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Exercise dependence and quality of life: Sense-making among individuals with eating disorders – an ongoing study.

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Aim

This research aims to investigate whether compulsive exercise in eating disorders has an impact on patients perceived quality of life. The areas that will be focused on with regards to quality of life include:

- Physical functioning
- Psychological functioning
- Social functioning
- Exercise enjoyment

This is important to understand the impact of compulsive exercise, how it affects different people and how it fits within eating disorders. This will help to give detail to an area that has no qualitative research on it at present. It is hoped that the depth of qualitative data will help to guide future research in further understanding and assessment of the best way to treat compulsive exercise.

Background

Between 52-85% of the eating disorder population is said to have a compulsive exercise problem^(1,2,3,4). Compulsive exercise is a big issue with research suggesting it plays a significant part in the aetiology, development and maintenance of eating disorders^(1,3,5).

The DSM-V reports “excessive exercise” to be a symptom of both anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa⁽⁶⁾. However, recent research shows that the phrase excessive exercise doesn’t accurately define the role of exercise in eating disorders. The phrase compulsive exercise has been agreed as the most accurate phrase as it combines both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of exercise⁽⁷⁾.

Compulsive Exercise and Quality of Life

Current research shows that compulsive exercise negatively affects quality of life in individuals with and without an eating disorder^(8,9,10,11,12,13,14):

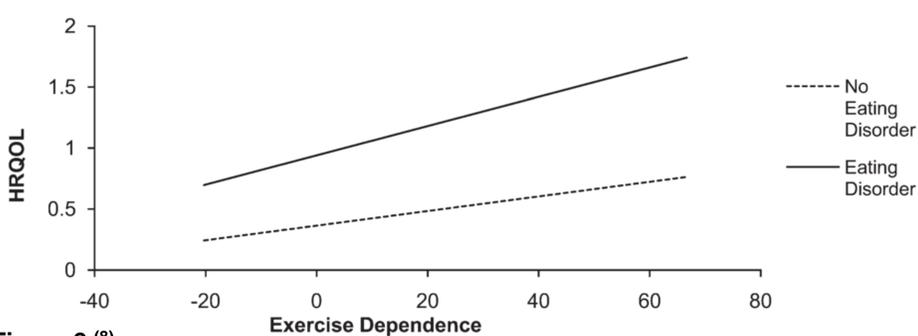


Figure 2⁽⁸⁾

However, current research does not use consistent quality of life measures meaning comparisons across studies is impossible to achieve. As a result, this means the current research base lacks depth and understanding. Quality of life is complex and individual to that person, as a result this study will utilise qualitative data to understand how compulsive exercise affects their individual perception of their quality of life^(15,16).

Method

A sample of participants will be purposely recruited from an eating disorder unit who have been identified as currently or previously exercise dependent. Once participants have volunteered and consent is gained all participants will engage in a one-to-one semi-structured interview to collect data. Questioning, in line with the standard techniques of IPA, will be largely open, with participants encouraged to talk freely about their experiences in their own way⁽¹⁷⁾. Initial thematic analysis of data will inform the generation of subordinate and, ultimately superordinate themes⁽¹⁸⁾. This analytic approach will furthermore allow the researchers to use their own knowledge to help interpret how the participants attribute meaning to their experiences⁽¹⁹⁾.

Pathological mechanisms of compulsive exercise according to the Compulsive Exercise Test

The Compulsive Exercise Test has been developed as a reliable multidimensional model of compulsive exercise. The areas measured in the Compulsive Exercise Test are^(4,5,20,21,22):

- Avoidance and rule-driven behaviour
- Weight control exercise
- Mood improvement
- Lack of exercise enjoyment
- Exercise rigidity

However, this model does not explain the impact of compulsive exercise on individuals who have eating disorders.

Visual representation of a compulsive exercise model

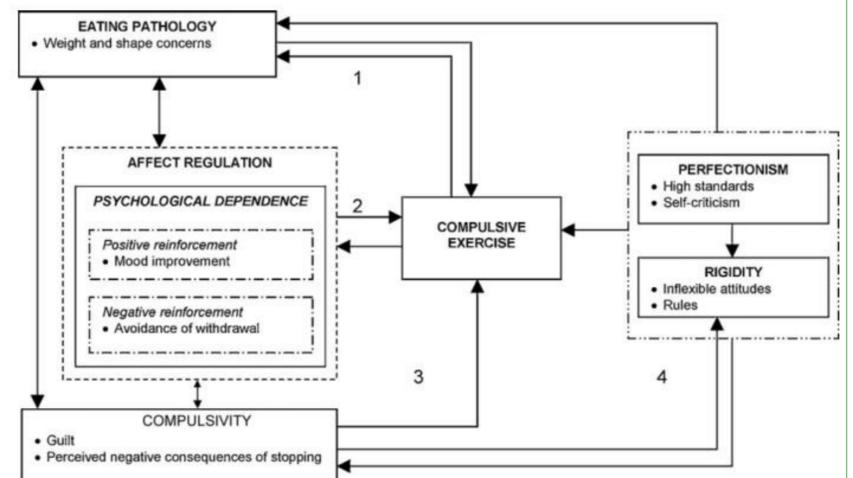


Figure 1 A schematic representation of the maintenance model of compulsive exercise⁽²⁰⁾

Types of questions that may be asked

Physical	Psychological
How much exercise would you normally undertake in a day/week?	Do you enjoy exercise?
Have you ever been injured as a result of exercise?	If you missed an exercise session, how did it make you feel?
Have you ever continued to engage in exercise even when injured?	How did exercise make you feel?
Do you give yourself rest days?	Why did/do you engage in exercise?
Do you often feel physically fatigued?	Did you do exercise around/with others or alone?
	Did you ever feel like you needed to increase/decrease the amount of exercise you did? Why?
	Did you ever feel like you were not in control of the exercise that you did?
Did exercise ever stop you from doing other activities with friends/family?	
Did you ever have to plan your days around exercise?	Did exercise ever stop you from doing something important?

Conclusions

Compulsive exercise is a significant issue in eating disorders, however, at present it is not accurately defined within the DSM and has limited research into the understanding of how it affects people who suffer from an eating disorder.

This research aims to collect in-depth data around how compulsive exercise affects quality of life to help add to the understanding, and therefore eventually more effective treatment, of compulsive exercise in eating disorders.

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