

Back From the Brink

My battle with
anorexia and
compulsive exercise
and how
I learned to strike
a balance
for healthy living.

By Christy Heitger-Casbon

*Christy was
suffering from
anorexia and
compulsive
exercise.*

A healthy, balanced, satisfying life is what we all want, isn't it? We bone up on the latest research about nutrition and fitness, buy top-of-the-line health products and exercise equipment and attend the best time management seminars—all in hopes of becoming the best we can be. Most of us have such wholesome, sincere, unadulterated intentions. Carrying them out in a healthy manner, however, is a different story. It's often not for lack of trying. It's quite the opposite, actually.

There are those of us who go to extremes in an intense effort to achieve the pinnacle of health. However, when you take things to the extreme, that is precisely when you get yourself into trouble. If you eat too much or too little, you feel ill. If you sleep too much or too little, you feel sluggish. If you exercise too much or too little, you harm your body both physically and psychologically. I know because I used to be one of those determined people who took things to the extreme. I still advocate exercise and nutrition, but I don't go overboard anymore because I learned the "lesson of moderation" the hard way.

My Anorexic Nightmare

My story began 14 years ago, when I was 12 years old. I was an awkward middle-schooler who desperately wanted to be beautiful and ached to be popular. It was clear from environmental influences (e.g., peers, family and media) that obesity was not acceptable. I heard enough derogatory "fat" comments and witnessed enough pointed fingers while growing up to know that I didn't ever want to be shunned and ridiculed like that. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that to be beautiful and popular, you needed to be thin. Consequently, I started dieting, but I took it to the extreme. Within a three-month period, I had developed anorexia nervosa (a disorder characterized by a preoccupation with thinness and an extremely restrictive diet). Over the course of the summer, I dropped from 110 pounds to a skeletal 73 pounds.

It's hard to believe that at the tender age of 12 I had already headed down a destructive, devastating and addictive path. People may not think of anorexia as an addiction, but in many ways it is. Experts maintain that all addictions are the pursuit or avoidance of a feeling. As a teenager, I wanted to avoid feeling self-hated and disgust. I grew tired of looking at myself and being repulsed by what I saw in the mirror, so I starved

myself in an attempt to drop pounds and pick up friends. I convinced myself that if I were thin, I'd be accepted and liked by those around me. My ambition backfired, however. Instead of gaining a social network of friends, I landed in an isolated hospital room. Instead of feeling thin, beautiful and popular, I felt grotesque, awkward and lonely.

Over the course of the next few years, I received therapy. Throughout my teenage years, I slowly gained weight—ounce by ounce, pound by pound.

Three years later, I had returned to a healthy weight. Of course, that didn't mean I had fully recovered psychologically. I still had very low self-confidence, and building that would take a long time.

Running for My Life

I needed to find a way to feel good about myself without falling back into the starvation pattern again, but I didn't quite know how to do that. I started by turning my attention toward something positive rather than negative, focusing on my health rather than my weight. For years, I'd been so preoccupied with the numbers on the scale, I couldn't move beyond that. I wanted to find a way to eat without being terrified of getting fat. Needless to say, this process was arduous and frustrating. For one thing, starving myself for so long had royally screwed up my metabolism. Therefore, I couldn't eat as much as the average woman because my metabolism was so slow. I wanted to find a safe way to give it a boost. I'd read about how exercise helps maintain muscle mass and how this conservation of muscle is important in maintaining a normal metabolic rate. Therefore, I decided to give exercise a try.

I can still recall the first half-mile loop around my neighborhood. Boy, was I pathetic. I was a determined teenager, though, and vowed to persevere. For weeks, I huffed and puffed and absolutely hated lacing up my shoes for my two-mile run. One day, about six months later, I realized,



A revealing glimpse of 12-year-old Christy in the clutches of anorexia in the summer of 1986.

"Hey, I'm actually enjoying this!" Before I knew it, an enthusiastic runner was born.

Running produced a wide range of physical and psychological benefits. Sometimes, I'd catch myself thinking, "Wow, who knew that I could find a fun activity that actually reduces my risk of heart disease and osteoporosis?" I also periodically took my resting heart rate when I first woke up in the morning because I found it amusing to count my heartbeats and knew that as I continued to condition my body, my heart muscle was getting stronger, as were other parts of my body. My lung capacity increased and even the steepest hills didn't leave me breathless anymore. One of the best things ever—especially from a former anorexic's point of view—was to look in a mirror at the body I had loathed for so many years and be able to recognize that it had blossomed into a strong, muscular, curvaceous one. Running definitely gave me the gift of life. Three years ago, however, I began abusing that gift when I started exercising compulsively.

