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## Addiction Arc

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## ADDICTION ARC

### *Hailee Park*

I'll admit, I love to work out. The feeling of being sweaty, sore, and tired is a feeling that I desire all day every day. Not only does exercise make you feel good, but it can make you look good too. The problem with exercise is that there is a fine line between working out for fun and working out because you feel like you have to. I used to do it for fun, but over time I conveniently jumped over the line.

All throughout high school, I lifted weights because I played sports. We did lifts every other day of the week, and they focused on strength and speed training. We would start the class with speed training, and then depending on the day, we would spend roughly an hour doing upper body, lower body, or full body. It was nice to have a coach who would come up with the workouts for us because there was no feeling of being unsuccessful. It was always enough exercise when the coach made the workout. I was always admired by my peers because I could lift more than the average female from the start. I would consistently get compliments from people saying "I can't believe you can do that weight" and I would spend time challenging myself to lift as much as my male counterpart. I always fed off of the compliments and pushed myself because I love to be the best. I am naturally a perfectionist and knowing that I was one of the best girls in the school elevated my ego. I constantly saw my name on the boards for the fastest 40 yd dash or the boards for achieving 1 rep of a certain exercise. I never worried about my diet either because I never had any issues with gaining muscle or looking lean. It was great until it wasn't.

After high school ended, I was no longer in any sports. I had no reason to go to the gym because the focus of my lifts was always on track or softball. It was extremely difficult to find the motivation to do something I thought I loved so much. I started to lose the muscle I had built up, and I spent a lot of time staring at the pictures of me from when I was so muscular. My self-esteem quickly started to decline, and I felt ugly nearly every single day. People were no longer feeding my ego and it killed me on the inside. I didn't know it then, but the real reason I was lifting was for the male and female gaze. I was never actually doing it for my own health. I was doing it because I wanted to look better than everyone else. Also, around this time, fitness on social media became a huge deal. Suddenly people were making accounts to post about their routines and their diets to help other people lose weight. It flooded all of my social media accounts, and I was constantly bodychecking myself and comparing my body and physique to models on Instagram. It was extremely detrimental to me and it ruined my mental health.

I started to worry about my diet because I wasn't working out to burn off all of the calories I ate every day. I went through these phases where one week I would binge, and the next week I wouldn't even come down for dinner. It was so hard to find a balance. At this point in my life, I had struggled horribly to find my self-worth and understand that I was the one who created my worth and not the people around me. I could not accept myself at all for who I am, and even today I still wake up worried that I'll never find someone to like me for me.

At this point, I turned to my mom for help. My mom is a nutritionist and a fitness instructor, so she knows a great deal of information about diets and exercise and how they go hand in hand. I asked her to help me get back into the gym and I also asked her to help me meal prep. Once I asked her for help, it became a bit of an obsession. I focused all of my attention on my diet and the gym and barely put any energy into anything else. I was so focused on looking like how I did when I was 15, failing to recognize that my body has changed since then. The problem with asking my mom for help is that she's always struggled with her body image too. She felt guilty about missing a class and was so bent on eating right that she cut out so many of her favorite foods. As an outsider, it looked like she was great, super healthy, and fit. As her daughter, I noticed when she was irritated because she didn't eat enough at lunch. I always looked up to her, failing to understand that her habits weren't perfect either. She struggled with her self-worth as much as I did to the point where she ended up getting a boob job. I wanted to be as fit as my mom and look like her at her age, so obviously I asked her for help. But we fed off of each other. Her bad habits bled into mine. I started taking after her, and when I put on her clothes and saw how tight they fit me it killed me inside. No way I should be the same size clothes as my mom. So finally I started going back to the gym in a consistent manner and not just whenever I felt like it, a few months before I came to Butler.

At first, I was pretty balanced. I had a 5-day workout plan that I created for myself. I spent just about an hour at the gym, doing enough to be tired but not enough to hurt myself. I did my research to find what exercises were best for my goals. The problem? I found those workouts from fitness influencers who had the body they flaunted long before they started working out. Their posts were extremely unrealistic and misleading, and I fell right into the trap. I wasn't seeing any results not knowing that their physique was something they were born with, and it was making me lose hope for myself. So I fell into this cycle of missing the gym for a week, feeling super guilty about it, and then overdoing it the week after. Not only that, but I still struggled with the same eating cycle that I had been dealing with since high school. All of this piled onto each other and created my exercise addiction. When I missed a week at the gym, I overdid it the next week just so I could feel that pain and have the feeling of being accomplished for barely being able

to walk when I left the gym. I felt so guilty when I messed up my gym schedule. I've always had my life on a specific routine and missing my gym routine made me feel extremely guilty and just elevated the negative image I had of myself. These feelings only made the addiction worse.

When I came to Butler, nothing changed. I came to the gym here and did way more than what I needed to do to be successful. I would do 12 different workouts and spent way too much time at the gym because that's how I thought I would see results. Sometimes I would hurt myself by doing too much. I brushed aside the fact that I strained a muscle in my back and hamstring during high school and continued to train them as if nothing was ever wrong. This became a form of self-harm. When people think of self-harm, they definitely don't think of the gym, but it is definitely a real problem in this day and age. The pain that comes with exercise is a type of pain that you have to work for, which is why it is so nice when you feel it. It's a twisted type of reward. So many people on social media think they are helping others get better but really they are just fishing for those compliments that make them feel worthy. The fitness community is extremely toxic, and I became a part of it.

In *Dopamine Nation*, Dr. Lembke explains the pleasure-pain scale by using the cold-water theory. Page 144 states "Michael's accidental discovery of the benefits of ice-cold water immersion is an example of how pressing on the pain side of the balance can lead to the opposite- pleasure." My exercise addiction is very similar to this. I have practiced pressing on the pain side by lifting weights until it hurts. I can spend an hour doing heavyweights and then immediately jump on the treadmill right after. By the end of it, I am tired and usually in pain. But the pain I experience presses on the pleasure side. Page 144-145 states "The pleasure we feel is our body's natural and reflexive physiological response to pain." This is a great explanation of how I feel after my workout. The pleasure that comes from putting myself through pain is enough to stop the feeling of guilt that I experience when I skip the gym. I know I overdo it sometimes, but I can't stop overdoing it and find a balance because I feel so accomplished after I use the pain and turn it into pleasure.

I definitely still struggle with my exercise addiction. It feels like no matter what I do, no amount of exercise will ever be enough. As I stated above, I feel so guilty and undesirable when I skip the gym. Even when I go to the gym, if I don't burn enough calories I feel like I didn't do anything. The pleasure-pain scale has been tipped out of balance for nearly a year for me, and it is extremely difficult to get it back to where it is supposed to be. A big part of the pleasure-pain scale is the fact that over time, I have needed to do more to trigger the pain side. I am overworking my body just so that I can tip the scale and get that small "high." It is a never-ending cycle that is hard to break, especially if you aren't aware of it. Social media has been a huge factor in my addiction, making me feel like I won't ever be good enough unless I

overwork myself. My mom has also played a big role in my addiction, sometimes helping, but usually just competing. I love my mom, but we both have our issues when it comes to working out. Exercise addiction is something that is not talked about enough, but I know in the coming years we will be able to help more people like me. Coming to terms with knowing I have a problem is the first step in changing up my bad habits, so I know that I am on the right path.