

# EATING OR EXERCISE DISORDER GUIDELINES

This policy has been designed to assist Fernwood Club Managers, Personal Trainers, Food Coaches and other gym staff to work effectively with gym members who are at risk of developing (or have developed) an eating disorder or exercise disorder in order to sensitively and appropriately address issues of health and safety.

Eating disorders is the term used to describe several different conditions. These include Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia Nervosa and Binge Eating Disorder. The term Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified describe a group of eating disorders which may be sub clinical (where someone meets most but not all of diagnostic behavior). This category also includes people who meet all of the criteria for Anorexia Nervosa but whose weight remains within a normal weight range.

The four stage intervention process within this document has been developed by Fitness Australia in consultation with Eating Disorder and Fitness Industry experts.

## OVERVIEW

### **Our Members' Health and Safety is our First Priority**

Prevention is better than cure. It is recommended that Clubs take a preventive approach to the issues surrounding eating disorders. A full "Activity Assessment" (See FCM> Resources) is carried out with members who are observed to be engaging in excessive exercise, or where there is concern that a member has, or is developing, an eating disorder.

### **People with eating disorders have the right to engage in appropriate levels of exercise**

For some people with eating disorders, exercise will form an integral part of their recovery process.

Members with a BMI lower than 14 should not engage in any form of exercise – either at a high or low intensity level. Where there is concern about a member who is thought to be at risk, is losing weight, and whose BMI falls between 14 and 18, she should be referred to a GP.

The dangerous physical complications associated with being underweight mean that it's essential that members who are thought to have, or be at risk of developing an eating disorder should be referred to see a GP.

### **When Specialist Intervention is required**

Specialist intervention is required in the treatment and recovery of people with eating disorders and excessive exercise.

Exercise instructors, Personal Trainers and Club Managers are not therapists and are not expected to provide counselling or treatment. The role of club staff is to identify problems as they develop and to encourage the member to seek appropriate supportive, medical and psychological help.

Club staff may request that a member provide Fernwood with an activity approval form (FCM> Resources) completed by a General Practitioner and should provide the GP with a copy of the Activity Assessment which will include a recommendation about continued levels of exercise.

With the right kind of treatment, support and advice, people with eating disorders can and do recover.

Clubs must provide high-risk members with appropriate information and make every effort to encourage members with eating disorders to contact a suitable referral agency.

### **When a Membership must be suspended**

Club management reserves the right to suspend a membership or restrict the use of the club (where possible) where there is concern about the impact of exercise on a member's physical or medical condition.

Every effort is made to assist each member to participate in an appropriate type of activity. Where a member is exercising excessively, confides that they are bingeing or purging, or where their body weight, BMI, physical or medical condition indicate that there is concern for their health or safety and no level of physical activity can be considered appropriate, and where all efforts to assist the member to modify their exercise regimen to an appropriate level have failed, membership may be withdrawn or suspended, or access to the gym may be limited.

# EATING OR EXERCISE DISORDER GUIDELINES

## THE FOUR STAGE INTERVENTION PROCESS

The four stage intervention process has been developed by Fitness Australia in consultation with Eating Disorder and Fitness Industry experts.

### Stage 1: The Initial Approach

1. First, discuss the issue with a senior member of staff, preferably the manager, to determine who should approach the member and what the most appropriate course of action should be.
2. Where possible, you may wish to review the member's attendance record prior to approaching them.
3. Approach the member and ask to see them in a private place.
4. Discuss your concerns in an open and non-judgemental manner.
5. Outline your responsibilities to the member, Fernwood's policy (which is governed by Fitness Australia's guidelines) and what you require the member to do (e.g. attend an individual review of their exercise program or see a GP & have an Activity Approval Form completed).
6. Go over the member's individual program to ensure their health and safety is maintained.
7. Set a review date.
8. Document all actions in the appropriate place – e.g. FCM Contacts Page.
9. Discuss the meeting and its outcome with the Club Manager.
10. Contact an eating disorder community organisation for additional support where required.

**Remember:** The sooner you intervene, the more likely it is that you will be able to easily and successfully negotiate an amended gym program with your member. The longer someone engages in excessive exercise, the more likely she is to become entrenched in this behaviour pattern and develop a serious problem.

Relationship, rapport, tone of voice and body language are very important when addressing serious but personal issues such as these. Wherever possible, the approach should be made by the most senior member of staff who is most familiar with the member. However, it is important that the club employee does not take on the role of counsellor.

### Stage 2: Program Review

Remember the member may be feeling anxious about the review. She may also be feeling upset, angry or defensive that she has been asked to account for her exercise routine.

Reluctance to answer questions or providing vague responses usually arises from fear, anxiety or lack of trust. It is important at all times to maintain a non-threatening, sincere approach, to reiterate that you are there to help and that you have a responsibility to ensure her health and safety comes first.

It is also important to acknowledge acceptance her thoughts and feelings about the situation and to give her an opportunity to ask questions.

