

Exercise inflicts students

Obsession with body image drives many to overexert

By Ieva Augstums
Staff Reporter

Jennifer Schulte, a junior dietetics major, had an obsession with exercise in high school.

She exercised daily, but she was unhappy with her body and wanted to change the way she looked. Exercise controlled her body, mind, and in the long run, her life. She lost contact with her friends and stopped going out.

Schulte's body became her life. At age 16, merely a junior in high school, she realized her addiction to exercise had led to anorexia, and she decided she needed to change.

"Exercise controlled my life to the point where I could not go to bed if I did not exercise during the day," Schulte said. "I felt gross and fat if I didn't make it to the gym. And to make up for my lack of exercise, I chose not to eat. My exercise dependency and my feelings about food contributed to my anorexia."

Five percent of young women and 1 percent of teen-age girls become anorexic or bulimic, according to the University Health Center. Schulte, unfortunately, is a part of that percentage.

Nancy Betts, University of Nebraska-Lincoln nutrition scientist, along with graduate students and undergraduates, has developed an inventory test to identify the diagnostic criteria and possible cases of exercise-dependent syndrome.

The Exercise Habits Inventory is a questionnaire in which participants give answers reflecting their own exercise and eating habits. The study also is trying to find a correlation between exercise and eating disorders, Betts said.

D.M.W. De Coverley Veale, a professor at London's Royal Free Hospital, coined the term, "exercise dependence," in 1987, Betts said.

"Exercise dependency is only a proposed syndrome," Betts said. "Our interest in this particular field is to determine if such a proposed syndrome actually exists."

Betts began testing the study's validity in 1993.

In 1995, 350 UNL students in introductory nutrition classes volunteered to help test the inventory's strengths. A random, nationwide mail survey was also conducted where an additional 500 to 600 responses were studied.

Results so far show a 4 to 5 percent estimate of exercise-dependent people nationwide. Betts said the sample gathered through the mail survey was mostly representative of the older population and their views and habits on exercise. College students are more prone to the dependency because of personal goals and age difference, she said.

Some pain, no gain

People exercise mainly to lose weight, relieve stress and, as a long-term goal, become healthy, Schulte said.

"No one thinks they are harming their bodies," Schulte said. "Sometimes exercise does more harm than good."

Betts agrees with experts who say people should exercise at least 30 minutes at least three times a week as a minimum.

"Exercise and physical fitness are essential for life, but it is also addictive," Betts said. "Exercise is healthy, but when it becomes an obsession, assessment is needed."

Tricia Besett, counseling coordinator at the Women's Center, said one of the main problems that links exercise dependence and eating disorders is that exercise is considered a social activity among college students.

"Many think of exercise as a social activity and many go to the gym with a friend to discuss and catch up on the day's activities," Besett said. "Some students go to the gym every day and exercise extensively. When you look at

the national norm, most college students' exercise activity is extremely above normal."

Betts said women, runners, body-builders and wrestlers are most susceptible to the syndrome. Women seem to exercise to lose body fat, while men exercise to achieve more physical fitness, she said.

"We are finding more correlation between exercise dependency and eating disorders among females," Betts said. "Society has created the image of an ideal women, and more and more females feel that they have to live up to the standard."

Feel the burn

Betts said the conclusion drawn from the surveys leans toward the younger generation. Exercise dependency focuses on people under the age of 40, she said.

Karen Miller, registered dietitian and nutritional educator for the health center and Campus Recreation Center, said she has noticed the effects of exercise more in clients with eating disorders.

"Most people see exercise as a healthy way of burning calories," Miller said. "What I am seeing more of is people choosing not to eat and think they have to exercise to keep off the

calories that they do eat. It has gone to the extreme that exercise becomes an obsession."

Betts said people with exercise dependency syndrome will increase their daily exercise habits, make exercise a higher priority and have withdrawal symptoms when they don't exercise. If they resume exercising, they will feel a rush, she said.

These clues form the diagnostic criteria for exercise dependency and can help researchers begin finding a cure, Betts said.

"The only help presently available for exercise-dependent people would be counseling," Betts said.

Miller said UNL's Counseling and Psychological Services provide many programs and services that provide a starting point for treatment.

Schulte gives group presentations and speaks to students and faculty members about eating disorders and her experience with anorexia.

"It was hard for me to admit to myself, to my family and to my friends that I had an eating disorder," Schulte said. "But looking at my life now, and how I have improved and excelled, I am proud of my decision. I admit it was hard, but I survived."

"Others will too."

Programs provide counseling treatment

■ The university has services available that deal with eating disorders and exercise dependency.

From Staff Reports

Experts say the best treatment for people suffering from exercise dependency or eating disorders is counseling and support groups. The university has services that can help:

PeerNET, the Peer Nutrition Education Team, provides group presentations and individual counseling on topics regarding exercise, dieting and nutrition. For information, visit Community Health Education on the lower level of the University Health Center or call (402) 472-7440.

Nutritional Assessments offers a personal evaluation of exercise, dietary intake, habits and goals. Call (402) 472-3467 or stop by the Wellness Office at the

Campus Recreation Center.

Accepting Our Bodies, Accepting Ourselves is a workshop for improving one's body image through exercise and nutrition. The group meets Mondays from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. at the Women's Center, 340 Nebraska Union. To register call Counseling and Psychological Services, (402) 472-7450.

Eating Disorders Education Group, provided by Counseling and Psychological Services, offers a team approach to individuals with eating disorders. The group meets five times during the semester, and it is open to students, friends or family concerned about eating disorders. It costs \$25 for students, \$50 for others. Contact Counseling and Psychological Services, (402) 472-7450, or the health center's business office, (402) 472-7435, for registration.

Eating Disorder Support Group, organized by the Women's Center, meets Wednesdays, 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. For information, visit the Women's Center or call (402) 472-2597.

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