

SWEAT *AND SOBRIETY*

Researchers are discovering exercise—especially intense exercise—can be an effective part of treatment of addiction, but it isn't the only part.

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The solitary-confinement cell at Florence State Prison in Florence, Ariz., is 8 feet by 5 feet. It contains a bed and a toilet. Prisoners in the hole are permanently shackled, and they spend 23 hours a day in the tiny cell. They are allowed showers a few times a week, and occasional exercise takes place in an 8-by-15-foot recreation yard, similar to a dog run, with walls 20 feet high. The opening at the top is covered by a green tarp that blocks out the sun.

Michael Gonzales spent five years in that cell. He lost 60 lb. and got so pale he could see his veins through his skin.

As far as Gonzales was concerned, prison was his life. He was serving a 36-year sentence, he'd been using drugs since he was 9, and he'd been in gangs since he was 12. Addicted to meth and heroin, deeply committed to gang life, he was a lost cause. History, statistics—everything—pointed to failure.

Few longtime addicts escape the clutches of addiction for good. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the relapse rate for drug abuse is 40-60 percent; some studies report relapse rates as high as 70 percent. Gonzales was a lifelong addict, and gangs—the criminal life—were his entire community and support system.

EXERCISE ON ITS OWN IS NOT A CURE FOR ADDICTION, BUT GROWING EVIDENCE SUGGESTS IT PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN HELPING ADDICTS RECOVER AND AVOID RELAPSE.

This year will mark seven years of sobriety for Gonzales. He's been out of prison for five years. He kicked meth and heroin on his own in prison and hasn't relapsed once. He has steady employment and a family.

Somehow, Gonzales beat the odds. So what's his secret? Other than an iron will, it's a combination of intense daily

exercise, a strong community and 12-step meetings. Exercise on its own is not a cure for addiction, but growing evidence suggests it plays an important role in helping addicts recover and avoid relapse.

Tim Harrington, co-founder of Sustainable Recovery, an addiction-recovery and treatment program, said he uses fitness as a way to reintroduce the chemicals that have been depleted during addiction, including serotonin and endorphin.

"When you take away the drug, you have to replace it with something," Harrington said. "You need to create some sense of well-being. Talk therapy takes too long."

"CrossFit gives me an outlet," Gonzales said. "It means the world to me. Without it, I would be using and back in jail."

THE ROAD TO SOLITARY

If you came across 34-year-old Gonzales in a dark alley, odds are you'd cross the street. He's covered in menacing-looking ink, including a teardrop tattoo under his left eye and another that covers his neck and goes all the way under his chin.

Gonzales' personality is nothing like his appearance. Despite spending 15 years—almost half his life—in prison and using, he's warm and gentle. Enthusiastic and friendly, he projects an undercurrent of calm that comes from experiencing some of the worst life has to offer.

Growing up, Gonzales never met his real mother. He moved around a lot and never felt like anywhere was home. The lack of family and community was difficult for him. He wanted to belong, and it wasn't long until he found his community by joining a gang. With the gang came drugs—and trouble.



His fellow gang members taught Gonzales how to survive in solitary by using meditation techniques that let him escape, mentally, from his tiny prison cell.

Gonzales first went to juvenile hall when he was 14, and by age 18 he was in prison, serving a two-and-a-half-year sentence for drug-related charges. He was free for a brief moment, and then in 1997 he got hit with a 36-year sentence for drugs, guns, assault and aggravated assault: 21 felonies in all.

Prison didn't reform Gonzales. He kept using and stayed committed to the only community he knew: gangs.

"I made a name for myself," Gonzales said. "Prison is like the army. You do what you're told. You never second-guess it."

As a good soldier, Gonzales volunteered for the more unpleasant jobs handed down from the gang bosses, such as hurting people and collecting drug debts. He had resigned himself to a lifetime in prison, so he saw no need to behave or play it safe. Gonzales thought he had reached the bottom.

He had no idea how much worse it could get.

In 2000, Gonzales helped start a prison riot. He was sentenced to five years in solitary confinement.

"For five years, I spent 23 hours in lockdown," Gonzales said. "I was never un-cuffed, I was always shackled. I went from one cage to another."

For Gonzales, the worst part of being in the hole was the social isolation. Gonzales craves human interaction and community.

