

## Eating Disorder Support Services

### Exercise Disorders

There are typically two types of exercise disorder: Compulsive Exercise Disorder and Bigorexia.

#### Compulsive Exercise Disorder

Compulsive exercising is often an overlooked component of eating disorders, and it is not always clear when physical activity becomes excessive. Indeed, compulsive exercise disorder is distinct from the frequent exercise behaviour characteristic of people with eating disorders. In particular, compulsive exercise disorder is when exercise occurs daily and when intense anxiety is experienced if exercise is not viable. As a result, compulsive exercisers have a tendency to push themselves to exercise even when faced with illness or injury. The key characteristics of compulsive exercise disorder are:

- Exercise becomes 'compulsive' when the individual spends many hours a day exercising, several days a week, if not every day.
- Usual modes of over-exercising are excessive running and spending long periods at the gym.
- What makes compulsive exercise different to Bigorexia is that compulsive exercisers will spend many hours aiming to lose calories in order to lose weight.

#### Signs of Compulsive Exercise Disorder

The common hallmark of compulsive exercising is putting exercise before other life priorities. Other common indicators are as follows:

- Obsessively exercising for hours a day, most days of the week
- Compulsive exercisers are selective about what they eat (e.g. they may eat very little and only typically 'healthy' foods like salads)
- Excessive concern about weight and size
- Setting ambitious fitness targets (e.g. running 5 miles every day)
- Cancelling social events with family and friends to exercise
- Refusing to take time off from gym sessions despite illness or injury
- Uncharacteristic mood swings, which can be a symptom of high energy drinks or supplements to increase energy to exercise
- May have previously had an eating disorder or be in recovery

#### Treatment of Compulsive Exercise Disorder

Treatment is similar to the treatment of eating disorders. It usually involves refraining from exercise for a period of time. This can be extremely scary for people with compulsive exercise disorder, but is important for identifying any underlying issues. In situations where anxiety is so high that the individual starts to take part in secretive exercising, including constant movement and fidgeting, treatment focuses on providing adequate nutrition to avoid further weight loss. Working alongside a team of eating disorder specialists,

including a counsellor and exercise physiologist is advised, especially when it comes to resuming exercise and determining a healthy workout schedule. Assistance will be needed in developing healthier coping skills.

### **Bigorexia (also known as Muscle Dysmorphia)**

Bigorexia is most frequently experienced by men and includes the following characteristics:

- A distorted image means they are obsessed with becoming muscular and are never happy, whatever size they achieve
- Preoccupation with muscle results in compulsive exercise and weight training, even when they are injured
- They might resort to using illegal steroids or other muscle building medications or products, even though they are fully aware of the dangerous potential consequences
- Possible side-effects of Bigorexia include: a delayed healing process, which means muscles may take longer to recover; susceptibility to infection and impaired immunity, making it more difficult to fight infection

### **Signs of Bigorexia**

The common hallmark of Bigorexia is a preoccupation with muscle development. Other common indicators are as follows:

- Eating more to get bulkier, especially meat, fish, and daily protein drinks
- Obsessively exercising or weightlifting for hours a day
- Cancelling social events with family and friends to train
- Refusing to take time off from gym sessions despite illness or injury
- Insisting they are 'puny' when actually they are very muscular
- Uncharacteristic mood swings, which can be a symptom of steroid abuse

### **Treatment of Bigorexia**

There is ongoing research into the treatment of Bigorexia, since there is currently no specific treatment that has been identified. However, cognitive and behavioural treatments are emerging as being the most promising treatment option for this disorder. Long-term psychological care and counselling is recommended, and additional help is likely to be needed for steroid addiction.