

## Call Us Crazy

--Kori L. Propst, MS, LPC, LWMC

Can we call what we do competitive neuroses? Webster's defines "neuroses" as a term generally used to describe a nonpsychotic mental illness which triggers feelings of distress and anxiety and impairs functioning. For many of us, competitive bodybuilding does in fact (and must in my opinion) alter almost every aspect of our lives. Our behavior within community, school, in relationships, and at home all change to accommodate the changes necessary to achieve a competitive level physique. I was asked by a colleague recently as I was dieting for Internationals how we'd know if what we were doing was "crazy." We're told by plenty of people in our lives how "crazy" we are to do what we do. In their eyes we most certainly are—they could not imagine putting themselves through such a structured, disciplined, stringent routine. The suffering! If we look at "crazy" through a mental health lens we wouldn't be categorized as such unless we were struggling to stay afloat in various areas of our lives. Is your relationship suffering? Have you been fired from your job? Are you unable to care for yourself? Are your finances in upheaval due to your bodybuilding goals? Is your health declining to a point unnecessary to succeed in the sport? Have you become isolated and depressed? You might ask yourself also what your intentions are within the sport and what you are willing to give up to win. If you can honestly say you'd give up your family, priorities need to be restructured.

Let's look at Mr. S. He competed in 2006 as an amateur bodybuilder. He developed his routine with the utmost determination, pulling in his honest buddies, family members, and bodybuilding gurus for feedback and critique. His posing was meticulously practiced, photos renewed with each hourly session. He purchased his suit after consulting with multiple competitors, researching online costume designers, and making various alterations once he received it. His diet was much the same. Leaving nothing to chance he cut out all foods he couldn't measure with precision. Mashed potatoes—forget it! The volume of one half cup could vary from the next half cup. Fruit- out! How would fructose affect his fat burning? He developed a schematic for his training sessions beginning from the day he started his diet all the way up to Peak Week. Strength, volume, and weights were all accounted for. He followed it to the number. Neurotic? Perhaps. Driven? Absolutely! But where do we draw the line? What are his reasons for competing?

Each individual will have varying reasons for becoming involved in bodybuilding. We are shaped as we mature in ways that we may not be conscious of by our environments, our caregivers, our peers, and our experiences. We are driven toward goals and develop behaviors, skills, and coping mechanisms that effectively serve us at certain times in our lives. Bodybuilding for some may be an escape from reality. We focus on externals- the size and density of our muscles, the macronutrients of our diets, the non-linear periodization program we will employ. Bodybuilding for others may be a test of will- how far can I take my body? I've lost 75 pounds- can I get leaner than what 1% of the population is capable of?

Regardless of the motives, I've often asked myself through my work with fitness competitors, how many actually take the time to develop an awareness of their internal states as they embark on this muscular

journey. I've come to realize that it's often those who are hurting, struggling, and filling voids that are drawn to this sport. It's the great escape. Do you realize how much time, energy, and self-centeredness bodybuilding demands? On the same token, you can completely ignore your SELF, your inner core. Relationships take a back seat. Work becomes less of a priority. Every day is planned around meals and workouts. The answers become evident when the competitor enters the "off-season." How many of you struggle with finding balance when you come off a contest diet? You are required now to re-establish a healthy weight, friendships, a social life, a more "normal" work standard, and a life less governed by ME, ME, ME.

In contest mode we are more isolated. We can use bodybuilding as an excuse to turn down invitations, skip outings with friends, and excuse ourselves from sex because we've got to get to bed early. When we're uncomfortable with ourselves, our feelings, our experiences we have yet to process, bodybuilding can be the perfect way to dismiss the work that needs to be done. When we are done with the contest it's exactly these things that will rear their heads!

I'm working with a woman currently who is engaging in binge eating. She has gained 20 pounds since her last contest two months ago. She contacted me with the request of wanting to learn how to regain control. "Control over what?" I asked. "FOOD!" she screamed with a distraught tone. "I don't know why I can't stop!" She wants to control food, but is food controllable? Does the alcoholic control the alcohol that goes down his throat? Does the addict control the coke that is snorted up his nose? No. This concept is perhaps the most difficult to grasp. We control only ourselves. It's so much more than being able to say "stop" though. It requires a personal awareness that supersedes the behavior we want to alter. As humans we don't go from an experience to a behavior. Our interaction with the environment, our physiology and mental state dictate a much more complicated response. Until we can break down that response and recognize its impact, the control we desire oftentimes escapes us.

As human beings we "experience." This word can be used as a guidepost for understanding our reactions. As we experience, we perceive, think, feel, and then act. We take in messages. Sometimes we internalize them. Then we, sometimes consciously and other times unconsciously, base our behavior off of what we learn from those experiences. Take my client as an example. I had a hunch that she had been through some trauma as a child. Soon after she revealed just how she was treated by her father. "Shit for brains" is what he would call her. He taught her to devalue herself. She wasn't shown love, never heard those three words many of us long for, and she wasn't given opportunities to express herself, her opinions, or her feelings. When she did she was criticized and punished. Never able to measure up, as an adult she is a perfectionist, constantly striving to create, perform, demand more from herself, and she sets goals that are sometimes unattainable. Fits doesn't it? When she isn't successful or makes a mistake, guess what and who she hears? So what role is food playing in her life, and more importantly, the binging behavior? In the short term, food provides a distraction, it comforts her, and it fills a void. Now, take a look at the last two words of the previous sentence—put them together and what do you see? Food gives her permission to avoid. If she's feeling something she'd rather forget, while she's eating it disappears. Further, the guilt she is consumed by following the binge serves to prolong the distraction but then leads to even further distress. Food is her acute coping mechanism. If I asked her

what she's afraid might happen if she actually gave herself permission to "feel" and express upset, hurt, or disappointment, what would she say? I'll let you answer that.

When we're unaccustomed to or were blatantly shielded or thwarted from self-expression or emotion we don't learn how to self-soothe. Instead we develop alternatives. They may be effective at times in our lives, but as we age, mature, and desire to connect with others they become less functional.

Please don't misunderstand me—bodybuilding can be a functional coping skill in itself. The off season will provide you with valuable information though and perhaps clue you in to some additional "work" you can do for yourself. How does it make sense that we would work so obsessively on our external selves without a congruent focus on our internal selves? That's a bit asymmetrical, is it not?!

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