



Are everyday exercisers crossing the line?

An investigation of participants' relationships with physical activity and eating

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Orthorexia Athletica (OA)

Orthorexia (from Greek 'orthos' – straight, correct, right; and from Latin 'orexis' – appetite, hunger) is often described as starting innocently with a desire, for instance, to improve one's diet and/or eating habits or general health.

OA is characterised by the compulsive misuse of healthy food in combination with obsessive exercise.

A lack of sociologically grounded research on how the culture of certain sports and/or other forms of participation (e.g. elite performance, club-based, informal) can contribute to higher incidence of OA.

Research Question:

What are the prevalent beliefs and practices around eating and exercising among formal and informal exercisers?

Methods:

Surveys, photo elicitation interviews and vignettes

Participants:

Exercisers (18+) who participate in formal and informal sport / physical activity in the metropolitan area of Perth W.A

“Informal sport participation refers to participation that takes place outside of the formal affiliated structure of sport” (Jeanes, et al., 2024)

Self-perceptions

		Female	Male	Informal	Formal
How satisfied are you with your weight and body shape?	Extremely satisfied	5.97%	3.84%	4.76%	6.66%
	Somewhat satisfied	38.80%	46.15%	38.09%	46.66%
	Satisfied	19.40%	19.23%	20.63%	16.66%
	Dissatisfied	32.83%	23.07%	31.74%	26.66%
	Extremely dissatisfied	2.98%	7.69%	4.75%	3.33%
	TOTAL	67	26	63	30
How important is it to be physically fit and conditioned compared to other people?	Extremely important	19.40%	19.23%	19.04%	20.00%
	Quite important	31.34%	42.30%	36.05%	30.00%
	Somewhat important	25.37%	26.92%	23.80%	30.00%
	Not important	23.88%	11.53%	20.63%	20.00%
	TOTAL	67	26	63	30

“I’m not an elite athlete, but I suppose, I’m an athlete in some sort ... I need to be active – I feel I need to be active a couple of times a day... Everyone wants to become a better athlete”
 (Johanna, 50+ years of age, informal exerciser)

“I’ve just got a bit of a pot belly and I want to get rid of it”
 (Nicole, 50+ years of age, formal sport participant)

“So, I’m not a professional [athlete], but I’ve got quite heavy into the health and fitness side of things ... I train regularly – I’m pretty dedicated to training, but I wouldn’t consider myself elite ... I just did one of those body scans, and it said that I was an athlete in my body composition”
 (Oriana, 30-39 years of age, informal exerciser)

“I like being the size I am, and I work hard to be the size I am, but I don’t need to be smaller than that. I was probably very comfortable being a size bigger and a bit, and I was eating other things, but due to health issues I make the choice to be like this”
 (Sarah, 50+ years of age, informal exerciser)

Standards and expectations

High Standards	Work	Sport	Appearance	Personal
Male	68%	60%	36%	60%
Female	79%	46%	40%	72%
Formal	72%	66%	45%	62%
Informal	78%	43%	37%	71%

“I think that sums up some of my traits that I bring into – just always looking forward, focusing, determined. And yeah, I guess looking forward as well. I’m not great at it. I’m trying to get better at if I make mistakes, just to be like, “Right, what's next?” like move forwards, look forwards, don’t dwell on that mistake. Because yeah, I get quite perfectionistic, and I often focus on those mistakes rather than doing better next time”
(Emily, 30-39 years of age, formal sport participant)

“I like the track and field because it is individual. I tailor my own training to what suits me. I don’t have to do training that suits everybody basically. And I like that – because I don’t like to rely on other people, I like that it’s just me having to rely on myself”
(Isabel, 40-49 years of age, formal sport participant)

	Need to be in control	Household	Work	Sport	Appearance	Nutrition	Children’s activities / behaviour
Male		35%	48%	58%	32%	38%	16%
Female		45%	52%	40%	33%	46%	25%
Formal		36%	38%	52%	38%	28%	10%
Informal		46%	56%	42%	31%	52%	28%

Attitudes relating to food

		Female	Male	Informal	Formal
Have you ever felt guilty after eating food that you consider to be unhealthy?	Not really	8.82%	22.22%	9.37%	19.35%
	Sometimes	36.76%	33.33%	43.75%	19.35%
	Often	16.17%	22.22%	14.06%	25.80%
	Very often	25.00%	18.51%	20.31%	29.03%
	Always	13.23%	3.70%	12.5%	6.45%
	TOTAL		68	27	64
How anxious / distressed do you feel if you do not have access to food you consider to be healthy?	I do not feel anxious/distressed at all	29.41%	42.30%	29.68%	40.00%
	A little anxious/distressed	29.41%	34.61%	26.56%	40.00%
	Somewhat anxious/distressed	36.76%	19.23%	37.50%	20.00%
	Extremely anxious distressed	4.41%	3.84%	6.25%	0.00%
	TOTAL		68	26	64

“I have certainly eaten meals like that in the past [a burger with chips] ... it’s certainly not a regular occurrence for me. Not only does it look unhealthy with the cheese and the bacon and the fries, but also it does look like a lot of food... But there are days where I’ve not eaten enough or my cravings are going through the roof or I’m coping with a difficult workload and I’m just – throw caution to the wind and go for it”
 (Leo, 25-29 years of age, informal exerciser)

“I guess it’s more of an awareness of what I’m putting in. And the elements of guilt sometimes filter in... There’s a mental element to it as well, and with everything that’s out there telling us, “This is good for you, this is bad for you”, it’s that guilt thing I mentioned before. I think everybody probably suffers from that, say, “I probably shouldn’t eat this”, but you do anyway”
 (Nicole, 50+ years of age, formal sport participant)

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