

Workout Junkies

Compulsive exercise regimens are not always the healthiest alternative

By Aline McKenzie
KRT CAMPUS

Imagine that you're in a gym. When you arrive, there's a good-looking woman vigorously working out. When you're done with your own workout, she's still there, plugging away.

You might admire her discipline or envy her figure. But she might have a secret - the exercise is compulsive, part of an eating disorder that may, literally, be killing her. Sometimes called "exercise bulimia," compulsive exercise can happen in women with either bulimia or anorexia. But because bulimics usually have normal weight, the disorder isn't as obvious as it would be in a stick-thin anorectic.

In fact, they may even be praised for it. "When you're sticking your head in the toilet, you don't get much kudos from society," says Dr. Jim Harris, a psychologist in the eating disorder program at Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas. "When you're exercising, boy, everybody gives you kudos."

One of the cornerstones of the syndrome is the excessive, punishing nature of the workouts.

"I've had patients who may get up at three in the morning, work out for three hours, go to work, and then come home and do another three-hour workout," he says. "Even Olympic athletes don't train like that."

Eventually, the workouts can interfere with social life, leading the patient to keep a veil of secrecy.

Some people even belong to more than one health club, so that the staff can't tell how much they're working out.

"Paradoxically, they say they can spot each other at the gym," Harris says. "There's a dead look in the eyes. Exercise should be fun."

Harris says he had one patient who restricted all fat and meat from her diet, used laxatives and worked out for four hours a day. Her heart had a leaky valve, and there was fluid around her heart.

"It was killing her, and she couldn't stop the exercise," he says. She was an intelligent woman, but the compulsion was too strong, he says.

Dr. Urszula Kelley, clinical director of Presbyterian Hospital's eating disorders program, says victims can become very creative in hiding their exercise.

"We've had some people who set the alarm for 1:30 a.m., sneak out of the house when everyone is asleep, run for 15 miles, then sneak back in, shower, put their nightclothes on and go back to bed," she says.

Others exercise in the bathroom with the shower running, so

the noise of the water will hide what they're doing.

About 4.5 percent of adolescent and young women have bulimia, Harris says. "It's really epidemic proportions."

"They've overused everything, even their heart, beyond all reason," Harris says.

Bulimia usually involves a variety of symptoms - eating excessive amounts of food in a binge, then getting rid of the calories by vomiting, misuse of laxatives, excessive exercise or other methods.

Like an alcoholic, a bulimic can literally be addicted to the behaviors, Harris says.

"These are often bright young women," he says. "They know what the cardiologist has told them, and they believe her, but they just can't stop it. ... You may hate yourself for it, but you just can't stop."

There's some evidence that serotonin, a brain chemical that's involved in addiction and depression, may play a role in bulimia, he says.

Treatment usually involves a combination of psychotherapy, family therapy, nutritional treatment and antidepressants.

"It's a gradual process, but it's possible," Kelley says.

During therapy, patients generally learn how to identify their feelings and learn new behaviors to cope with them, says Dr. Stephanie Setliff, medical director of the intensive outpatient program for eating disorders at Children's Medical Center of Dallas.

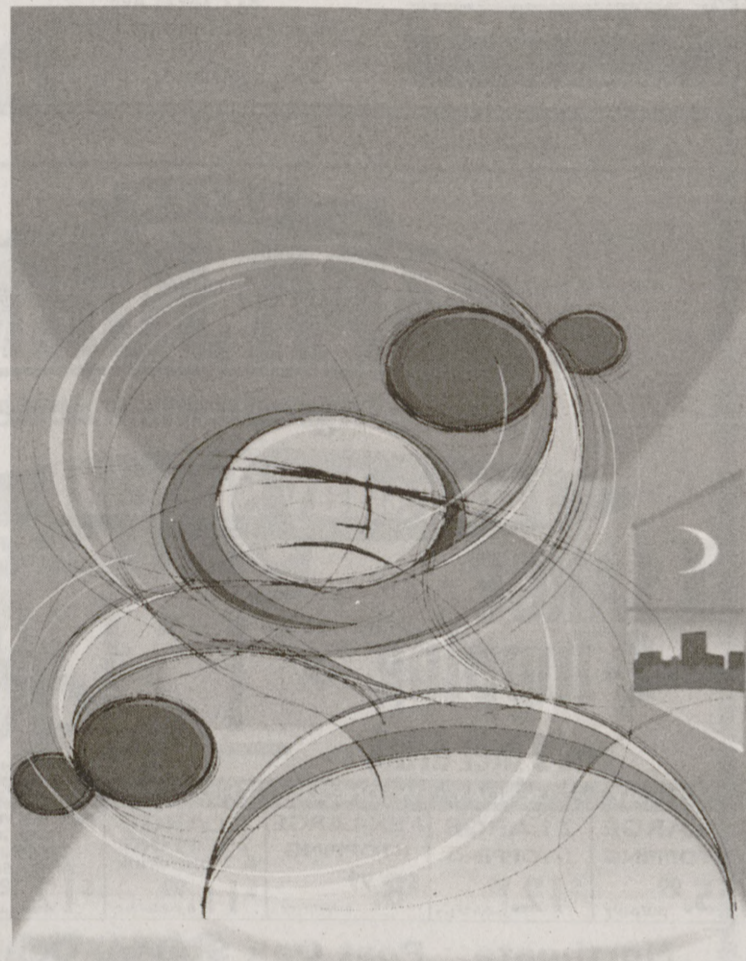
For instance, when a teenage girl with bulimia has a fight with her mother, her impulse may be to go on a 5,000- to 10,000-calorie binge, followed by a purge.

