

Unhealthy Exercise

Healthy Exercise

Exercise, or movement, is an important part of healthy living. Calogero and Pedrotty (2004) have identified three key points to consider when assessing whether exercise behaviours and beliefs are helping or harming our health. In order for movement and associated thoughts to be regarded as healthy, they suggested that movement must:

- Rejuvenate the body, not exhaust or deplete it;
- Increase mind-body connection, not allow or induce disconnection; and
- Alleviate mental and physical stress, not produce more stress.



Unhealthy Exercise

'Unhealthy' exercise (or, movement) describes exercise behaviours, thoughts, motives and intentions that degrade, rather than support, our various aspects of wellbeing. These aspects include, our physical, emotional, social, intellectual, occupational, spiritual, environmental and financial wellbeing. Unhealthy movement is a maintaining factor of an eating disorder.

Signs of Unhealthy Exercise

Unhealthy exercise is a common symptom in individuals with or without an eating disorder. If you experience any of the symptoms below, you may be exercising at a level that is not healthy for your wellbeing:

- Overexercising (exercising to the point of creating physical, emotional, occupational, intellectual, social, spiritual, environmental or financial harm, even if the exercise does not appear to be excessive in frequency, duration, type or intensity).
- Abstaining from movement due to previous negative experiences and fear of degradation
- Exercising in secret, and engaging in rigid/repetitive or punitive exercise
- Exercise that is directly related to the eating disorder (e.g., calorie compensation, body image dissatisfaction) or to self-harm
- Exercise when also engaging in purging behaviours (e.g., self-induced vomiting or laxative misuse)
- Exercise performed despite injury or illness
- Experiencing guilt, anxiety and low mood in relation to exercise
- Experiencing distorted exercise beliefs
- Exercise that interrupts daily life, or when excessive time is spent thinking about exercise
- Perceived inability to change exercise session or introduce anything new

Consequences of Unhealthy Exercise

Unhealthy exercise can lead to serious health effects including:

- The maintenance of the eating disorder via distorted thoughts and behaviours
- Cardiovascular damage
- Vital organ dysfunction
- Bone damage
- Reproductive issues
- Muscular and metabolic issues
- Relapse/delayed recovery
- Takes away time from family/friends, work, study, and other important areas of one's life

How Much Exercise is Right for You?

Movement should be used to support, and not harm, your overall wellbeing. Each dimension of health should be completely supported by movement, and not at all harmed. It is best to tailor your movement toward achieving wellbeing. It is advisable to consult with your GP, Psychiatrist or Paediatrician for regular medical monitoring (e.g., vital signs, blood test, ECG) as exercise is a stressor on the body. You may also find it helpful to see an Accredited Exercise Physiologist who has experience working with eating disorders for safe programming support. Speak with your treating team about the psychological challenges you may be facing around movement, such as the ones described in this handout, and finally, when you do exercise, make it social and make it fun!

Note: if you have recently (or in the presence of movement only) experienced heart palpitations, chest pain, dizziness, fainting, light-headedness, or you are using compensatory methods to purge calories, it is important to consult your GP, Psychiatrist or Paediatrician prior to engaging in any form of exercise.

Seeking Help

Attempts to reduce excessive exercise can elicit strong negative thoughts and high levels of anxiety. It is important to get professional help if you are struggling to reduce excessive exercise on your own.

