

into dependency and compulsion, it can create physical, social, and psychological havoc for those who appear to be the very fittest.

The U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention advises two and a half hours of aerobic exercise per week – an average of 30 minutes a day – complemented by two sessions of muscle strength training. This recommended activity level is exceeded

by those with exercise addiction. Exercise addiction comes with a loss of perspective of the role of exercise in our lives. For some, exercise can become overvalued and take priority over other activities that add a sense of fulfillment to people's lives, including work, friends, family, hobbies, or community involvement. There are only so many hours in the day, so time spent exercising competes with the time spent doing other meaningful things. For example, when emotional connections are passed up in favor of additional hours of training, warning bells should ring. Other noticeable signs include withdrawal symptoms, such as anxiety, irritability, and depression, which appear when circumstances prevent working out.

With exercise addiction, an ethos of "the more, the better" prevails. This is rationalized by the individual as healthy and disciplined hard work, when, in reality, it's a form of uncontrollable compulsion and dependent behavior. Therefore, the line between what is good and what is harmful is blurred. It is understandable if people get a little annoyed when they miss their favorite gym class, but, in the case of exercise addiction, the class is so overvalued that missing out leads to an amplified overreaction and a marked shift in mood.

### HOOKED ON A FEELING

Exercise addiction has been approached by some as a physiological phenomenon. Exercise releases certain chemicals (endorphins and dopamine) into the nervous system, which create a sense of pleasure and reward. Exercise addiction can be viewed as a form of dependence on this pleasure response. Interestingly, these two chemicals are also released during drug use, which is why many former drug addicts and alcohol abusers turn to exercise to fill the void left by past addictions.

Dependence on this chemical pleasure response induces a vicious cycle of behavior. One exercises to produce pleasure-inducing chemicals, but when the exercise stops, the neurotransmitter production stops as well. In order to increase the chemical release, one must partake in physical activity again and so the cycle continues.

**"EXCESSIVE EXERCISE  
A SERIOUS ADDICTION  
IS BUT AN EXTERNAL  
SYMPTOM OF AN  
INTERNAL STRUGGLE"**

## ALWAYS ON THE RUN

The U.S. National Institute of Health has reported that women and girls, who more often put restrictions on what they eat and engage in rigorous exercise regimes, are at particular risk for exercise addiction. Eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and bulimia, may lead to an unhealthy relationship with exercise. An astonishing 95 percent of people with eating disorders also frequent a fitness center or gym.

However, anyone can fall into a pattern of over-exercising. “Intense, high-achieving, perfectionist individuals are particularly vulnerable to this addiction,” psychologist Sharon Stoliaroff told Active.com. “In the case of exercise addiction, the underlying psychological causes are usually linked to low self-esteem, which finds gratification in the gains made by training.” A pre-occupation with body image and a fear of or obsession with weight gain are dominant. “Unfortunately,” Stoliaroff warns, “Denial is a frequent component of any addictive process.”



