

# SPORT ACTIVITY AS A SIGNIFICANT ELEMENT OF PREVENTING ADDICTIONS

MONIKA SURAWSKA

*The Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities  
Lomza State University of Applied Sciences, Lomza, Poland*

E-mail: msurawska@pwsip.edu.pl

**Abstract:** Addictions are one of the most serious social, legal and health problems of present times. For many years, specialists from various fields have sought to find efficient ways of combating the abuse of and addiction to various psychoactive substances and high-risk behaviors. Prevention is an essential element in the fight against addictions. It is mainly based on transferring knowledge and engaging in psycho-educational activities. Currently, it also takes different forms, e.g. shaping the so-called dynamic attitude in the society. This article describes theoretical basis of addictions, ways of preventing them as well as the possibility to use sport activity in combating them.

**Key words:** addiction, sport activity, prevention of addiction

Addictions are one of the most serious problems of contemporary times, although various types of psychoactive substances have been known ever since the beginning of humanity. Uncontrolled usage of stimulants is a threat not only to individuals and their families, but also to whole societies and nations [1]. Alcohol, drugs, nicotine became the most widespread ways of reducing fears and strains [2]. It is observed that every year, the number of people using various psychoactive substances is increasing. Simultaneously, apart from the increase in the number of addicts, there are new, problematic phenomena such as lowering the age of initiation with stimulants or the increase in addictive substances intake by the populations formerly not inflicted with this problem, such as e.g. the population of women, young girls or people with a high social status. Statistics are horrifying. According to the research conducted by Stępień and Wojciszka cited by Hołysta [3], we can conclude that alcohol consumption takes place even in primary schools (several pupils per one hundred admit to drinking alcohol once a week). In secondary schools, alcohol is consumed by every fifth student. Individual preferences in terms of the type of consumed substances are also changing. Nowadays, the hallucinogenic or stimulating substances replace the formerly popular alcohol or opiates (morphine, opium). The phenomenon of consuming stimulants is increasing and changing at an alarming pace. Additionally, the disease such as addiction is universal, concerns both sexes, every age group and nationality. Due to this, for many years doctor, psychologists, pedagogues, researchers and therapists have been wondering how to fight this problem so that addiction did not reap such a great harvest in the world among the people of all ages. In every country, the government as well as smaller social groups undertake various trials to combat the abuse of psychoactive substances. The created programs to

fight against addictions aim not only at eliminating damages caused by consuming psychoactive substances, but also at preventing such a problem [1]. Due to this, there are various types of centers for addicts or support groups and the government tries to provide money for help and prevention. There are also many initiatives where the knowledge about mechanisms governing addictions and their irreversible results is spread. Prevention through education is undoubtedly an indispensable aspect of combating addictions. Knowledge provides the basis for further actions connected with changing attitudes and behaviors as well as improving one's quality of life. The general aim of preventive activities is to change life attitudes (or sustaining them if they are correct), show alternative activities for using addictive substances and indicate different forms of activity. Therefore, it seems that a very good alternative for psychoactive substances intake can be, and even is, sport activity as the one possessing many positive aspects and influencing physical and mental functioning of an individual. It is worth taking closer look into this subject and begin by providing the definition and the problems related to the addiction alone.

Addiction is 'a set of physiological, behavioral and cognitive phenomena in which an intake of a certain substance or a group of substances is more important than other things that used to be of a greater importance. The key, characteristic feature of addiction is the compulsion (...) to consume drugs, alcohol, nicotine'. Such a definition of addiction is provided by the World Health Organization – WHO [4]. On the other hand, according to the classification criteria of psychical disorders – DSM IV – adopted by the American Psychological Association, addiction is characterized by particular symptoms, such as:

- tolerance, i.e.:
  - the necessity to consume visibly larger doses of the substance in order to obtain the desired effect;
  - more subtle effects when taking the same amount of the substance;
- withdrawal symptoms – dependent on the substance type or an intake of other similar ones in order to avoid withdrawal symptoms;
- taking larger doses of the substance for a longer period of time than it was intended;
- the crave to stop or control the intake of the substance;
- sacrificing great amount of time to get the substance, take it or recover after an intake;
- abandoning important social, professional or leisure activities or limiting them;
- continuing the substance intake despite the awareness that certain somatic and psychical changes will occur.

