

# Bodybuilding Obsession

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In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the fact that exercise can become addictive. This phenomenon has been termed 'exercise dependence', and is characterized by a number of symptoms which can be damaging physically, psychologically and socially. For example, such individuals almost always grossly overtrain, even training when suffering from injuries or 'flu. Also, they often place such an inordinate emphasis on their training that other important areas of their life, such as work or family, suffer.

The possibility that individuals could become dependent upon exercise was first noted by Baekeland, a sleep deprivation researcher, in the early 1970s. As part of this research, Dr. Baekeland wanted to explore the effects of exercise deprivation. He had to abandon this part of his research, however, as he found subjects impossible to recruit. Despite offering large sums of money, he could not persuade enough subjects to forego exercise for several weeks. His observations led him to conclude that many of these individuals were obsessed with their exercising.

Since this time, psychologists have paid exercise dependence a great deal of attention. However, most of this research has focused on aerobic activities, particularly long-distance running. However, there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence that exercise dependence is very common in bodybuilding. For this reason, over the last few years myself and colleagues have been performing research aimed at increasing our understanding of bodybuilding dependence. The aim of this article is to discuss some of our findings and related issues, with a view not only to promoting a greater understanding of this issue, but also to share some ideas as to how individuals can prevent themselves becoming dependent on bodybuilding.

In an article published in the Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness in 1998, we noted the fact that many scientific studies have shown that weight training can significantly enhance an individual's self-esteem. This is not surprising, as, for males, the muscular physique is the most socially desired in our culture. People tend to view the muscular male as possessing more favourable skills and personality traits, and to be more physically adept and athletically capable, than less muscular males. Therefore, it makes sense that as an individual increases the size of his muscles through weight training, he will begin to view himself more favourably.

As individuals successfully use weight training to improve their self-esteem, some may begin to rely exclusively on their training to feel good about themselves. This is most likely to occur in those who have low self-esteem in most or all of the areas of their lives that they feel are important to them. For such individuals, the time they spend in the gym may be the only time they feel a high degree of self-worth. Because of this, they try to spend as much time in there as possible. In this way, they become compulsive about their training, placing a higher priority on it than on other activities, and neglecting other responsibilities in order to train.

Anyone who trains in a bodybuilding gym probably knows a number of people who display symptoms of an exercise dependence disorder. However, some examples may serve to illustrate just how serious this problem can be. For example, in his autobiography, former bodybuilding champion Sam Fussell chronicled a lifestyle which was entirely geared around the sport. After losing his job (indirectly due to his obsession with bodybuilding), he devoted every hour of the day to the gym. Time which was not spent lifting was spent preparing for it. This behaviour was clearly detrimental to his health. For example, he noted that when preparing for an important competition, "Thanks to the rigors of my training, my hands were more ragged, callused and cut than any longshoreman's. Thanks to the drugs and my diet, I couldn't run more than 20 yards without pulling up and gasping for air. My ass cheeks ached from innumerable steroid injections, my stomach whined for sustenance, my whole body throbbed from gym activities and enforced weight loss. Thanks to the competition tan, my skin was breaking out everywhere".

Fussell noted that bodybuilding was the only thing which he felt gave his life any meaning, thus providing some support for the above hypothesis as to how and why individuals become dependent upon weight training. He makes it clear that the lifestyle he describes was relatively common amongst the Southern Californian bodybuilding community.

In the BBC radio documentary *Iron Maidens*, several top British female bodybuilders discussed their lifestyles and their attitudes towards the sport. One woman, a former British champion, stated that bodybuilding was her whole life; her commitment to her training even led to the breaking off of her engagement to her fiancé. Another woman's daily training programme involved such long weight training and aerobic workouts it left virtually no time for her to do anything else. When faced with injuries which forced her to withdraw from an important competition and temporarily cease training, she suffered from psychologically debilitating symptoms:

"I was dead depressed and really down about the whole thing. All this year I've been training for this competition and now I'm not doing it everything has just totally stopped. My life has just fell apart really because I have been training non-stop and I just don't know what to do with myself now. I'm lost".

This example supports the suggestion made by some psychologists that individuals whose identities are strongly bound to their sport will be vulnerable to emotional difficulties when unable to perform that activity, particularly when other sources of self-worth are lacking.