**“AN ASTONISHING 95 PERCENT OF PEOPLE WITH EATING DISORDERS ALSO FREQUENT A FITNESS CENTER OR GYM”**

## 25 SIGNS OF AN UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH EXERCISE:

1. Giving up other interests, including spending time with friends, in order to make more time for workouts.
2. Becoming irritable and depressed if a workout is missed or getting mad when something (e.g. weather, illness, or family duties) interferes with exercise.
3. Only feeling content during, or in the few hours, after exercise.
4. Preferring exercise to most other activities.
5. Working out even if sick, injured, over-trained, or tired. Not taking enough time off for injuries to heal properly.
6. Working out multiple times a day, often fitting exercise into one's routine whenever an opportunity presents itself or when there's “extra time.”
7. Family and friends commenting about the excessive time and effort dedicated to exercise.
8. Building up tolerance and needing more and more of the activity to achieve its initial effects.
9. Judging a day as good or bad based on the day's exercise.
10. Feeling anxious, depressed, or guilty if one can't find the time to work out every day.
11. Getting sick frequently and needing a long time to recover when ill or injured.
12. Self-esteem and self-worth are linked to – or even based on – the amount of exercise or level of performance.
13. Arranging work meetings, social obligations, and family engagements around a rigid exercise schedule.
14. Reducing, cancelling, or missing important social obligations and family events in order to work out.
15. Feeling physically worse (e.g. tired and worn out) instead of better after workouts.
16. Exercising alone because others interfere with progress, intensity, and caloric burning.
17. Exercising to compensate for overeating (or simply eating).
18. Experiencing withdrawal symptoms when not exercising, including increased agitation, fatigue, and tension.
19. Difficulty scaling back the duration and intensity of exercise and an inability to stick to a reduced exercise routine.
20. Dealing with difficult emotions by working out instead of tackling these challenging feelings head on. In other words, taking difficult emotions out on one's body.
21. Weight loss, malnutrition, and lack of menses in women.
22. Having uncontrollable urges to exercise and losing control over the usual exercise regime.
23. Routinely exceeding a pre-planned limit or repeatedly spending longer than intended exercising.
24. The inability to stop thinking about exercise and being consumed with thoughts of exercise, fitness-related activities, and weight-gain prevention.
25. Having a history (or family history) of anxiety or depression.

Sometimes people lose perspective on their behavior. Exercise is healthy as long as it is in balance with other aspects of a person's life as a whole. However, if a person can relate to more than three of the signs mentioned above, he or she should consider speaking with a mental health professional or personal doctor for support.



**“INTENSE HIGH-ACHIEVING PERFECTIONIST INDIVIDUALS ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO THIS ADDICTION”**



### **PUT THE GYM BAG DOWN**

It can be challenging to change an unhealthy habit into one that is more balanced, especially as exercise comes with such a wide array of physical and psychological benefits. An exercise addict might believe that this behavior demonstrates admirable traits such as discipline, when in reality a disorder has been building up. Here are a few steps to start developing a healthier relationship with exercise:

1. Plan weekly workouts with an experienced trainer. Every well-balanced training program emphasizes specific and reasonable goals, which include rest and recovery time.
2. Change your current attitude towards exercise. Keep in mind that quality training is better than training with a “more is better” attitude.
3. Keep track of all the exercises – including warm-ups, cool downs, and stretching – and do not exceed the time or intensity that was initially planned.
4. Never work out just because there’s an extra hour or two in the day. Train only as much as was originally intended. If there’s some extra time here and there, spend it pursuing other interests and setting new goals in other areas of life.
5. Never make up for a missed workout by doubling up the next day.
6. Remember that working out is meant to be enjoyable and shouldn’t be done because of a sense of duty or a compulsive need to exercise.
7. People who over-exercise to change their body will never be satisfied. Therefore, they should try to explore other things that are meaningful to them and seek to achieve satisfaction by going after them instead.

8. If an exercise leaves you tired, depleted, and feeling like you’re not good enough, then stop doing it. People should find an activity that allows them to appreciate their bodies’ strength, not one that leaves them feeling beat up.
9. Talk to a trusted trainer, family member, or friend and find out if others find your current exercise regime too rigorous. Consider seeking professional help from a counselor, therapist, or mental health care professional that specializes in harm reduction. This therapeutic approach doesn’t prevent the client from performing the problematic activities altogether, but it allows them to integrate the activity into their everyday lives in a healthier and more flexible manner.
10. Instead of sticking to a rigid exercise schedule, people should listen to their bodies’ needs. Before heading out to a workout they should ask themselves, “What would nurture my body today?” instead of “What’s going to burn the most calories or sculpt my body?” They should decide on how they want to feel in their bodies and choose an activity that supports that. Perhaps even consider trying something new like dance, yoga, or swimming.

Excessive exercise, a serious addiction, is but an external symptom of an internal struggle. These inner issues can be explored and treated with the help of a qualified mental health professional. The truth is, no piece of fitness equipment can strengthen the parts of the body that are actually fragile and weak, which are the parts that require the most work. ■

