



The Dark Side of Physical Activity

Over the past few years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of girls and women who are physically active and who participate in sports recreationally, competitively and at the elite level.

While there are many benefits to physical activity and sport, there is also a dark side.

Compulsive Exercising (Obligatory Exercise)

Compulsive exercise is harmful. Some of the physical dangers that result are dehydration, stress fractures, degenerative arthritis, heart problems and risk of the Female Athlete Triad. Some girls and women who start out participating in physical activity and sport for fun may begin to use the activity as a way of burning calories in order to lose weight and as a way of dealing with difficult feelings, stress, and unresolved issues in their lives. Like dieting, exercise gives them a sense of temporary power, control and/or self-respect and like dieting it can become obsessive and out of control. If and when girls are deprived of exercise they feel a tremendous amount of depression, anxiety and guilt. Because compulsive exercise is addictive it becomes the area of most importance in girls' and women's lives. It puts their physical safety, emotional health and other areas of their life such as their school work and relationships with their families and friends at risk.

Compulsive exercising is seen as a solution to midlife crisis for many women in their 40s and 50s. It is a way for women to avoid looking at what's going on internally and to avoid mourning the things they haven't done in their lives.

The Female Athlete Triad

The Female Athlete Triad is made up of disordered eating, amenorrhea (not menstruating) and osteoporosis (weak bones). When girls and women severely restrict the number of calories they are consuming or use other ways to restrict the amount of food they take in they are at high risk of developing an eating disorder. As well, their performance is affected because of dehydration and/or muscle weakness.

When girls and women exercise and don't take in enough calories to balance the energy output or if they lose a lot of weight their body enters a state of constant energy depletion. The hypothalamus (which is a part of the brain that is involved with periods and fertility) is unable to function properly and responds by making the ovaries produce less hormones (especially estrogen). Amenorrhoea, the medical term for no periods, then develops.

When estrogen is low the body loses its ability to absorb calcium and to use it for bone growth or maintenance. This puts girls and women at risk of developing stress fractures and breaking bones through non-traumatic injuries. If the process of developing bones is interrupted when girls are in their teens their bones may never reach their maximum density, putting them at risk of osteoporosis when they are older. If estrogen levels come back up, bone loss can be halted and actually rebuilt—although there is still concern that the bones may never regain their full strength.

Muscle Dysmorphia (Bigarexia)

Images of men today reflect more male muscle and rippled chests than ever before. The ideal man with his hard and muscular body physically reinforces society's tough, hard and unemotional code of masculinity. Because thinness is usually equated with weakness and frailty, boys and men who have body image concerns or feel powerless in their lives want to bulk up instead of lose weight. Some take bigness to an extreme.

“ We discovered we all have a commitment to getting people off diets and to promoting health at every size. Let me tell you that it's an uphill battle! ”

Leila, Corey and Alisa—a dietitian, a nutritionalist and a fitness trainer—have each witnessed the dark side of physical activity. Read their story on www.jessieshope.org.



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