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Improving addicted patients' quality of life through exercise

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Introduction: Quality of life is a well-established outcome within clinical practice. Despite substance use disorders' adverse effects on a wide range of patients' functioning and the multidimensional composition of quality of life, the treatment field does not yet systematically assess quality of life among patients. Exercise has established positive effects on the quality of life of healthy and numerous clinical populations. The potential to integrate exercise within treatment in order to improve quality of life has not been satisfactorily explored.

Aims: To measure changes in quality of life after group exercise among residential substance use disorder patients, and to explore the feasibility of the program within a treatment setting.

Method: Thirty-five patients in four long-term, residential substance use disorder treatment facilities in Oslo enrolled in a 10-week group exercise program. Twenty-four participants exercised and were analyzed as completers, while eleven did not and were analyzed as non-completers. Quality of life, mental distress, somatic health burden, and addiction severity were measured at program start and end.

Results: The program was feasible for participants, and the completion rate was 69%. Completers' physical health domain and psychological health domain of quality of life improved significantly. The program engaged the most physically and mentally vulnerable participants, and flexibility and motivational factors were important elements.

Discussion: This study provides promising evidence that low doses of group exercise can yield appreciable benefits, even to patients with more severe health problems.

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