Active Recovery: Physical Activity as a Coping Strategy for Abuse

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Abstract
Survivors of abuse report coping strategies that include negative health behaviors such as drinking, smoking, overeating, and isolation. However, some studies (Babyak et al., 2000; Eriksson & Gard, 2011) assert that physical activity holds the capacity to reduce these mental health disparities and may serve as a beneficial strategy to escape, comprehend, or respond appropriately to abusive situations. This present study qualitatively examines the influence of physical activity in the lives of six women who report past experience with a form of abuse and seek counseling from a local center. The findings identify positive outcomes for victims that increased or sustained physical activity levels in order to manage the effects of abuse.

Keywords: physical activity; exercise; abuse; coping; behavior; health

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There are few investigations of the relationship between physical, emotional or verbal abuse, and subsequent physical activity levels. When individuals experience abuse, questions arise about how to react. Positive responses traditionally include seeking out relational support,
spiritual encouragement, or professional services. Considering that other strategies offer similar benefits, what factors determine whether victims of abuse utilize physical activity as a coping mechanism?

Abuse, repeated improper and unjust treatment, may overpower its targets and hold them in this vulnerable position. Subjects of abuse direct less focus toward taking care of one’s self and more toward avoiding another abusive episode. Many victims often shy away from intellectual and educational scenarios, choose to cope alone instead of reach out for support, or even ignore the body’s health needs, which this study will explore.

Alternatively, some victims may experience a sense of ownership over their life in spite of others’ forcefully negative impacts. Such individuals may find a stronger drive towards higher education or job promotion, reaching out for a community of support, or increasing their levels of physical activity to gain better control over their well-being (Anderson, Renner, & Danis, 2012).

When placed in an abusive situation, individuals may choose to either accept or overcome their circumstances. So what determines their answer to this weighted decision? Could external factors alter this? Is a certain approach more beneficial? Through discussions with persons who have experienced abuse, research explores possible answers to these questions. This study hopes to assist victims of abuse along with clarification of beneficial coping strategies available.

**Literature Review**

Contributors to the health field widely accept the idea of an “inverse relationship between physical activity and mental health” (Babyak et al., 2000). The more that an individual engages in an active lifestyle the less they will experience mental health disparities. Exercise has the ability to enhance levels of job and housework performance, social activeness, and effectiveness of treatments concerning psychological wellbeing (Dugmore et al., 1998). From a treatment perspective, exercise may drastically lower levels of depression and anxiety as well. Coincidentally and conversely, victims of abuse are more prone to disparities such as financial struggles, job insecurity and an unsupportive, stress inducing environment (Elisberg, Winkvist, Pena & Stenlund, 2001). However, few researches support physical activity’s aid in coping specifically with abusive experiences.

Each individual’s experience with abuse is unique and his or her reactions or coping strategies vary as well. Perception of conditions typically determines the mechanism chosen to overcome circumstances, which is why victims utilize social and spiritual support techniques most often (Anderson et al., 2012). From this support, victims may gain strength to prevail along with the ability to view suffering in a different, more beneficial light. Other successful intervention strategies applied are legal and policy based or through emergency departments (Wathen & MacMillan, 2003). Attempting to derive a conclusion, if what a victim of abuse needs is what physical activity has the ability to offer, could this become a more advantageous and exercised coping strategy?
Research Purpose

The effects of abuse may easily diminish quality of life mentally, emotionally and physically. Research has consistently shown that exercise offers balance and improvements to all these aspects of everyday living (Dugmore et al., 1998). Connecting these two issues has the potential to formulate strategies to cope with past negative experiences or current abuse. No individual deserves or can even control these harmful acts done to him or her. Being able to control reactions and perceptions, however, could return quality back to life. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to determine whether physical activity may be a beneficial coping mechanism for individuals experiencing some form of abuse.