**During the exercise program review you should:**

1. Complete the Activity Assessment Form (FCM > Resources > Human Resources) gathering as much information about the current exercise regimen as possible. Remember to ask about incidental activity such as walking, plus activity taken outside the gym – e.g. swimming, running, cycling.
2. Steer the conversation by asking the member to elaborate, returning to a subject that was skimmed over by using encouraging words or gestures.

# EATING OR EXERCISE DISORDER GUIDELINES

3. Take the member's BMI:
  - a. If the BMI falls below 18, ask the member to get her GP to complete the Activity Approval Form, (FCM > Resources > Human Resources) and have her sign an Information Release Form (FCM > Resources > Human Resources), so that you are able to contact the GP where necessary.
  - b. If the member's BMI is within the normal range but exercise is excessive, develop a new individual exercise plan, based on the information you have gathered, in collaboration with the member. Consider her likes and dislikes, discuss the appropriate amount of exercise, target heart-rate, perceived level of exertion, benefits of variety etc.
4. Set a review date for the new exercise plan – make sure this is a relatively short period of time (e.g. 1-2 weeks).
5. Document all actions in the appropriate place – e.g. FCM Contacts Page.
6. Discuss the outcome of the meeting with the Club Manager.
7. Contact an eating disorder community organisation for additional support where required.

## Stage 3: Reviewing the New Plan

If all goes well, the amended program will have reduced the amount of exercise time spent in the gym and you will see some improvement in the member's nutritional status by an increase in weight and BMI. (Refer to: Discussion guide Option A, Fitness Australia Guidelines First edition 2004 FCM > Resources) From here, you may wish to monitor the member's progress over a number of months and occasionally thereafter – discuss the options with her and make the decision together.

Alternatively, the member may have made some of the recommended changes, but not all, and you may decide to go over the amended program once more and ensure that your requirements are clearly understood (i.e. that the member reduces the amount of exercise she is doing) and that any difficulties with the amended program are identified. (Refer to: Discussion Guide Option B, Fitness Australia Guidelines First edition 2004 FCM > Resources)

It is important to schedule a second follow-up session within a fairly short space of time – i.e. 2-4 weeks. If the member continues to have difficulties or loses more weight, it may be necessary to take further action (see Stage 4).

If the member has continued to lose weight, had difficulty reducing the level of exercise or has increased it, or has simply increased her level of activity outside the gym to compensate, then it will be necessary to request that the member visit her general practitioner for a medical review (see Stage 4). This is likely to cause the member to feel humiliated, upset or angry, so it is important to maintain a firm and honest, but non-threatening and non-judgemental manner. Wherever necessary, provide the member with written materials to support what it is that you are saying (FCM > Resources) and suggest that they contact the Eating Disorder organisation in their State Fitness Australia guidelines First edition 2004 FCM > Resources) for additional referral options.

Document all outcomes in the appropriate place e.g. FCM Contacts page, and be sure to debrief with the Club Manager after each meeting takes place. Addressing excessive exercise and issues surrounding eating disorders can be difficult and anxiety provoking for the staff member involved. Additional support can be sought from the eating disorder organisation in your State.

## Stage 4: Taking further Action

Unfortunately, there will be some members who are unable to make the appropriate changes to their exercise regimen, or who continue to lose weight, requiring you to take further action.

Asking someone who is exercising excessively or has an eating disorder to obtain a Doctor's approval to exercise may seem like a daunting task. However, if you maintain a warm and concerned approach and provide clear information about your Club policy, your responsibilities as an exercise specialist, and exactly what you require the member to do, things should not be too difficult.

# EATING OR EXERCISE DISORDER GUIDELINES

## Taking further action involves:

- a) Asking the member to visit their GP for a medical assessment and providing you with an Activity Approval Form completed by that GP.
- b) Getting the member to sign a Release Form so you can discuss the situation with the GP if necessary.
- c) Providing the member's GP with a copy of the completed Activity Assessment Form
- d) Monitoring the member's progress and, in some instances
- e) Limiting access to the gym, or
- f) Suspending their membership if they are not willing to make any changes, they don't have medical approval to exercise and their physical condition is obviously deteriorating
- g) Informing other employees of the gym of the outcome of each of these activities and recording information in the member's file or wherever appropriate
- h) Discussing the outcome of the meeting with the Club Manager.
- i) Contacting an eating disorder community organisation for additional support where required.

## Important Point:

Once a referral to a GP has been made, the GP is then responsible for weighing the member, working out her BMI and making recommendations to you for the amount and type of exercise she can do. Make sure you discuss the process of who will do what with the GP to avoid giving the member conflicting messages and reduce her anxiety.

## Resources

Fitness Australia Guidelines, fact sheets, discussion scripts First edition 2004 (FCM > Resources> Human Resources)

Activity approval form (FCM > Resources)

Release form (FCM > Resources)

Example referral letter (FCM > Resources)

Activity assessment (FCM > Resources)

Additional information [www.eatingdisorders.org.au](http://www.eatingdisorders.org.au)

Eating Disorders Helpline – 1300 550 236 or [help@eatingdisorders.org.au](mailto:help@eatingdisorders.org.au) (Mon-Fri 9:30-5pm)

<http://www.eatingdisorders.org.au/resources/edv-fact-sheets>