

Unhelpful Exercise

Exercise and movement is an important part of healthy living. However, for people experiencing an eating disorder, exercise can become driven by a desire for control. It can become so rigid or extreme that it becomes dangerous and interferes with other important aspects of life. When we exercise in an unhelpful way it serves to maintain the eating disorder.

Three key points to consider when assessing whether exercise behaviours and beliefs are helpful include:

- Is this movement that rejuvenates the body, not exhausts, degrades, or depletes it?
- Will it increase mind-body connection?
- Does it alleviate mental and physical stress, not produce more stress?



Signs of Unhelpful Exercise

If you experience any of the symptoms below your exercise may be considered harmful:

- Prioritising exercise over other important life activities, like employment, study, social outings, and sleep
- 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
- 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
- Exercising when also engaging in purging behaviours (e.g., self-induced vomiting or laxative misuse)
- Exercising despite fatigue, injury, or illness
- Experiencing guilt, anxiety and low mood in relation to exercise
- Being preoccupied with the next opportunity to exercise
- Experiencing distorted exercise beliefs
- Exercise that interrupts daily life, or when excessive time is spent thinking about exercise
- Unable to change exercise session or introduce anything new
- Using exercise to 'earn' food
- Cancelling plans/avoiding activities if they interfere with exercise

Consequences of Unhelpful Exercise

Unhelpful exercise maintains an eating disorder by reinforcing distorted thoughts and behaviours. It can lead to serious health effects including:

- 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. There's no 'one size fits all' approach when it comes to exercise; however, current Australian guidelines recommend 2.5 to 5 hours of moderate physical activity or 1 to 2.5 hours of vigorous activity, each week. You may find it helpful to see an Accredited Exercise Physiologist who has experience working with eating disorders for safe programming support.

If you are recovering from an eating disorder, the general guidelines around exercise may not be appropriate for you until your health is stabilised. Sometimes you will be asked to participate in gentler forms of movement during recovery, or even take a break from exercise, as you rebuild your physical strength and learn to develop a balanced relationship with exercise

Some Tips for Healthy Exercise

- Tune into how you are feeling before, during and after exercise. Do you feel tired or energised? Is any part of your body very sore? Are you enjoying yourself?
- Use these cues to help you decide whether you should proceed with exercise or take some time off
- Fit exercise into your life in a way that doesn't interfere with your ability to see friends, study, work, or live the life you want to be living
- Ensure that you continue to eat all your meals and snacks after exercise – the goal isn't to burn calories!
- Rest! Every person in the world, even competitive athletes, require rest days



It is a good idea to consult with your GP for regular medical monitoring (e.g., vital signs, blood test, ECG) as exercise is a stressor on the body. If you have recently (or in the presence of movement) 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 prior to engaging in any form of exercise.

Seeking Help

Attempts to reduce unhelpful and/or 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 exercise on your own. Speak with your treating team about the psychological challenges you may be facing, such as the ones described in this handout. Finally, when you do exercise, make it social and enjoyable!