



## Is it safe to count steps?

Logically, smartwatches and fitness trackers that count steps, monitor the heart rate and calculate calorie consumption should be perceived by exercise addicts as the best thing since sliced bread. The truth, however, is that these gadgets often work to the addicts' disadvantage since they have the habit of warning the bearer when they ought to slow down or stop – news which an addict does not care much for. Instead, the digital health revolution is mainly applauded by healthy gym-goers and people who want to get in shape and therefore exercise moderately.

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struggle to concentrate and, paradoxically, see their physical performance get reduced rather than improved.

Warning signs to look out for, according to Danish research, are the mindset that exercise is the most important part of life, exercise habits that cause conflict with friends and family and the need to constantly increase the amount of exercise you do in order to feel some kind of temporary satisfaction. Over-generalisation and dichotomous black-and-white thinking is common, according to ABIDE. For instance, a person can make a deal with herself that says that she cannot eat if she doesn't run 20 kilometres, or tell herself that she will become obese if she doesn't hit the treadmill right this minute.

According to the same research, exercise addicts experience withdrawal symptoms in the same way that alcoholics and compulsive gamblers do. Whenever their muscles aren't moving, they feel frustrated, restless and guilty. States of rest and relaxation only make the exercise addict uncomfortable, according to ABIDE.

### HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

At what point exactly does a healthy habit become dangerous? A new report published in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology, which was incidentally conducted at a Danish University, suggests that the upper exercise limit might be lower than what experts previously believed. Researchers studied 1,000 people over a 12-year period and found that those who only did 2.5 hours of moderate jogging per week were the healthiest. The exercise recommendations made in the context of the study are much lower than

what most countries recommend. Yet, the scientists were unapologetic when presenting their findings. They insisted that one does not actually have to do a great amount of exercise for the positive health impact to occur, while stressing that there should be an upper limit.

However, the study has been criticised for being too limited to draw conclusions from (for instance, only 36 test persons were classified as strenuous joggers). According to Johnny Ah Yan, there is certainly no need for people who exercise more than 2.5 hours a week to worry. "Research is often contradictory but what we know is that a routine that consists of 30 minutes of exercise three times a week is healthy, while one that consists of the same amount of exercise five times a week is even better," he said.

What if people feel comfortable with working out every day, then? Does that make them addicts? Not necessarily. "Exercising every day can be healthy, as long as it is done in the right way," Ah Yan said. He explained that those who want to hit the gym on a daily basis need to alternate their routine so that different groups of muscles are active on different days. That way, the muscles are still given the time that they need to recover.

Fitness enthusiasts who are aware that their routine is intense are advised by Ah Yan to monitor themselves through conducting a simple test. "If during an intense work-out they are so out-of-breath that they cannot even talk, they are pushing their bodies too hard," he said. "It's alright to uphold that level of intensity for short periods of time but not for hours!" he stressed. Unless, that is, you want to put yourself in the risk zone of developing an addiction, which is a slippery slope to go down. ■



BY GARETH ROWLANDS\*

## Battling dementia

Both mental and physical exercises can stem the onset of Alzheimer's disease and dementia because they stimulate parts of the brain dealing with memory. Mental exercises have been known to reactivate some parts of the brain that may have become dormant by supporting the growth of new brain cells as well as promoting communication between various nerve cells involved with memory.

Many elderly people can be encouraged to adopt a do-it-yourself approach by selecting any simple words and numbers to exercise with. Obviously, the bigger the words and numbers, the more difficult the exercises become. They can work through the four or five letter words in the dictionary alphabetically. By working in pairs or in groups, the exercises can be more enjoyable not only for the elderly but also for their carers. Other mental exercises such as Sudoku, crossword puzzles and scrabble are also beneficial as brain-stimulating exercises but the simpler the exercises are, the better.

There are a number of mentally stimulating exercises which also provide fun and amusement:

- writing the letters of one's name backwards;
- writing down the numbers from 1 to 10 backwards;
- saying or writing the odd numbers up to 10;
- saying or writing the even numbers up to 10;
- writing the numbers 4, 3, 8 and 1 in ascending order;
- writing the numbers 6, 9, 2 and 3 in descending order;
- reciting or writing days of the week and months of the year backwards;
- memorising shopping lists;

- using one's left hand instead of the right hand if one is 'right handed' for activities such as brushing one's teeth, dialling a number, eating, using one's keyboard, combing one's hair, using the computer mouse or even using one's non-dominant hand to perform basic domestic activities such as stirring tea, pouring water, opening and shutting taps, opening and shutting doors, cutting cakes, opening a bottle or packet and cleaning surfaces;

- involving as many of the five senses as possible at the same time such as getting dressed in the dark, listening to music whilst smelling flowers, singing whilst working or drawing pictures whilst singing;

- selecting different travel routes instead of the usual one, for example, different routes from home to the shop.

An active lifestyle spent in an intellectually-stimulating atmosphere having plenty of interesting company can certainly compensate for some forms of brain damage whilst reading, writing, singing, reading aloud, learning a new language, playing Scrabble, completing crossword puzzles, playing Sudoku or a musical instrument are magnificent ways of stimulating the brain.

These are much preferred activities to watching TV when the brain is sent to a neutral state and is void of thinking.

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"MENTAL EXERCISES HELP REACTIVATE SOME PARTS OF THE BRAIN."