

Publication

How to Develop and Implement an Exercise Programme in a Heroin-Assisted Treatment Setting

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Background: Individuals in treatment for substance dependence suffer more frequently from a variety of psychiatric and physical comorbidities in comparison with the general population. In the past, it has been shown that exercise can be beneficial as an adjunct therapy in the treatment of these diverse comorbidities; however, in substance dependence treatment, compliance with exercise programmes is inadequate. Aim: The aim of this study was to gather the perspectives of patients on how an exercise programme should be developed and implemented in an outpatient setting dedicated to treating substance dependence. Methods: The study was carried out in a clinic offering heroin-assisted treatment (HAT) in Switzerland. A survey, focus group and interviews were administered before and after a 3-month exercise programme. Results: Participants in the focus group (n=12) and survey (n=28) reported that they were eager to participate in an exercise programme, and recognized that it would be beneficial for their well-being. The exercise programme was adapted to offer parallel sessions for differing ability levels. Feedback from the programme indicated that a varied multisport programme was most favoured, and that special attention was required to ensure that participants would not lose touch with each other through miscommunication. Final interviews (n=14) indicated that patients wanted the programme to become a fixed part of treatment. Conclusions: It is essential to take patients' views into account when implementing an exercise programme in an outpatient substance use treatment setting. Clear and repeated communication, programmes which adapt to patients' abilities, and continuous assessment of the programme are important in motivating participation.

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