"Mike walks in and makes eye contact with everyone, says hello to everyone, and if he doesn't know the person, he makes a point of introducing himself to them," said Robert Schrimpf, who regularly works out with Gonzales at 6 a.m. at CrossFit Pacific Beach in San Diego, Calif. "When he finishes, he will stay and encourage everyone until every single person is done."

Although he lives in Florida with his family, Gonzales spends extended amounts of time in San Diego working as a sober coach—living with his clients and modeling a healthy, sober lifestyle.

The hyper-social Gonzales survived his time in solitary by mentally removing himself from his environment.

“I would run in place, and in my mind I was somewhere else,” he said. He would picture the streets near his home and felt like he was actually running outside in the sun.

Eventually, Gonzales got out of solitary and finally got some good news. Early in his sentence, Gonzales had put in an appeal, claiming the judge had made an error during the trial. He won his appeal, and his sentence was significantly reduced. In 2007, Gonzales got out of prison.

He wasn't free for long.

“I didn't make it six months,” Gonzales said. Not only did he end up back in prison, but he also found himself in the exact same cell as before.

Gonzales was incarcerated for internal possession—“basically for being high,” he said.

THROUGHOUT HIS TIME IN PRISON AND IN THE EARLY DAYS OF RECOVERY, GONZALES WAS ALWAYS IN THE GYM.

When he walked into the cell, he saw two things: the same cot and a 12-step recovery book.

“My body was tingling because I was coming off of drugs, and I thought, ‘This is it. Turn it around.’”

Gonzales calls that day a spiritual awakening. He left his gang, and he stopped using drugs. He hasn't used since. As soon as Gonzales got out again in 2009, he immediately became involved in the recovery community. He started working in a treatment center in Prescott, Ariz., then worked at a sober-living home. Finally, he began sober coaching and acting as a sober escort.

Throughout his time in prison and in the early days of recovery, Gonzales was always in the gym. The close-knit recovery community took the place of the camaraderie he found with gangs. Gonzales began to repair his life. He moved to Florida, got in a relationship and in 2011 had a daughter.

Then the happiness and good fortune threw Gonzales into a tailspin. He was in San Diego working as a sober coach, and he took his girlfriend (now his wife) and daughter to the beach at Windansea in La Jolla, Calif.

“I felt healthy but mentally broken,” Gonzales said. “I wasn't sure if I wanted to be sober.”

Holding his infant daughter while standing on the rocks overlooking the ocean, he felt enveloped by love—an unfamiliar feeling.

“I was surrounded by love. I was so used to not having it, I was fighting it,” Gonzales said.

It was then he decided to embrace the love around him and stay sober. Gonzales avoided a relapse and started CrossFit not long after at CrossFit Pinnacle in Ocala, Fla. He lost 50 lb. in less than a year, and he found an entirely new community.

“CrossFit made it to where I have an outlet,” Gonzales said.

Recovery is his work and his life.

“I eat, sleep and shit recovery,” he said. “CrossFit is my release ... it makes me feel good.”

EXERCISE AND THE BRAIN

Many treatment centers use exercise as part of their treatment, and there's science to back up their approach. **Scientists have found** that intense exercise causes a release of endorphins and endocannabinoids (eCBs), a marijuana-like substance that enhances the natural high. ECBs do not increase following low-intensity exercise such as walking.

A 2012 **Frontiers in Psychiatry** report summarized several recent epidemiological studies that found people who regularly exercise are less likely to use and abuse drugs. What's more, the studies found that exercise produces an effect that helps the brain recover from a substance-abuse disorder. Just as drug abuse often leads to a cascade of destructive, negative behavior, regular exercise has a positive ripple effect. Once they start exercising, recovering addicts feel better and look better, and that encourages them to improve their nutrition, quit smoking and get adequate sleep. The role of exercise in recovery is a complicated mix of behavior and neurobiology, but scientists have found evidence that exercise affects the brain in many of the same ways as stimulants, opioids and alcohol.



Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

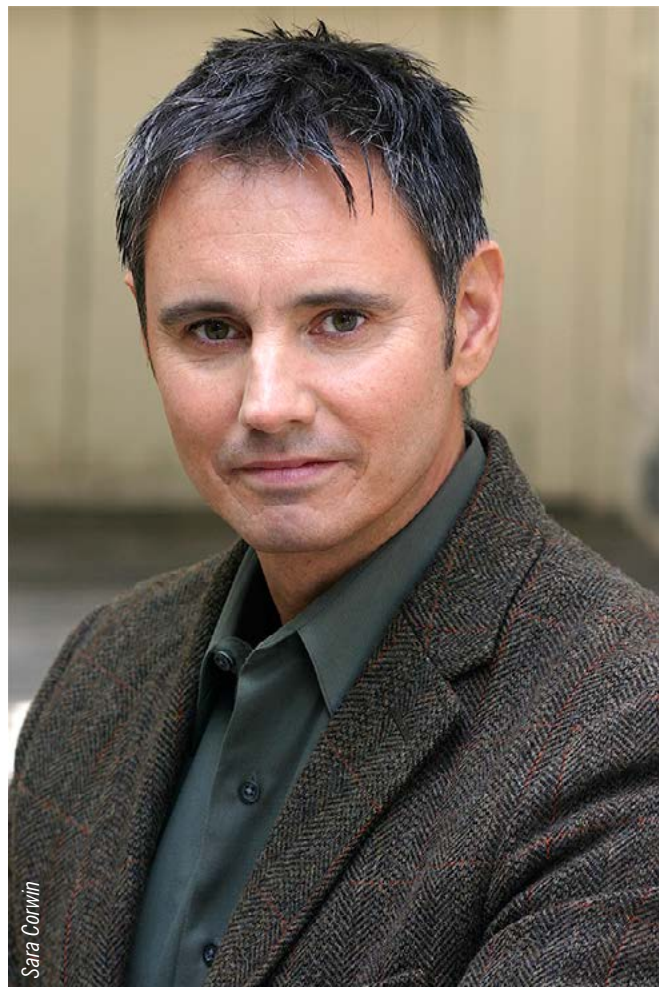


Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Gonzales yells in celebration when a workout is going well, and he yelps in pain when he's struggling.

The recovery community is taking notice, and exercise is an integral part of many treatment programs today. For example, Ron Gellis, himself a recovering alcoholic, detailed aspects of a 12-step program combined with CrossFit in the 2012 *CrossFit Journal* article [Addiction, Recovery and CrossFit](#). Recovering addict Shari Keener similarly offered perspective on using exercise to battle drug problems in the August 2013 video [Meet Shari Keener: Changing the Pattern](#).

Sober since 1989, Ken Seeley has been involved in the recovery community for more than 20 years. He started his own company in 2000 and was a featured interventionist on the A&E show *Intervention* from 2004 to 2009. Now Seeley runs Ken Seeley Communities, a sober-living facility in Palm Springs, Calif. He also provides intervention services through his company, Intervention 911.



Sara Corwin

On the TV show *Intervention*, Ken Seeley tried to convince addicts to get sober and enter rehab.

When Seeley got sober in 1989, exercise wasn't part of the recovery process.

"They didn't push exercise," he said. "It was not as important."

Today, Seeley said he views exercise as one of the life skills—like creating a resume, volunteering or attending meetings—recovering addicts need to learn in order to get back on track. Seeley's approach is to focus on the spirit, mind and body. Focusing on the spirit refers to finding a higher power, whether through prayer or meditation, while focusing on the mind refers to dealing with trauma: the issues that may have contributed to the addiction in the first place. Work on the body includes both exercise and nutrition, and the piece is considered so essential that residents of Ken Seeley Communities have access to their own personal trainer.

"It's about the whole package," Seeley said, "finding the balance. When you're a drug addict, you're off balance. (Exercise is) a really important part of recovery; it's about finding that balance. Whether it's walking, going to the gym or swimming, it's important to get the endorphins going, to get the cells opening up."

MOST ADDICTS HAVE DEEP-SEATED EMOTIONAL ISSUES THEY MUST ADDRESS, BUT EXERCISE HELPS MANY ADDICTS GET THROUGH THOSE EARLY, DARK DAYS.

However, Seeley doesn't think exercise works on its own. The other components—the mind and spirit—have to be there for the recovery to work, he said. Exercise by itself is not enough. He thinks there must be some type of therapy to address the underlying mental and emotional issues.

"About 10 percent of the population gets addicted to going to the gym," Seeley said. He can tell too much focus on the body is a problem if the person is going to the gym two to three times a day and won't focus on getting a job.

In the case of the recovering addict, balance is everything. And someone who is spending that much time on the body is most likely neglecting the spirit and the mind. For an addict, this can have disastrous implications. In the long run, most addicts have deep-seated emotional issues they must address, but exercise helps many addicts get through those early, dark days.

