Exercise Addiction: An Issue for Some Students

Most parents are at least somewhat familiar with body image issues such as anorexia and bulimia. Exercise addiction is another body image disorder that has recently attracted more nationwide attention.

What is exercise addiction?

While exercise is great for the body, mind, and spirit, it is possible to take things too far. According to Running & FitNews (June 2000), “When a commitment to exercise crosses the line to dependency and compulsion, it can create physical, social, and psychological havoc for those among us who appear outwardly to be the very fittest.” People who are addicted to exercise spend hours working out, regardless of how their body feels. They lose the ability to view exercise as just one way of maintaining a healthy, balanced lifestyle.

Who is at risk?

Although runners and other athletes are especially vulnerable, anyone can develop this disorder. Experts have stated that individuals with intense, high achieving, perfectionist personalities or low self-esteem are particularly at risk.

What can you do?

Exercise addiction is dangerous because of the significant toll it takes on a person’s mental, physical, and spiritual well-being. The effects are often long term, and in some cases, can’t be reversed.

If you think your student may be addicted to exercise, encourage him/her to get help. While overcoming an addiction is never easy, there are some strategies for addressing this disorder. The campus health center, athletic department, and counseling center are great resources. You can always call those offices yourself to see what kind of educational literature and initiatives are happening on campus to help combat this issue among college students.

Encourage your student to maintain healthy perspectives regarding workout schedules. While remaining sedentary is not a good idea, neither is compulsive exercise. Helping your student establish realistic exercise routines and goals will enable him/her to learn valuable life skills. No matter what, keep in mind that the fittest and most disciplined athletes are not necessarily the healthiest individuals.


Healthy Athletes vs. Exercise Addicts

While a healthy athlete and an exercise addict may share similar amounts of training workouts, the difference is in the attitude and results. Someone who is addicted to exercise is not able to see value in unrelated activities – instead, he/she will pursue the sport regardless of consequences. Exercise addicts view more as better – more workouts with less rest. Healthy athletes see the big picture and are able to adjust their training regime to allow for rest, recovery, and other important commitments in their life.

Students who exhibit these signs may have a problem…

- Placing exercise as a priority over all other commitments
- Doubling up workouts when an exercise time is missed
- Exhibiting symptoms such as guilt, anxiety, irritability, and depression when circumstances prevent a workout
- Exercising despite serious injury, illness, or fatigue
- Exhibiting heightened anticipation/preoccupation with and an increased need to create opportunities to exercise
- Demonstrating devious, defensive, and secretive behaviors in order to gain more exercise time