A Few Just Wouldn't Do

When I had anorexia, I found that the more I limited my food intake, the better I felt. This may sound strange, but studies have shown starvation actually alters brain chemistry. Under-eating can activate brain chemicals that produce feelings of peace and euphoria. Some researchers believe that anorexics use the restriction of food to self-

medicate painful feelings and distressing moods.

Years later, I subconsciously did the same thing with running. I relied on my workouts to suppress and alter my negative emotions. When I first began running, I ran four or five days a week and jogged approximately 20 miles weekly. For seven years, I slowly increased my mileage but still maintained a safe, normal, healthy exercise regimen. It was only when I became addicted to exercise that my behavior turned unhealthy.

I first realized I had a problem when one day, three years ago, I freaked out at the prospect of taking a day off from exercise. My husband and I were in Indiana over Christmas break and a blizzard hit town. Even after the storm subsided, I couldn't run outside because there was blowing and drifting snow. I couldn't get to a gym, either, because the roads were closed. On top of that, my in-laws didn't own a treadmill. When I realized that I had no way of exercising that day, I flipped out. My mind was racing as I desperately tried to figure out an alternative way to run. When I couldn't find a solution, I was overcome by a paralyzing fear. It was so surreal.

I thought to myself, "Taking a day off is something I used to do and was fine with. Why does it terrify me now? And what am I afraid of, anyway?" I couldn't explain or rationalize my emotions. All I knew was that I felt completely trapped and amazingly anxious—feelings that only increased with time. In the height of my compulsive exercise addiction, I painstakingly scheduled business meetings and personal vacations around my running regimen. In 1995, I even scheduled the time of my wedding around my daily run. I knew this wasn't normal, yet I couldn't change my behavior.

Risky Business

My running routine didn't become a problem until I let it consume and control me. Just as my moderate exercise routine had originally produced numerous benefits, my

excessive running routine produced numerous problems. I experienced knee pain, hip pain, ankle pain, muscle cramps, headaches, shin splints and pulled muscles, but the discomfort was never enough to prompt me to cut back on my workouts. Despite the fact these pains were a direct result of my compulsive running, I chose to overlook the adverse consequences and continued to run.

You can imagine, then, if pain wasn't going to stop me, neither was bad weather nor illness. I once found myself running through town with a tornado siren blaring in the distance. Another time, my body was pelted by dime-sized hail as I ran through blinding rain in an attempt to squeak out one last mile. Last winter, when I was sick with the flu and running a fever, I spent the morning vomiting, but still found myself lacing up for an afternoon five-mile run. I knew it was wrong. I knew my compulsive behavior was bad for me, but it didn't matter. My compulsive exercise behavior eerily paralleled the anorexic behavior of starving myself even though I knew what I was doing could kill me.

When I became a compulsive exerciser, I once again placed my health in jeopardy. Even after I recognized that my behavior was abnormal, I felt powerless and reluctant to change it. No matter how much sense it made to cut back on my workouts, I felt compelled to exercise a full seven days per week—no exceptions. I absolutely refused to let myself jog less than four miles at a time. My motto was, "It's not even worth sweating if I run less than four."

It was more than needing or wanting to run. I felt I had to have my daily run to feel complete. You may be thinking, "Addicted to exercise? That's absurd!" However, it's not as absurd as it may sound. Research suggests that compulsive exercise is a vicious cycle. Specifically, prolonged, strenuous exercise has been shown to produce morphine-like substances that result in a self-induced high. However, over time, this high subsides, leaving the individual with only one option for regaining such euphoric feelings—participating in another round of strenuous exercise.

When I had anorexia, I was actively denying my body's essential nutrients, thereby placing my vital organs (i.e., heart, lungs, kidneys) at constant risk of failure. However, no matter the risks, I stubbornly refused to eat. I understood I needed to gain weight to stay alive, but found the actual process of lifting food to my lips too much to bear. Ultimately, I couldn't, wouldn't and didn't eat until I was hospitalized and forced to do so.

Everyone knows that excessively limiting food intake is dangerous, but recognizing excessive exercise as dangerous isn't quite as obvious because the signs aren't visible or evident. Nevertheless, the danger is just as real. Just as my old addiction had a name (anorexia), my new one did, too.