It is important that in order to speak about addiction on the basis of the aforementioned symptoms, at least three of them must have occurred in case of an individual within the last 12 months. The basic criteria of an addiction can be summarized as three ‘c’: loss of Control over the substance intake, Continuation in spite of unpleasant consequences as well as Compulsion (coercion) of the substance intake [4]. The consumed psychoactive substances influence brain’s functioning, physical health, mood and individual’s behavior. Their interaction strength depends to a great extent on the substance intake method as well as its amount. Stimulants lead to tragic consequences – serious physical and mental diseases and even suicides or death. To the category of psychoactive substances, we can include either the legal ones, such as alcohol, nicotine as well as the illegal ones – drugs, psychotropic drugs. They can be divided into: stimulating (amphetamine, cocaine, nicotine), hallucinogenic (marijuana, LSD), opiates (heroin, morphine, opium) or suppressants i.e. among others, alcohol [4]. However, it should be kept in mind that addictions can be connected not only with the intake of psychoactive substances, but also with the Internet, telephone, computer games, sex and gambling.

‘Sweet oblivious antidote’, as Shakespeare called psychoactive substances in *Macbeth*, is still a form of a gateway from problems people face in everyday life [4]. However, in contemporary times it has become a considerable social and legal problem. The intake of these substances very often causes serious health, mental and social harm. Although very often it so happens that the intake is the result of functioning in adverse life conditions, but even more often this intake becomes the reason for family, professional conflicts as well as poverty and crime [1]. What

solution can be found to this problem? Drug legalization, the solution implemented by the Czech in 2009, starts bringing negative consequences and the state authorities want to withdraw from it. Restrictions in the access to drugs also do not work sufficiently well. Undoubtedly, the way to fight addictions and make progress in curing addicts is to improve research methods and therapy. Prevention is also indispensable. Misiewicz [5] after Cekiera write that it should include:

- providing healthcare professionals as well as educators with scientific publications and specialist literature in the field of addictions;
- organizing conferences and trainings for education and health sector on harmfulness of stimulants;
- making parents, teenagers and children aware of the problem;
- presenting role models, shaping goals, meaning of life, system of values.

Such prevention – through education, is undoubtedly a chance to fight against addictions, but predominantly such a chance is also provided by the prevention based on presenting alternatives to stimulants. In recent years, the attitude to stimulants has changed. Currently, it is important to strengthen self-confidence, sense of security, develop personal characteristics, build a realistic picture of the world or self-control, improve the quality of life. It is significant to shape proper attitudes, perceive own development opportunities, learn how to deal with difficult situations. This kind of prevention must be based on strong patterns [2].

In order to find a good alternative to addictions, the reasons for their occurrence should be detected. Explanations can be sought on various levels of an individual’s functioning. Łuszczynska [6] after Yusko and others claim that a person’s emotions can play a key role. Excessive fear, lower, depressive mood and stress can cause eagerness to intake stimulants. An individual can expect positive experience from consuming psychoactive substances, which will help fight with difficult emotions and survive bad moments. It is possible that an avoiding attitude to problems that occur in life can also be a significant factor. Stimulants can then become a form of a gateway from everyday problems and unexpected events. It is worth highlighting that Yusko and others in their research also confirmed that the risk factors of psychoactive substances intake can also include the tendencies to seek excitement and newness. The reason for the addiction can become the trivial need to try something different, interesting and even forbidden or simply the trial to fight boredom [6]. This developmental motive of addictions as well as criminality is emphasized also by Hołyst [3]. He claims that an important aspect can be the willingness to experience adventure, fun, popularity of one’s imagination or inner strength. It is significant for an individual to

experience something interesting, mysterious. Undoubtedly, what also emerges from the above, these are also social contacts that influence the behaviors connected with psychoactive substances intake. The desire to equal others or adulate can lead to risky activities. It gains significance especially when an individual functions in pathological environment. It becomes obvious that the negative family patterns and the way of upbringing influence the behaviors. They very often model identical pathological activity connected with addictions or criminality. Summing up, on the basis of long-term research, the following causes for addictions can be selected:

