

Louisville athlete shares struggles of exercise addiction

Sep. 28

courier-journal.com



Ryan Althaus is a triathlete who is spreading awareness of exercise addictions and related eating disorders. September 14, 2012

Exercise Addiction Inventory

This questionnaire was developed by researchers to help people evaluate whether they have an exercise addiction. The more strongly a person agrees with the statements, the higher the indication of an addiction.

- Exercise is the most important thing in my life.
- Conflicts have arisen between me and my family and/or my partner about the amount of exercise I do.
- I use exercise as a way of changing my mood (e.g. to get a buzz, to escape, etc.)
- Over time I have increased the amount of exercise I do in a day.
- If I have to miss an exercise session I feel moody and irritable.
- If I cut down the amount of exercise I do, and then start again, I always end up exercising as often as I did before.

Source: “The Exercise Addiction Inventory: A New Brief Screening Tool,”

by Annabel Terry, Attila Szabo and Mark Griffiths, “Addiction Research and Theory journal, October 2004.

It was easy for Ryan Althaus to ignore the warning signs.

Everyone had been heaping praise on him since he emerged in high school in Maryland as a star long-distance runner with a lean physique and a ferocious dedication to rising mile counts and falling numbers on the stopwatch and the weight scale.

But Althaus was slowly but steadily hollowing himself out, starving himself and exercising with calorie-devouring zeal — a response, he says, to past emotional trauma and sinking self-worth.

His body broke down in college, leading to an extended hospitalization. Then came years of counseling, study and prayer to deal with a condition that therapists say is little discussed but real and deadly — an exercise addiction and a related, self-starving eating disorder.

Althaus, now 28, is telling his story publicly, and organizing a series of meetings on exercise addictions and eating disorders. The Louisville resident hopes to encourage others to learn more about the syndromes and consider whether they or someone they know is struggling with them.

“For their whole lives, everybody praises what (athletes are) doing to themselves,” said Althaus, a recent seminary graduate and candidate for Presbyterian ministry. “When I was in my worst phases, people were going, ‘I wish I could get out and work out every day. I wish I had your body fat percentage.’”

Althaus isn’t rejecting fitness. He remains an active triathlete — a grueling endurance test of running, cycling and swimming — and he is the founder of a ministry seeking to bridge the church and fitness communities.

But he said people need to keep a healthy balance — whether it’s food or exercise.

“The trick is to love it, but not need it,” he said.

While the concept of exercise addiction might seem far-fetched in a society where many struggle with chronic obesity and a lack of fitness, it's very real, said Virginia Cox Evans, a licensed clinical social worker who has been counseling patients with eating disorders for more than 20 years and who directs the Pathways Center for Eating Disorder Recovery.

"I applaud Ryan for doing this, getting people to own it, because it does kill," said Evans, whose clients have included jockeys, ballet dancers and other athletes and performers in weight-conscious fields.

Evans is scheduled to speak Sept. 24 at a new weekly discussion organized under the name Eating and Exercise Concern Group.

The sessions are scheduled for the next six Mondays at 7 p.m. at Highland Presbyterian Church, 1011 Cherokee Road.

"In no way is it saying you have an eating disorder, you have to come here," said Marguerite Duck, who is studying therapy at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. "It's a time and place to gain an understanding, whether it's for yourself or someone else."

Seeking control

Eating disorders involve extreme emotional and mental conflict with food.

They include anorexia nervosa — self-starving — and bulimia, or alternating bingeing and purging, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the standard reference of the American Psychiatric Association. The National Eating Disorders Association estimates nearly 10 million American females and 1 million males have such conditions.

Often such disorders are bound up with a history of abuse, self-contempt and striving, particularly among teenage girls and young women, to maintain model-thin weight.

The manual does not list exercise addiction as a disorder by itself, although it lists excessive exercise as a symptom of bulimia.

But experts have recognized exercise addiction in its own right in academic publications since the 1980s, alongside other behavioral addictions such as compulsive gambling and video gaming.