Due to the obsessive attitude which many bodybuilders have towards their training, they may be at a high risk of developing such problems. As bodybuilding journalist TC Luoma notes, many bodybuilders have a total lack of balance in their lives: "Many bodybuilders do nothing else. They spend every living hour, every minute of the day building their muscles, to the exclusion of any kind of life".

Indeed, in a study of professional female bodybuilders, American sport psychologist Leslee Fisher found that, on average, the women spent 5-6 hours per day in bodybuilding-related activities, and another 6 hours thinking about bodybuilding. As one woman put it:

"The great majority of women I know that are involved with it are obsessed with their weight and are just compulsive about it".

Of course, it could be argued that these may just be isolated examples. However, research performed by myself and colleagues (for example, see *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, November 2000; *Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness*, March 1998) has found that this is unlikely to be the case. Incidence of exercise dependence in most exercise activities tends to be fairly low, with only a few per cent of most exercising populations exhibiting symptoms. However, we have found that in bodybuilding this figure appears to be much higher, with such behaviours fairly commonplace in the sport. Given the sorts of problems that can arise from taking such an obsessive approach to training, it would appear that this is a serious problem.

This all begs the question: what can be done about it? Actually, there are no psychological 'quick fixes' or magic potions that will make an individual's attitude towards exercise more psychologically healthy. The fundamental problem here is that of the individual's whole outlook on life. People who are dependent on bodybuilding are making the mistake of assuming that spending most of their time in an environment where they feel a high degree of self-esteem is an effective strategy for coping with the general feelings of inadequacy and inferiority that pervade their lives. Clearly, however, this is simply trying to block out the problem rather than tackling it head-on. This problem will not go away merely because you ignore it. Instead, such an individual becomes, to paraphrase Sam Fussell, like Lady Macbeth in a lifting belt, trying desperately to remove the stain of their inferiority, not by washing it off but by building a suit of muscular armour to keep the rest of the world at bay.

So, are there any effective long-term strategies for dealing with this problem? Probably the most important step for the individual to take in addressing this problem is to recognise that building a more muscular physique, or performing any other activity, is only really of value insofar as it contributes to the individual's long-term happiness. The legions of bodybuilding-dependent emotional cripples, unable to function effectively outside of the gym, are testament to the fact that such behaviour certainly does not bring happiness.

The idea that optimal functioning as a human being requires both physical and mental development would appear so obvious that it goes without saying. However, in an environment where individuals mindlessly perform as many sets as they can physically stand, gullibly consume a mind-boggling array of (mostly useless) supplements and spend lots of hard-earned cash on magazines full of scientifically unsound and often dangerous training misinformation, it would appear necessary to emphasize this. There is nothing wrong with wanting to develop a muscular physique, but if you let it become an obsession, and find that it interferes significantly with work and family commitments, and intellectual and other leisure pursuits, then is the time to take stock of the role bodybuilding plays in your life.

Taking up another, physically non-strenuous hobby may help you realise that other interests and pursuits can also be very rewarding, and help you to place bodybuilding in its proper perspective, i.e. an important but not all-consuming part of your life. It doesn't really matter what that hobby is: anything that you find interesting. Read more, learn to play a musical instrument, learn a foreign language, go to the movies or theatre more often. Anything that helps you realise that there is more to life than slaving away for hours every day in some dank smelly dungeon. Indeed, it is ironic that such behaviour will probably be counterproductive to the person's bodybuilding goals anyway, a point that is explored next.

In their quest to become more muscular, individuals who are dependent on bodybuilding almost always grossly overtrain, thus making it unlikely that they will achieve their full muscular potential. The amount of training these individuals perform can lead to overuse injuries in the muscles and joints, a weakened immune system, chronic fatigue and even muscle atrophy. Clearly, all these things are counterproductive to achieving these people's goals. Therefore, psychologists and medical doctors faced with bodybuilders who present with symptoms of dependency could suggest that the patient tries brief, high-intensity training sessions performed no more than a couple of times per week. Such an approach has been shown in many scientific studies to produce optimal gains in size and strength (see, for example, my article in Exercise Protocol, Spring 2000, and my chapter in Fitness Fraud, both of which are available from the I.A.R.T.).

Thus, in pointing out such facts, the health professional will leave such individuals with an uncomfortable decision to make: they either continue to overtrain, in full knowledge that they are not doing it purely for physiological reasons, or they train less frequently and for shorter periods, and suddenly find that they have large gaps in their life where their training used to be. Hopefully, they will fill this new "free time" productively, and learn that there is a whole world beyond bodybuilding that they can explore.