- broken home or single parenthood;
- family conflicts;
- lack of resistance in difficult situations and inability to overcome them;
- problems at school, home, work;
- increased level of anxiety and tension;
- excessive dependency;
- the feeling of external control;
- environmental influences from people using addictive substances – pressure;
- influence of media – showing pleasure and freedom that come together with psychoactive substances intake;
- accessibility to addictive substances;
- emotional immaturity;
- difficulties in expressing emotions;
- low frustration tolerance;

as well as inadequate self-esteem (too low or too high).

Thus, either social as well as psychological factors can be distinguished. However, the existence of biological factors is also not precluded [2]. According to Cekiera, this division looks differently. He distinguishes environmental and personality factors. It is worth bearing in mind that addiction is very often a complex issue and is caused by numerous reasons [7].

In order to explain the validity of the above mentioned assumptions, it seems necessary to mention the psychological and sociological Strain Theory developed by Robert Agnew. This concept puts emphasis on negative relationships with others; either those an individual is not satisfied with, but also those in which an individual is present with harmful, negative stimuli. Agnew, in his concept, stresses also the fact that the youth is pushed to pathological behaviors by negative emotional states and mostly anger. As a result, such a strain leads to the trials of relieving it by: using illegal ways of achieving goals; attacking or running away from the source of affliction as well as changing the negative effects of the strain by drinking alcohol and/or taking drugs. It so happens that individuals abusing psychoactive substances turn to crime or pathology and criminal environment pushes to stimulants intake. The strain,

which appears and needs relieving can emerge from a couple of reasons. It can appear due to the lack of possibility to achieve positively valuable goals. In this context, there is a discrepancy between aspirations (ideal goals) of an individual and expectations/ current achievements, expectations (thanks to previous experiences related to the observations of others; an individual knows that something is possible) and the actual achievements as well as fair gratifications and the ones actually received. Strain can also result from being deprived of positively valued stimuli (parents' divorce, death of a friend, disease) or can occur due to an individual being presented with negative stimuli connected with e.g. upbringing in pathological conditions, physical punishment, stressful experiences or failures at school [8]. Similar approach can be found not only in strain theories, but also in theories connected with aggression and especially in those that discuss the dependency: frustration – aggression [9, 10]. In those theories, but also in numerous studies connected with them, a considerable influence is highlighted that is connected with the possibilities to observe aggressive and negative behaviors by an individual [11]. Moreover, on the basis of the strain and aggression theories, another approach to preventing addictions is shaped, not only through education, but also through shaping the so-called dynamic attitude, which can be easily found in sport activity. In order for it to emerge, it is important to shape pro-health spirit from the young age, teach constructive stress and negative emotions management and present various, attractive forms of spending leisure time. Such 'coping with strain' is a natural element of sport. Humanistic Encyclopedia of Sport defines sport as 'conscious, self-imposed human activity, undertaken mainly to satisfy the need for fun, show-off, fight as well as self-improvement through systematic development of physical, mental and volitional characteristics' [12]. Thus, sport influences many aspects of human functioning. Sport activity helps to ease the strain (which according to Agnew's theory prevents addictions). It also creates the possibility to establish good relationships with others (especially when an individual participates in team sports). It is important that sport follows unchangeable rules, principles, which enable fair assessment of an individual's effort and minimize the strain connected with it. Participation in sport activity helps to satisfy needs similar to those, which stimulate an individual to consume psychoactive substances – the needs for exciting experiences, stimulation, peer group acceptance or a sense of belonging. Additionally, sport develops specific characteristics of an individual such as endurance, overcoming weaknesses or setting oneself constantly more demanding challenges. It also elevates self-esteem and all of those characteristics are indispensable when dealing with problems. It helps to fight boredom, evokes positive emotions, turns aggression

into positive sport anger, teaches how to take pride in successes, but also how to cope with failures and stress [13]. All of those greatly decrease the possibility of turning to addictions.