Methodology

The researcher used a focus group and thematic analysis techniques for this qualitative study. Collaboration with a local counseling center in South Mississippi provided subjects and a meeting location. From advertisements through social media related to this center and word of mouth between patients, six female volunteers participated in the 50-minute discussion group. The participants signed a consent form before the recording of the study began, acknowledging confidentiality. The researcher asked participants a series of open-ended questions related to their experiences and views of physical activity as it relates to coping strategies against abuse. The researcher then transcribed the audio recording of this focus group and analyzed it for themes. Four key points stood out from this analysis: relationships between abuse and activity level, the many coping strategies exercise offers in one, initial reactions and effects thereof, and determinants of the coping strategy chosen.

Results

The trauma abuse inflicts on its victims permeates beyond the surface level and drives people to various health changing coping strategies. According to focus group participants, many of these coping strategies included alcohol consumption, overeating and most commonly isolation. Often times, confrontations with abusers or their own inner battles about the abuse were too much to bear. Not dealing with the issue was much easier and seemingly less painful or damaging for a majority of the subjects. Non-interactive, lifeless activities consumed their lives even though all of these women attributed their survival to relationships and life-giving activities, among them regular exercise. Although increasing activity levels is not the typical initial reaction to solving or dealing with these inherent issues, many of the participants stated that physical activity might serve as a better alternative. In most cases, these women later engaged in that physical activity which brought about more positive, life-changing results.

Relationships between Abuse and Activity Level

Throughout discussions with the participants, a relationship between the fight to survive the abuse and the level of physical activity became evident. One participant stated, “As the abuse progressed verbally, I just gave up and gained a lot of weight and didn’t care anymore and lost my self-esteem.” As conditions worsened with these victims, desire drifted further away from self-care toward retreating and just accepting the abuse. They chose to stop confronting the
abuse and gave up the fight altogether. The isolationism limited these participants to work and
the couch, where “not living at all” was the norm. As these women gave up on themselves and
hope of a brighter future, negative consequences, such as poor health, increasingly overtook their
lives, even for those who previously had exceptionally healthy habits. One woman noted, “I just
quit. I gained probably, I had never had much of a weight problem, and I gained about 70 or 80
pounds.” So, if abuse contributes to less healthy behavior, a healthy coping mechanism, like
exercise, may help to manage those abusive instances until the individual could leave the
situation.

The Best of All Worlds

Participants noted that physical activity offered several different coping strategies,
reporting better sleep, reduced osteoporosis, energy, and relaxation as benefits of increased
activeness, even within the parameters of enduring abusive episodes. Many participants made
remarks on fleeing from isolation and clearing the mind as priority needs for engaging in
physical activity as their means for coping with abuse. The gym atmosphere met both of these
needs and improved motivation and mood. For example, one participant discussed aspects of
abuse, isolation and physical activity in this manner,

*It’s almost like you don’t have any skills left. I didn’t know anybody or really talk to
anybody, but it felt good. It felt good to be around people. And if I did socialize a little
bit, that was fine, but if I didn’t, that was okay too. Just being out and away from just
sitting at home or being alone all the time just really helped a lot. And the gym was a
safe place to do that.*

Feeling and observing normalcy in a typical environment encouraged some of the participants to
handle their abuse and increase motivation for change. That motivation and subsequently, the
heightened self-esteem, which abuse strips away, helps to focus and rebuild those who need a
life change.

Regardless if you are on a leisurely walk or pounding the pavement, physical activity
brings the mind back into focus and can help relieve mental tension. The participants described
the time away as an opportunity to “*just think about things and go.*” Whether they engaged in
breathing exercises in Yoga, a focus on each breath with a walk, or intensity with elevated
cardiovascular activity, the connection between breathing and thinking proved beneficial for
these respondents. When the mind is racing or aching, different forms of fitness can act as an
escape and bring the body and then the mind back under control.

According to the participants, physical activity also encouraged healthy behaviors in the
midst of negative situations. As with other, various coping strategies, when one’s mind or body
is preoccupied with a task (i.e. drinking, eating or exercising), the focus does not center solely
on the abuse. A participant who coped with compulsive overeating offered this explanation,

*You see me sitting here with the Kindle? This was the other escape. If it wasn’t food, it
was a book. And preferably, it was a book and food, because the book kept the mind
occupied and the food kept the hand and the mouth occupied.*
Physical activity may also relieve aggression and redirect focus. One participant stated,

*I know a lot of times when I go out walking: I start in a very aggressive, like oh I can’t believe it. And I’ll relive the whole situation in my head. The more I walk the more I calm down.*

As a coping mechanism, physical activity provides the escape necessary to refocus one’s thoughts in a positive manner and redirect an individual towards what is important, survival skills and moving forward.

