

The relationship between eating disorders and motivation in cardio-based fitness classes

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Fitness classes are considered high-risk sports in the development of eating disorders besides aesthetic sports, weight division sports, endurance sports and low weight performance sports; nevertheless, studies on eating disorders (ED) in fitness activities are rare. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between ED and motivation among females in cardio-based fitness classes. In all, 1270 females (M=23.68 years-old, SD=3.04) completed a questionnaire incorporating among others the Eating Attitude Test (EAT-26), the Body Shape Questionnaire (BSQ-8C), questions about weight-loss methods and an open-ended question allowing to evaluate the main motivation to practise fitness sports. In addition, 40 females practising fitness sports and suffering of ED (15) or not suffering of ED (25) were interviewed. Quantitative data indicated that motivations for fitness sport were principally related to health (64.16% of females), followed by appearance and weight management (13.77%); enjoyment was rarely cited (7.36%). In our sample, 10.31% of females reached the critical threshold reflecting ED (EAT score >20). The “exercise for weight/appearance” motivation was associated with eating disorder indicators such as a higher EAT-26 score, a higher body dissatisfaction, a higher frequency and a longer use of weight-loss methods. Qualitative data showed similar results: females interviewed with ED practiced sport with the single motivation of weight/appearance management. More precisely, three sub-logics emerged: a “lose weight logic”, a “body control logic”, and a “compensatory logic”. On the other hand, among interviewed females without ED, the weight/appearance management was important but accompanied by other important motivations : social, psychological, physical health reasons and sometimes also enjoyment. Showing important differences in sport motivation between females with and without ED, our results underline the importance to understand motivation for sport participation to improve ED prevention strategies.