

Compulsive Exercise in Eating Disorders

A compassionate guide for understanding, support and recovery

Understanding this presentation

Compulsive exercise describes movement that feels driven, rigid or impossible to rest from rather than freely chosen. It can occur alongside several eating disorders and may be used to compensate for eating, manage anxiety, influence weight or meet strict internal rules.

What may be happening underneath

The problem is not simply how much somebody exercises. Important signs include guilt or panic when unable to exercise, continuing despite injury or illness, exercising secretly, needing to meet exact targets, or feeling that food must be earned or compensated for.

Why compassion matters

Eating difficulties and eating-disorder behaviours often make more sense when we understand what they are trying to manage. They may reduce anxiety, create predictability, soothe difficult feelings, respond to sensory distress or provide a temporary sense of control. Understanding does not mean ignoring risk; it gives us a more useful place from which to build change.

Shame usually increases secrecy. Helpful support combines respect for the person with clear attention to physical safety, nourishment and specialist care where needed.

Health, treatment and recovery

When the body is undernourished, excessive exercise can increase medical risk and interfere with recovery. Injury, fatigue, hormonal disruption, dizziness and cardiovascular strain can all matter. A treatment team may recommend reducing or pausing exercise depending on physical health.

A gentle place to begin

Try replacing 'What is wrong with me?' with 'What is happening for me, what is this helping me manage, and what would make the next step safer?' A useful step might be telling one trusted person, attending an assessment, noticing a trigger, accepting nourishment, reducing a harmful behaviour or asking for an accommodation.

Supporting yourself or somebody you care about

Recovery involves rebuilding a more flexible relationship with movement: learning that rest is legitimate, separating exercise from punishment, listening to the body and eventually reconnecting with movement for wellbeing or enjoyment rather than fear.

If you are supporting somebody, avoid becoming the food police. Keep weight, calories and moral judgements about food out of the conversation where possible. Ask what support feels useful, encourage appropriate professional care and keep room for ordinary life, humour, interests and connection.

When urgent help is needed

Seek urgent medical help for collapse or fainting, chest pain, severe weakness or confusion, severe dehydration, blood in vomit, suspected poisoning or obstruction, signs of diabetic ketoacidosis where relevant, or immediate risk of self-harm. In the UK use 999/A&E; for an emergency or NHS 111 for urgent advice.

You do not have to become more unwell to deserve help.

My Compulsive Exercise in Eating Disorders Diary



Use this page to notice patterns, difficult moments and small wins. There are no right or wrong answers.



How am I feeling today?



What happened around food or eating?



What felt difficult?



What went well - even a little?



What helped me?



What do I need tomorrow?



I am learning. I am growing. I am enough.

My Recipe for Life

This is not a meal plan. It is a reminder that recovery and wellbeing need many different ingredients.



Ingredients

- ♥ Patience
- ♥ Compassion
- ♥ Curiosity
- ♥ Support
- ♥ Rest
- ♥ Joy
- ♥ My Pace
- ♥ Self-Trust
- ♥ Small Steps
- ♥ Hope

How I use them



A message from Maggie

You are so much more than your struggles with food. Please be gentle with yourself. You do not have to prove that you are struggling enough to deserve support. Recovery is allowed to be slow, uneven and personal. Small steps matter, and you deserve patience, understanding and hope.

Maggie