**Initial Reactions and Effects Thereof**

One of the main goals of this study was to explore perspectives of women who have experienced some form of abuse and the role physical activity played as a coping mechanism. For most of these participants, the initial reaction to an abusive episode was to shut down. They kept to themselves and felt the need to “withdraw from everything.” For one woman,

*Whenever I encountered an incident with him, really kind of made me want to go into a depression and not do anything. My first instinct is not oh, I want to go workout. It’s mostly, I want to go lay in bed.*

Retreating made the participants believe their abuser may be less inclined to inflict harm. If they do nothing, then what can they do wrong?

*It’s like, when you’re depressed, you know you should exercise. You know it makes you feel better. But then, because you’re depressed, you’re not motivated to go and do it.*

However, physical activity can serve as an appropriate coping mechanism when utilized as a means to manage the effects abuse. One participant described how she used the gym every time she boarded the “crazy train,”

*And if you hop on that crazy train, you know I could hop on a treadmill and go a couple miles and the anxiety attack, everything, just all calms down. It has saved me from doing a lot of stupid stuff. And I was just like no; let me go do this first. And the hardest thing about exercise is putting your shoes on. Tell myself I don’t care if you just walk. Do something because you’re on the crazy train. It’s just been a real lifesaver.*

**Determinants of Coping Strategy Chosen**

So, what determines if individuals take advantage of physical activity as a coping strategy? Physical activity may not be a cure for those who endure abuse at the hands of others, but rather a possible coping strategy during abusive episodes and a means to provide support to individuals seeking to make changes in their lives. One participant said,

*And so when I found myself doing those patterns and I stop and I say this is not right and I am going to cope with this differently. I am not going to let this consume my entire life*
again. I have other ways to do this. I can get up. I can go to the gym. I can get out of this thing.

Another participant knew that she turned to a book or TV instead of overeating when there were people around. She was not alone, and she realized that she could use that to her advantage.

The main factors the participants stated that could have altered the way they handled their abuse were relational support and education of benefits or personal testimonies. Joining friends on their evening walks, answering phone calls to get their “butt off that couch and go to the doctor,” or receiving “a swift kick in the butt” were effective approaches from outside support for these participants. The support and encouragement made a tremendous difference.

Somewhere along the line, I ended up hating myself and blaming myself for the whole thing. If somebody could have been there... could have helped me appreciate who I was, that I was an okay person and there was nothing wrong with me and nothing happening was your fault, that would have helped me tremendously with being able to cope.

Another respondent agreed,

If there had been even from a distance, even if they knew and I wasn’t able to leave at the time, you know, “that’s okay I love you,” instead of reinforcing in my head that it was my fault and I deserved it.

Physical activity can provide additional support and encouragement. Those in coaching and support roles have the capacity to encourage the building of a healthy body and a healthy mind. Many trainers and workout partners will work with an individual to set goals, remove obstacles, and affirm self-worth and capacity that abusive behaviors may strip away. One participant suggested that the benefits that have occurred in her life with exercise might be a source of hope for others. “I see this working in your life, maybe it can help me.”

Participants also articulated the concept of balance as significant. Every participant mentioned the importance of having a balanced, centered, or middle-grounded life. Many factors play a role, but relationships, faith, and spiritual well-being were the most common factors. All three may go hand in hand; one participant stated, “Spiritual exercise benefits the body to me more than physical.”

Conclusion

This study indicates that physical activity holds the capacity to assist in coping with instances of abuse, whether it is physical, verbal or emotional. Victims of abuse need an outlet to harness or relieve anger, fear, anxiety, depression or self-doubt. While the negative situations at home, work, or wherever the abuse originates from may remain out of their control, consciously choosing physical activity as an outlet will provide a coping mechanism to refocus energies and effectively deal with the consequences of abuse.
References


