Bipolar and Exercise Addiction: When Exercise Becomes Dangerous

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Bipolar and Exercise Addiction

If you do a quick Google search with the terms “bipolar” and “exercise” you’ll find many articles touting the benefits of exercise for mental illness.

As with any chronic disease – mental or physical – we know that exercise is extremely beneficial. We don’t need to read research articles to know that it can stave off cardiovascular disease, reduce and/or maintain weight, and promote feelings of well-being – and this is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

But can there be *too much of a good thing?*

The Benefits of Exercise for Bipolar Disorder

According to *Bipolar Lives*, there are multiple reasons why people with bipolar disorder should exercise routinely.

One of the main reasons is that healthy coping skills can make living with a mental illness a bit easier. And exercise is one of those coping skills.

Another good reason that is well-documented is that exercise releases endorphins. Endorphins are the “feel good” hormone – and when endorphins are released, the person is more likely to have a boost in mood and well-being, and a reduction in stress.

Many of the medications that are used to treat bipolar disorder can increase appetite – which can then increase weight. This causes a cycle of reduced self-esteem and depression. Adding exercise can reduce weight, as well as improve self-esteem and feelings of well-being.

When Exercise Becomes Addictive

We posed the question, “Is there such a thing as too much of a good thing?”

The answer is – maybe.

According to *Bipolar Lives*, “For some bipolar suffers, exercising can become an obsession. The feeling of power you get when the adrenaline is pumping. For some people, it’s addictive. It’s hard to stop, taking a rest day can make you feel like you are sliding into bipolar depression. You’re convinced that the only way to feel better is to get the endorphin levels back up again.”

According to a study carried out by the University of Manchester, manic behavior was linked to multiple addictive behaviors – for example, gambling, drinking, and exercise. The study evaluated both men and women with bipolar disorder with mania and hypomania. The results were shocking – they researchers found that exercise

dependency was linked to people with hypomania – but only in the females.

When exercise becomes addictive, it is called ***compulsive exercise*** and is also a mental illness. Like other addictions, such as alcoholism or drug addiction, it is a true addiction.

There are many reasons why someone may go from enjoying a healthy exercise routine to a compulsive exercise routine. Some of them include:

- Peer pressure.
- Body dysmorphia.
- Low self-esteem.
- Postpartum depression.
- Postpartum dieting.
- Codependent or abusive relationships.
- The desire to achieve an exercise high.
- An eating disorder such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa.
- Mental health disorders such as bipolar disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, or depression.
- A desire to have or maintain a specific body shape or size.

The Signs of Exercise Addiction

If you are worried that you have an exercise addiction, or that you have a loved one with an exercise addiction, you should assess the signs below:

- Wanting to work out alone.
- Having a workout routine that cannot be broken.
- Having a fixation with numbers – such as running a certain amount of miles, burning a certain amount of calories, or losing a certain amount of weight.
- Continuing an exercise routine, despite being ill or injured.
- Experiencing guilt if exercise is skipped.
- Neglecting obligations in order to exercise.
- Exercise that is longer, more frequent, or more intense than recommended.
- The topic of exercise is all-consuming.

If you find that these signs describe you, or that they describe a loved one, seek help from a trained professional.

The Bottom Line…

We know that exercise is helpful for almost everyone, both physically and mentally.

Researchers note that only a small percentage of people suffer from compulsive exercise, and that worrying about this addictive behavior should not scare people away from beginning an exercise routine. In fact, more people should start an exercise routine.