And in a society that showers praise on the thin, the fit and the fast, exercise addiction is one of the hardest disorders to recognize.

"It's a respected and acceptable way to regulate intake, and it's applauded," said Sondra Kronberg, a clinical nutrition therapist based in Long Island, N.Y., who counsels people with eating disorders and is a spokesperson for the National Eating Disorders Association.

But addicts are marked by doing ever-more exhaustive workouts in spite of injury, illness and ruin to careers and relationships.

"To some degree, exercise is calming and soothing and re-regulating, but it's got to be in balance," Kronberg said. When the focus on "food, weight and exercise interfere with the quality of your life, your aliveness and ultimately your health, that's the degree we're talking about a disorder."

Lasting health effects

Eating disorders can erode a person's bone density as well as their heart and other vital organs.

"When I was doing this to myself, I didn't understand what it was doing to my liver and my kidneys," Althaus said. Extreme athletes "are the ones that care so much about their bodies, they're obsessed, when in reality you're hurting your body more than anything."

The history of that disorder is difficult to read on Althaus' ruddy face, with its persistent smile and crown of golden curls.

He's become a prominent fixture of the local road-race circuit, enthusiastically leading pre-race devotionals and encouraging runners as he joins them on the course and cartwheeling across the finish line.

Althaus — who moved here to attend of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and is preparing for the Presbyterian ministry — founded Team Sweaty Sheep in 2010.

The ministry — sponsored by the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky and getting assists from supportive running-shoe stores and other organizations — aims to bring open-air worship, running-oriented Bible studies and other spiritual support to runners who prefer the road-race circuit to church on weekends.

At the same time, he's encouraging churches to get pewbound members outdoors, through everything from forming a cycling club to lining race routes and cheering on the runners.

Althaus says churches need to look at how much of their ritual and fellowship is oriented around food. Particularly in an era of epidemic obesity and diabetes, he's urging churches to promote healthier eating and non-food related fellowship.

And churches' food orientation can alienate people with eating disorders, he said.

At his low point, Althaus said he used to avoid church on communion Sundays — and when he couldn't avoid communion, he would take the bread but then discretely spit it out.

"I feared the bread," he said. Many people with eating disorders "can't see it as Christ."

Troubles growing up

Althaus, a Maryland native, traces his disorder to multiple causes.

They include an early emotional trauma that occurred when he was wrestling his father and accidentally hit a chemotherapy pump that his father was wearing. Ryan was so horrified by the pain he had caused his father, who died of cancer when Ryan was 12, that he feared ever growing big enough to hurt someone again.

Then came pressure from a high school track coach.

"He had me drop 40 pounds in a matter of weeks, and I did," Althaus said.

But Althaus began to see his self-worth as fused with his ability to keep lower his weight and running times.

He began starving himself and cooking fat-laden meals for his family — setting aside small portions of steamed vegetables for himself — afraid someone else might sneak some butter into his food.

He said he shared many of the traits of people with better-known eating disorders, but it manifested itself differently.

“When I was in the eating-disorder hospital, I was the only guy with 30 girls,” he recalled. “They were all there looking in the mirror all the time, and I was trying to stretch.”

The hospitalization didn't end his struggles — there were times when he'd exercise to exhaustion, or stop eating when sidelined by injury. He maintained an ardor for endurance sports — has been an avid marathoner since college and a triathlete in more recent years — but he said he's also learning to pace himself.

He literally schedules naps and days off from his workout regimen. He keeps a counselor on speed dial. After the recent Ironman Louisville triathlon, he scheduled an extensive time of recuperation and reading to counter post-race depression he's experienced in the past.

Adopting a stray dog, and adapting to its slow walking pace, also helped.

“We want to celebrate” athletic achievement, Althaus said. “When I went to the hospital they were like, ‘You cannot run anymore.’ ... You want to battle them instead of getting better. ... We don't want to drive people away.”

Reporter Peter Smith can be reached at (502) 582-4469.