Self-Evaluation Test for Exercise or Sport Addiction

1. Do you exercise every day, regardless of weather, illness, schedule or injury?
2. Do you get so used to your exercise routine that even very important events are intrusions? Have you started scheduling your life around your activity instead of fitting your activity into your life?
3. Do you become depressed, irritable or cranky if you miss a scheduled workout?
4. Do you feel awkward, bad or incomplete if you haven't exercised?
5. Is your sport or activity the main topic of your conversations?
6. Do you have a strong preoccupation with keeping track of your times, repetitions, weight, wins or other measures of success?
7. Do you spend a lot of time arranging your diet to match your exercise needs?
8. Do you spend a great deal of time thinking about your physical health?
9. Is it possible your activity is a way of escaping from personal or family problems?
10. Do you get depressed over minor injuries?
11. Is your commitment to exercise causing personal problems, such as arguments with your spouse or complaints from your children or friends that you're never around?
12. If you miss a workout, do you try to make it up late at night or by doubling up the next time?
13. Do you fantasize about your sport or activity while working?
14. Have you been criticized for spending too much time or money on your activity?
15. Is your work suffering because meetings with colleagues or clients would conflict with your exercise schedule?
16. Are your activity partners the only friends with whom you now spend time?

If you answered "yes" to more than one or two items, you need to adjust your commitment to the activity. It is possible a perfectly good thing has become an addiction and is robbing you of your freedom to choose.

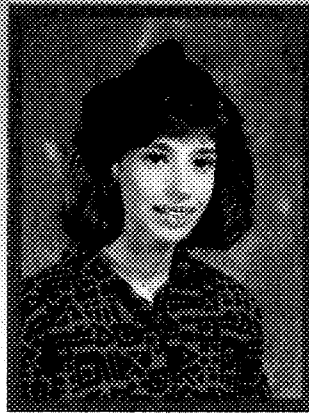
This test is from Dr. Grant Martin's book, *When Good Things Become Addictions: Gaining Freedom From Our Compulsions*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.)

— C.H.C.

Researchers call it "anorexia athletica" or "compulsive exercise," and its consequences are numerous. Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders (ANRED) reports that the consequences of compulsive exercise include abandoned relationships, damaged careers, lower grades in school, stress fractures, as well as damaged bones, joints, and soft tissues. Some psychological effects include obsessive thoughts, compulsive behaviors, self-worth measured only in terms of performance, depression, guilt and anxiety when exercise is impossible. [Note: See the Self-Evaluation Test for Exercise or Sport Addiction to determine if you're an exercise addict.]

Christy today—
happy, healthy
and balanced.

Photo by Joe Nalley



Christy at 85
pounds in the fall
of 1986.

The Power of Praise

Once I admitted to myself that my behavior had gotten out of control, I needed—and wanted—to return to a healthy and normal exercise routine. I thought it would be relatively easy to resume a healthy lifestyle. After all, I wasn't cutting out exercise—only cutting back. However, I found this process more painful than I had anticipated. My addictions were particularly hard to break because I received what I perceived to be reinforcement from those around me on an almost daily basis.

As an anorexic, I was elated when someone would say to me, "Wow! Have you lost weight? You look terrific!" Those positive words fed me in ways that sustenance from food could not. My running routine also brought me praise, which is not uncommon, according to Grant Martin, Ph.D., author of *When Good Things Become Addictions*. Dr. Martin says that when an exercise addict receives acclaim or adoration for her exercise-related achievement, he/she feels an improved sense of well-being. This is exactly what happened to me.

For instance, I remember during one of my college classes, we were asked to share something extraordinary about ourselves. I proudly announced, "I have been a runner for six years and have kept a running log of my mileage since I began. Since 1987, I have run more than 8,400 miles!" The class was in awe, and I felt like I was in the spotlight for a few precious moments. From that point on, I had another circle of friends who thought of me as the "healthy fitness fanatic."

The Facade of a Healthy Addiction

My family and friends were so thrilled when I conquered anorexia. They rejoiced as they saw me eating a well-balanced diet, developing muscle

tone through exercise and genuinely enjoying life. Years later, however, when my running turned addictive, the lines separating "healthy" and "addictive" were blurred. An outsider could look at me weighing a frail 73 pounds and clearly see that I had a problem, but at 125 muscular pounds, I was the picture of health, so identifying that I had a problem was not so easy.

Everyone knew I loved running, but they didn't see my behavior as unhealthy. This is because the American public tends to view exercise categorically rather than on a continuum. By that I mean that most



people view the notion of not exercising as "bad," whereas, ideally, these should both be placed on the same continuum, like this:

Participating in moderate exercise should be everyone's optimum goal. Unfortunately, the tendency is for people to look at athletes who train four hours a day and think, "Gosh, they sure are dedicated. How impressive!" Carol Kennedy, Director of Fitness and Wellness at Indiana University, says that an over-exerciser's fitness habits are often admired by others because the exerciser seems in control and motivated. Ironically, they're not. The bottom line is that over-exercising—just like under-exercising—is harmful to your health. In other words, being an inactive couch potato is bad for you, but so is becoming an overzealous exercise maniac.