Physical education and sport activity are the best and the most attractive forms of preventing addictions and fighting criminality. A PE teacher or a coach, from the youngest age, shape pro-health behaviors. It should also be remembered that very often he or she has a much greater influence on an individual's upbringing than parents, educators or other teachers. It is therefore important to make use of this chance. The classes should be run in a way as to enable an individual to make use of the acquired skills and knowledge also outside the school, training as well as in later adult life. The additional benefit of such an activity is the fact that sport can also be 'addictive'. Why? – due to endorphins that are responsible for providing the feeling of satisfaction and happiness, but also because of successes, sport performance or only better general mental well-being, which evolves through systematic physical exercises. Moreover, numerous research proved that exercises bring either physical as well as mental benefits [6,14]. It is worth highlighting that sportspeople all over the world support anti-drug campaigns. In Poland in such campaigns as 'Sport against drugs – I do not take yet I win' or Summer with Tiger (Challenge – sport as an alternative to drugs) organizers combine education and fun and the possibility to perform sport activity with the top sportspeople in our country. A considerable role in popularizing sport activity as an alternative to addictions is also played by state authorities and especially local units. The City Councils' resolutions for the consecutive years include the programs for the prevention of alcohol related problems and social pathology. Due to them, various projects helping combat addictions are financed in the cities (beneficiary: AZS PWSiP in Lomza). Very often, within the programs, various activities for children and adolescents are organized that are combined with preventive and educational activities. It is worth benefiting from good practices used in different countries. In 2001 in Mexico the then president Vicente Fox announced that the money taken from drug dealers shall be invested in sport [15].

However, it should be kept in mind that even sport and sportspeople are not free from stimulants (including doping). Łuszczynska [6] pays attention to the problem, which is becoming constantly more notorious in activities of this kind. By citing the current research results, she emphasizes the fact that there are considerable differences between the people who do sport and those who are passive in this field. It seems astonishing that harmful alcohol drinking is more often popular among minor sportsmen and students associated in clubs than among their peers not per-

forming sport. However, undoubtedly professional athletes avoid consuming alcohol. On the contrary, the results related to cigarette and marijuana smoking are different. The PE students as well as professional athletes definitely less frequently turn to stimulants of this kind. When we look at the problem from this perspective, no clear conclusions can be drawn considering the dependence between sport activity and the psychoactive substances intake [6]. Thus, in the future considerations on sport and addictions, it is worth focusing also on this issue.

At the end, it should be emphasized that sport activity surely enables the efficient fight against addictions. It brings better benefits than education, although it is also an indispensable element in coping with this problem. Sport activity satisfies the same needs as the ones that are the reasons an individual turns to stimulants. Sport not only improves physical fitness, but also helps to develop the mind. It strengthens self-confidence, self-esteem, helps to accept oneself, enhances well-being. It helps to develop personal skills, shape positive characteristics, such as persistence, confidence, activity. It teaches how to manage not only during sport competitions, but also every day. Sport successes help to find happiness in everyday life. Failures strengthen and it helps to tackle difficulties. Sport combats boredom. It assists in finding friends and teaches how to live in the society by either benefiting from it and giving something from ourselves. All those elements cause that there is no better way for fighting addictions. Thanks to the power of sport, it is easier to refuse when an individual has contact with stimulants. As people know their value, they can fight for themselves. Most of all, they have something or somebody to fight for, as sport makes life meaningful.

A human is an active being – 'homo agens' [16]. Without activity, one is not able to function properly. Especially when activity such as sport provides happiness, fulfillment and satisfaction.

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