Instead, through therapy, she can learn to identify that she's feeling upset and angry, and learn new behaviors - finding someone to talk to, for instance.

"It's real directed," Setliff says of the therapy. "It's not someone sitting around pondering the meaning of life or their childhood."

There can also be family therapy, because very often there are stresses in the family that aren't being talked about. There may be another child with an illness, or marital stress between the parents, for instance.

Dr. Nicole Caldwell, a pediatric psychologist at Children's, says she saw one family that had such bad communication that "no one really talked about what was going on with each other. It was 'Hi, how was your day?' 'Fine.' Even when something bad happened, no one would talk about it, even though they all knew about it. It's not going to go away just because you decide not to



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discuss it."

The most important change in the family is to talk about feelings, Caldwell says, and not have the parents be the ones to keep track of how much the child is eating or exercising.

"We're the professionals, so if the patient gets mad at us, that's OK," she says. "But we don't want this antagonistic power struggle going on about the eating disorder."

NEWS IN BRIEF

Opponents of golf club's membership policy claim victory

AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP) — Opponents of Augusta National Golf Club's all-male membership claimed victory after city officials failed to approve a proposal that would have made it more difficult for them to picket the club during the Masters tournament.

County officials split 5-5 Tuesday on a plan that would have required demonstrators to give at least 30 days notice of their plans to picket.

The five commissioners who opposed the ordinance are black. The five who supported it are white.

Mayor Bob Young, who could have broken the tie, was in Washington for a national mayor's conference. He said he didn't know how he would have voted.

"I'm grateful that at least half of the (commission) recognizes the ordinance for what it is: an attempt to stifle free speech and put off social change," said Martha Burk, chair of the National

Council of Women's Organizations.

The proposal could be reconsidered next month.

If it isn't approved before the tournament in April, the National Council of Women's Organizations and the Rev. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition will be able to wait until just before the tournament to apply for a permit to protest the club's all-male membership.

Existing law requires protesters to secure a permit from the Richmond County sheriff before picketing on public property.

Police find no evidence that skiers triggered avalanche

CALGARY, Alberta (AP) — Police said Wednesday that they found no evidence that skiers triggered an avalanche earlier this week that killed seven people, including four Americans.

"There's nothing for us to believe that it's any-

thing other than just an accident," Sgt. Randy Brown of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police said at a news conference.

The snow slide Monday near Durrand Glacier in the Selkirk Range of eastern British Columbia hit some members of a group of 21, suffocating seven of them in up to 15 feet of concrete-like snow.

The adventurers had divided into two groups, and one was above where part of the avalanche began.

A survivor described hearing a loud crack, followed by a 100-foot-wide wall of snow.

A year after Daniel Pearl's abduction, questions remain

KARACHI, Pakistan (AP) — Scraps of refuse mix with chalky dust on the desolate dirt path where Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl spent the last tortured days of his life. It was in a concrete shed here that the killers videotaped his gruesome murder.

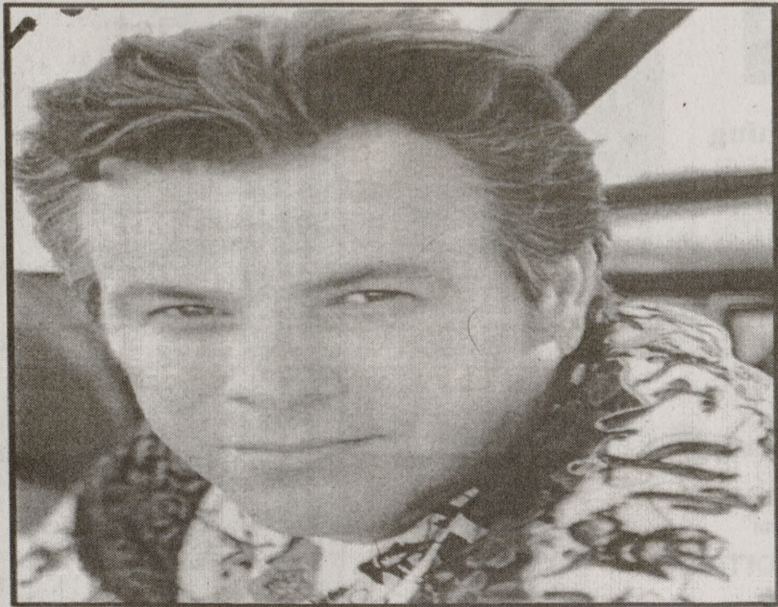
Investigators in the case have uncovered a web of extremism, with operatives from several Pakistani groups and possibly Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network in on the plot. That mix is bad news for Pakistan, which has endured a series of attacks since its president threw his support behind the U.S.-led war on terrorism.

A year after the 38-year-old South Asia bureau chief was snatched off the streets of this pulsing seaside city on Jan. 23, 2002, mysteries still abound.

Even though four men have been convicted in the case, authorities are reluctant to discuss the murder. Suspects disappear or are found dead. Crucial dates are confused. Confessions are offered and then recanted.

There is agreement on one point: Nobody who physically carried out the killing has been convicted. None of the four men sentenced is even believed to have ever been at the shed where Pearl was held.

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