Letting Go and Embracing Life

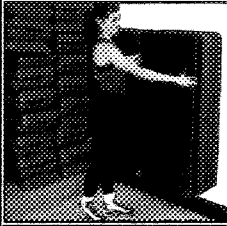
Addictions are hard to let go of

because, over time, they sort of act as security blankets, and it's difficult to remember what life was like without them. They often grow to define you and, admittedly, I sort of liked it when my friends referred to me as "the running maniac." This, of course, is precisely why I had a difficult time changing my routine. Not only did I like the attention, but I worried if I exercised less, my family and friends would think I'd gotten lazy. After all, they clearly admired my "dedication." The first question my father-in-law always asked when he called was invariably, "Have you gotten your run in yet today?" I felt my running

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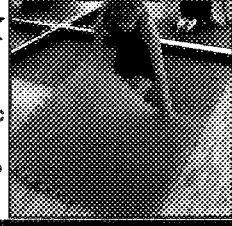
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defined me as a committed, young woman and I feared that easing up on my routine would somehow be a disappointment to all who knew me.

However, despite these fears of "letting go," I entered into what psychologists term a "contemplation stage" about six months ago. I was searching for a way to break out of the cycle because I had reached a point where my behavior had gotten so out of control that part of me wanted to change it. I decided I needed to face my addiction head-on, begin changing my behavior and start to enjoy healthy living.

I didn't want my running to be an obsession anymore. Instead, I wanted it to just be part of my healthy lifestyle. I longed for a balance in my life. ANRED maintains that a satisfied, well-balanced person enjoys home, career, hobbies, friends, physical activity, interests, spiritual disciplines and intellectual and cultural pursuits. I knew that getting to this point would be scary, but I knew I couldn't go on the way I had been for the previous three years. I refused to be beaten by my addiction. I was determined to be strengthened by it.

Rounding the Bend

Six months ago, after concluding that I wanted to be an "avid" runner rather than an "addicted" one, I altered my exercise regimen. I began by slowly reducing my mileage and adding cross-training activities such as weightlifting, biking, swimming and tennis. Then, I started taking two "rest" days a week. Admittedly, allowing myself rest days was not easy to do. As strange as it sounds, for a while, I felt guilty for getting hungry on days I hadn't exercised. My first inclination was to cut back on my food intake on my rest days. Nancy Clark, M.S., R.D., author of *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook*, warns against this because, as she says, "Your muscles will be busy replacing glycogen stores with the carbohydrates you normally burn off during exercise."

I've actually grown to appreciate my rest days because I don't view them as lazy, inactive days, but rather as free, unstructured ones. On these days, I'll take long evening walks with my husband or swim a few easy laps in the pool to unwind. It just depends on what I feel like doing.

I've noticed both psychological

and physical benefits as a result of my new, balanced approach to health and fitness. Psychologically, I feel much healthier since I began exercising in moderation. Now that every second of my day doesn't revolve around my workout, I enjoy life more. I know that I'll get my workout in because I'm still an enthusiastic and motivated individual, but I don't let obsessive thoughts about exercise consume me anymore. For example, if something comes up and I have to push my workout back a couple of hours, it's not a big deal. (I couldn't have said that a year ago.)

I've also incorporated variation into my new routine. Some days I exercise when I first get up, some days I do it right after work and some days I wait until the evening. I get to enjoy working out at different hours of the day, and that aspect alone is nice. I have also felt remarkable physical differences in my body—especially on the days following my rest days. I used to read in health magazines how important rest days were for muscle rejuvenation, and I always shrugged off the notion. I thought, "Hogwash. The more often I run, the faster I'll improve." Well, I've found that's not true. The rest days allow my body to recuperate. Consequently, I run faster, my muscles feel stronger and I have more energy. Plus, because I'm not overusing (and thus abusing) my body, I don't experience nearly as many debilitating or chronic aches and pains. The bottom line is: I'm a happier and healthier person now and actually think I look better than ever before.

I've lived so much of my life in fear of things—fear of getting fat, fear of losing control, fear of what others think of me, fear of failure and fear of disappointing others. However, I've let go of all that. Fear and obsession no longer rule my life. I'm finally living a healthy, sensible and balanced lifestyle. **AF**

Christy Heitger-Casbon is a writer and editor for Serve, a regional educational laboratory that works to improve learning opportunities for all students. She is a graduate of Indiana University and a freelance writer on health and fitness, adolescence and women's issues.

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