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Who becomes exercise dependent? Exploring psychological risk factors for exercise dependence through a person centred approach

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Abstract:

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pt. Max 600 ord/words)

Introduktion/Introduction

Participation in regular exercise is generally related to both physical and psychological wellbeing. Paradoxically, exercise may also be associated with a negative influence on health. For some individuals training routines may turn into rigid, obsessive-compulsive behaviours that eventually develop into dependence. Exercise dependence is described as a craving for physical activity that results in extreme exercise that may generate physical impairment and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. Typical symptoms of exercise dependence are that the individual exercises more often and for longer periods of time than originally intended, that important social, occupational or leisure activities are given up or neglected in favour of exercise, and that exercise routine continues despite recurrent physical or psychological problems. If the individual, for some reason, is prevented from exercising, withdrawal symptoms such as physical discomfort, distress, feelings of guilt and lowered self-esteem are often experienced. Consequently, the exercise dependent's life is dominated by exercise, often at the expense of family, friends and work. The causes for exercise dependence have not yet been clarified but anxiety and obsessive-compulsive behaviour as well as body image disturbances have been proposed as potential risk factors. However, research in this area is still limited.

Syfte & teoretisk ram/Aim and theoretical framework

The aim of this study was to investigate psychological risk factors for exercise dependence by examining the predictive ability of anxiety, obsessive passion and appearance orientation on exercise dependence through a latent profile analysis (LPA).

Metod/Method

In the current study we used a repeated measures design with two time points. Measures from T1 were used to identify latent profiles based on level of anxiety, obsessive passion and appearance orientation. Results from the LPA were then used to analyze if profile membership at T1 had a relationship with exercise dependence at T2. The sample consisted of 206 regular exercisers (100 males and 106 females) from exercise groups, sport clubs and sport science classes in Sweden ($M^{\text{age}} = 28,5$ years; $SD = 9,97$).

Resultat/Results

The LPA showed that a model with two profiles provided best fit to the data. Profile 1: "high risk for exercise dependence" was characterized by high levels of anxiety, obsessive passion and appearance orientation. Profile 2: "low risk for exercise dependence", reported low levels of the aforementioned variables. Furthermore, exercisers in the "high-risk profile" at T1 reported higher levels of exercise dependence at T2, compared to the "low-risk profile". Large effect sizes were found for all three predictors, with anxiety being the strongest predictor.

Diskussion och slutsatser/Discussion and conclusions

A combination of high anxiety, obsessive passion and appearance orientation is associated with increased risk for developing exercise dependence. Moreover, "high-risk exercisers" are characterized by anxiety, potentially at the level of an anxiety disorder, an obsessive passion for exercise and place great importance in their appearance. An interpretation of the results is that to these exercisers, exercise may function as a tool to cope with anxiety and worry, as well as a means to achieve body ideals. Furthermore, they may strongly identify themselves as serious exercisers and experience internal pressure to exercise in order to uphold this identity. Results of the current study may explain why some exercisers develop exercise dependence and others do not.