

Faith & Fitness: Exercise good, but only in moderation

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NEW YORK (ABP) — The sixth chapter of First Corinthians describes the body as “a temple of the Holy Spirit.” For many Christians that means what they do with their body matters to God, including physical fitness. A few, however, caution that too much focus on “temple care” can become a sin.

In his book [*Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power and the Only Hope that Matters*](#), author Tim Keller defines an idol as “anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”

That includes even things normally thought of as good, like exercise.

While it’s easy to think about idols as statues in a temple somewhere, Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City, says idols are everywhere. “Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the good things in life,” he says.

Keller defines a counterfeit god as “anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.”

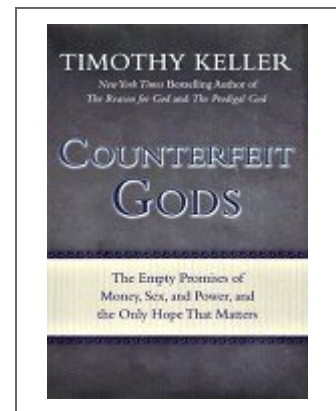
Pastor Mike Higgins of [*Redemption Fellowship*](#), a conservative African-American church in Fayette County, Ga., aligned with the Presbyterian Church in America, says he has dealt with idols of exercise and physical appearance many years.

The problem began for Higgins when he felt shame after failing an Army physical fitness test in the late 1970s. “I have been running ever since,” he

wrote in a recent blog. He never failed another test and usually scored the maximum, but it never was good enough, and he never enjoyed it.

“A lot of my marathon training was motivated out of the fear of dropping out of a race, and so I found myself overdoing it and only by God’s grace not seriously injuring myself,” he said. “I still work out consistently; however, as a result of understanding how my heart functions, I am not controlled by physical fitness—although it is very tempting.”

M.S. Bhatia, a psychiatrist in India, says about 1 percent of the population suffers what he calls “exercise addiction.” Among athletes like elite runners, competitive weightlifters, endurance athletes and obsessive gym-goers, he believes the percentage is even higher.



In an article in the *Delhi Psychiatry Journal*, Bhatia described the compulsion as physical activity that “significantly interferes with important activities, occurs at inappropriate times or in inappropriate settings or when the individual continues to exercise despite injury or other medical complications.”

Scientific studies have shown that when taken to extremes, physical activity can develop into addictive-like behavior. Committed runners often report feelings of euphoria nicknamed “runner’s high.” Over time they increase the distance to achieve feelings of well-being, similar to increasing tolerance related to substance abuse. Like addiction, exercise compulsion

can cause difficulties in social interaction and when suppressed, elicit feelings like depression, irritability and anxiety.

In a study published last August in the American Psychological Association journal *Behavioral Neuroscience*, Tufts University professor [Robin Kanarek](#) found similarities in rat studies between withdrawal from excessive running and morphine.

Doctors in recent years have recognized a new eating disorder called “exercise bulimia.” Bulimia nervosa is an illness where people binge by eating very large amounts of food and then use inappropriate means to rid their bodies of the food by vomiting, laxatives or water pills in order to prevent gaining weight.

“Individuals are overly concerned with weight and body image,” Debra Wood, a registered nurse with Baptist Health Systems in Jackson, Miss., said in an article on the group’s website. “In some, excessive exercise or fasting may replace or supplement purging.”



Experts say exercise bulimia particularly is threatening because it is so hard to diagnose.

“You can’t tell from the behavior necessarily whether this is an exercise bulimic or a regular exerciser,” Dr. Charles Murkofsky with the Program for Managing Eating Disorders told CNN in 1996. “You really need to know

what a person is thinking and what is motivating them.”

One problem is that doctors constantly preach exercise is good, because it lowers the risk of certain diseases and improves cardiovascular health. “They’ve been told all their lives that exercise is good for them, and they’re doing a lot of it, so that must be even better,” nutritionist Sondra Kronberg told CNN.

Heidi Fingar, a former fitness instructor turned wellness and lifestyle coach in Hilton Head, S.C., describes her own struggle with exercise bulimia in a new book, [*God is in Your Full-Length Mirror*](#).

In a recent story in the *Beaufort Gazette*, Fingar recalled bingeing on gallons of ice cream, and then exercising up to 15 hours a week to compensate. At the height of her addiction, she was up and running at 5 a.m., teaching two to three exercise classes a day and running triathlons and half marathons.

That was until she decided to turn her desire for a Hollywood figure over to God. By cutting back to moderate exercise and improving her diet, she says she is now smaller than when she constantly dieted, fasted and over-trained.

“My message is that God has the answers for every struggle that life throws us, including the struggle with food,” Fingar said of the book.

The key is getting into a relationship with God and learning what causes you to overeat, she said.

“If you don’t change a person’s attitudes and beliefs, you won’t change for good,” Fingar said. “The last thing we have got to triumph over in order to lead clean lives, to live before God, is overeating. I look at overeating as the final frontier.”