"I've noticed the people who are successful in early recovery are ones who exercise regularly," said Zachary Buschman, the trainer at Ken Seeley Communities. "I believe exercise is a healthy substitute for compulsive behavior."

Buschman said: "Exercise releases neurochemicals that mimic the chemicals released by drugs. It helps the body get back into homeostasis and combats depression associated with recovery." According to Buschman, once a person has found exercise helps him or her feel better, the recovering athlete wants to be in the gym every day.

"It's a healthy high, and they start to see (good) changes in their body," he said.

It only becomes a problem when people use exercise as a substitute for treating underlying issues.

"The hope is recovery is holistic," Buschman said. "They need to work on mind, body and spirit."

CROSSFIT AND RECOVERY

Most of the existing studies looking at the role of exercise in addiction recovery treat "exercise" as fairly generic: raising the heart rate for a period of time. As stated above, studies have shown that high-intensity exercise provides benefits not found with moderate exercise, but is there something about CrossFit that makes it particularly effective for recovering addicts?

John Kim, a therapist and CrossFit athlete, thinks so. Kim, who has been doing CrossFit for four years, uses exercise as a central part of his practice and as a therapeutic tool. Instead of meeting patients in an office, Kim conducts his sessions outside, in coffee shops or in online hangouts via his website, [The Angry Therapist](#).

"I come as I am, with my Rogue shirt," Kim said. "I'm redefining the role of a therapist. It doesn't have to be in an office."

Kim believes exercise is helpful when recovering from addiction, but he, too, thinks it has to be paired with something that addresses the mental and emotional causes of addiction.



Courtesy of John Kim

John Kim thinks the community aspect of CrossFit is enormously helpful for recovering addicts.

"Many people do drugs because of low self-esteem," Kim said. In CrossFit, they are confronted with movements and workouts that seem impossible. Then, one day, the impossible becomes possible. When this happens, a mental shift occurs, Kim said.

"You are proving yourself wrong; you're proving your self-worth," Kim said. "Recovery is about feeling whole, and CrossFit helps build self-worth."

In addition to intense exercise, CrossFit also provides a community, Kim said: "It pulls you out of yourself. You're part of something bigger than you."

But even with the self-esteem boost and community that come with CrossFit, it's important that recovering addicts address their emotional scars.

"The flip side of high-intensity training is the danger of getting addicted," Kim said. He compares it to holes in

a water balloon. Addiction is one hole, and exercise can easily become an additional leak.

Kim said it's easy for recovering addicts to take a nosedive and bury themselves in an attempt to "fill the hole with CrossFit," which can bring all the old issues to the surface if someone has to take some time off or gets so competitive that training ceases to be fun. He believes using exercise as part of addiction treatment is all about balance and asking the right questions. For example, he runs what he calls a "mental stretch" after classes at CrossFit Hollywood, in which athletes are encouraged to discuss their mental dialogue during the workout.

"RECOVERY IS ABOUT FEELING WHOLE, AND CROSSFIT HELPS BUILD SELF-WORTH."

—JOHN KIM

"Everyone keeps (their thoughts during the workout) a secret," Kim said, "but a lot of our stories overlap."

By sharing your thoughts, you might find the firebreather next to you is fighting the same demons.

"You have to know what you want out of CrossFit," Kim said. "How is it affecting you emotionally? If it makes you angry, that's feeding your addiction. Fitness and mental health are not separate."

A LIGHT IN THE DARK

Purely by instinct, Gonzales managed to pursue two elements that aid sustained recovery: community and exercise. He beat the odds, but he made the odds much easier to beat by forging positive, supportive relationships and by making exercise—specifically intense exercise—part of his daily routine.

Now Gonzales is spreading the word and trying to encourage his clients to make exercise a part of their recovery.

Gonzales says he achieves his spiritual recovery by helping others.

"I was an animal at one time in my life," he said. "(I was) developed that way by the system, so when I was released, I learned a whole new way of life, but it didn't help my mind. When I help people and they get better—or a little hope is brought to them—a piece of my mind heals."

He said his mind is ravaged by his past mistakes, but he's starting to find peace through prayer, meditation and helping others.

Gonzales' harrowing life story has contributed to his success in the recovery community. He's proof that a person can

Gonzales just earned his CrossFit Level 1 certificate, which will help him model a healthy, fit lifestyle for his clients.

recover from even the darkest, most hopeless place. He said his story provides people with much-needed inspiration, and he tries to lead by example.

"They are looking for hope," he said. "If I can change, anybody can." ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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