

Exercise Addiction: Are you at risk?

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Dr. Julia Samton and certified personal trainer Franci Cohen speak out about the dangers of pushing yourself past your limit

New York, N.Y. – We are surrounded by “perfection.” Just look at a magazine cover, a website or television and there she is – the ultimate girl with the ideal body. Often these femme fatale figures are airbrushed and photo-shopped, making it even more unrealistic for real women to achieve their body image goals. Many women think that with achieving a fabulous figure comes happiness, wealth and the ideal mate. They will often exercise to a dangerous point in pursuit of “their dream body.”

According to Manhattan neuropsychiatrist, Dr. Julia Samton MD, “It’s unfortunate that society and the media place so much attention on physical appearance. It adds so much pressure on young impressionable women, who become convinced that they will have the perfect life if they look a certain way. Inevitably, for certain types of girls, this desire for that picture-perfect life can lead to exercise addiction – the beginning of this quest for perfection.”

According to Samton, exercise addiction can be characterized by the following: “A need to increase exercise to feel a desired effect such as a ‘buzz’ in order to feel accomplished, a feeling of withdrawal if one is unable to exercise and unsuccessful attempts at reducing exercise. However, the biggest red flag would be when exercise starts to interfere with one’s occupational, social and overall functioning. It’s at this point that treatment is recommended.”

Luckily, not every girl surrounded by this idealized world will become addicted to exercise. “Certain personality types are more prone to succumb to this addiction, says Samton. Perfectionists are more likely to be focused on meeting an unrealistic body ideal. Those with anxiety disorders are also more vulnerable to obsessions and compulsive behaviors. And individuals who do not have healthy ways of handling their negative emotions may turn to addictive behaviors as an outlet to relieve mental pain.”

Samton says “cognitive behavioral therapy can be helpful, but seeking a therapist with experience in exercise addiction is crucial. For extreme cases, there are inpatient treatment facilities that offer 28-day rehabilitation programs.

ARE YOU AT RISK?

Does all of this sound a little too familiar? Or perhaps alarm bells are ringing around one of your friends or family members? Well here are some of the typical symptoms of someone who is letting exercise take over their life:

Intention effects

The amount of exercise or length of exercise sessions is longer than originally intended.

Time

Large amounts of time are spent exercising and conflict with other areas of their life.

Continuance

Will continue to exercise even with persistent physical or psychological issues that are made worse from exercising, such as a recurring injury.

Franci Cohen is a New York personal trainer, certified nutritionist, and exercise physiologist who owns and runs Fuel Fitness. With 19 years of training under her belt, she has definitely seen her fair share of women battling along the exercise addiction spectrum.

“Over the years a few red flags have certainly popped up as telltale signs of exercise addiction,” Cohen says. “If someone suddenly amps up their exercise from 1 hour a day to 3 hours a day; if they start to disregard their health or safety, such as continuing to work-out with a fever; and/or if their days start to revolve around their exercise schedule to the point of even missing important family or work events — *this* is when I would start to worry.”

According to Cohen, the most effective way to deter a client from over exercising is to explain the science behind how the body works. “The whole reason we work out is to increase muscle strength and mass, which in turn leaves us with a higher metabolic rate,” she says. “Over exercising, sometimes known as exercise bulimia, can cause muscles to be catabolic, or break down, as opposed to anabolic, or build up.”

This shows that over exercising will actually give you the exact opposite results of what you’re striving for. If you start to feel the need to complete an insane three or four hour routine, try to cut it down to just one hour of high intensity exercise in order to feel the satisfied exhaustion you long for.

“As a trainer, the most important thing for me is that my clients leave the gym feeling proud and satisfied with their workout- and that they are obtaining this feeling in the healthiest way possible!” says Cohen.