

Exercise and Eating Disorders

Exercise and movement play a complicated role with eating disorders. While exercise certainly has its benefits, when taken to the extreme, it may be a sign of destructive coping. Often there is an overlap between compulsive exercise and eating disorders due to one's attempt to control their weight and shape with excessive movement. Compulsive exercise can be defined as movement that significantly interferes with meaningful activities, occurs at inappropriate times or in inappropriate settings, or when the individual continues to exercise despite injury or other medical complications. It may also occur for periods of time that are longer than expected or more frequently than expected.



For some individuals, exercise interferes with their life such that there is little time left for friends, family, school, work, and other aspects of life. Exercise may induce feelings of superiority or a sense of power when it results in weight loss. In reality, there is nothing superior or powerful about exercising to that degree. If anything, excessive and compulsive exercise create a mere illusion of control. Real control means you can start and stop what you are doing at any point.

While compulsive exercise is often conducted under the guise of being “healthy” or “health conscious”, there are actual health risks involved in this kind of movement. Exercising when one's body is depleted leads to dehydration, which causes electrolyte imbalances and heart complications. It can lead to a syndrome known as Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S), which is characterized by low energy availability, low bone mineral density and, in those who menstruate, loss of menses (amenorrhea). Low energy availability ultimately impacts heart and lung function. Both RED-S and compulsive exercise can also lead to injuries, like sprains and fractures. A malnourished body requires more time to heal, and when people feel compelled to resume working out before they're well, they are more likely to sustain serious injuries.



Healing one's relationship with exercise is highly personal and individualistic. Sometimes it's essential to abstain from all movement for a period of time in recovery. If you choose to resume movement in your recovery, approaching it with a curious lens can help ensure your motivations stay recovery-oriented. Asking yourself questions such as, "Why do I want to exercise right now?" or "Is this movement bringing me joy" may help elucidate your underlying motivation. Amy Gardner's book [iMove](#) can also offer some insight as you consider your relationship with exercise. Ultimately, movement should be something that brings you joy, nourishes the soul, and helps you maintain your recovery.