

'Exercise Therapist' trains clients to attain healthy body and mind By Sasha Cavender

QUINCY, Mass (Reuters) - As doctors discover how emotions can help heal the body, fitness specialist Jeff Rutstein, a rehabilitated drug addict turned bodybuilder, trains the body to heal the mind.

Most of his clients suffer from depression or addictions not only to drugs or alcohol, but also -- as some top executives admit -- to work, power and making money.

Rutstein 28, can understand the stranglehold of addiction. He was hooked on alcohol at age 12, then street drugs and later steroids. He quit on New Year's Eve 1988 and has been clean ever since.

The obsession with fitness that nearly killed him in college became Rutstein's salvation. Now he shares his road to recovery with others, for the cost of a workout session.

"I could bench press 400 pounds but who cares? I didn't like myself on the inside so I tried to build myself up on the outside," says Rutstein, who concedes that steroids took a terrific toll on his body.

"Coming off drugs I felt like a homeless person inside, so empty." His body and self-esteem were trashed. Severe withdrawal also landed him in the hospital. "My pulse was 140 resting. That's heart attack level. Now it's 60-65. I had an inflamed liver. I was only 22 and felt 62," he said in an interview at his workout center in Quincy, south of Boston.

A fanatic about fitness -- "that Schwarzenegger look" -- Rutstein says his substance abuse amounted to flirting openly with death.

A year later, he started to exercise with a difference, "not jerking the weights up and down, but isolating each set of muscles and focusing mentally 100 percent." The effect was like Zen. A kinder, gentler workout, he noticed, sculpted his feelings more than his physique. He felt relaxed, less depressed and a lot better about himself.

Training others with similar problems became Rutstein's new career. He turned the basement of his home into a gym, wrapping the walls with blue plastic so it feels skylit even underground.

"The mind and body are so detached in most people, they're like two separate entities," he says, adding that he tries to make them become one.

So when the depressed and distressed come to work out, Rutstein gives them barbells for sympathy, and support. The weights are lined up like crayons in a box - red, blue, fuchsia, chartreuse, olive, gray and orange.

Barbells as therapy is not a brand new idea. Doctors have praised exercise for its feel-good benefits for years. It relaxes; reduces stress, anxiety, depression, and elevates moods so that some fitness buffs call it a "natural high" to which many become addicted.

But gyms are intimidating to those already feeling poorly about themselves. They want to hide, not show off.

Allen Abelow, one of Rutstein's clients and a partner in a leading management consulting firm, admits, "I've achieved enormous wealth and enormous influence but I hadn't made the same investment at home. I was depressed, despondent about the gap between my professional and personal life.

"My work behavior was compulsive, obsessive, and addictive and I sought professional help." Jeff is one part of that "help."

Abelow often gets to Rutstein's basement at 6:30 a.m. to get a jump on the day. Wearing sunglasses and a T-shirt on a snowy Sunday morning, he says he wouldn't go near a gym.

"That's about shiny clothes and how much you can lift. This is about something else. I'm already physically strong. I'm not emotionally strong in balancing my life. Because Jeff's overcome his own struggles it gives reassurance to others it can be done," Abelow says.

"A lot of people are depressed and numb. What really helps my clients is the fact that I've been there," Rutstein, adding that he dislikes the term "personal trainer" and prefers to call himself an "exercise therapist."

"Weight training is not easily available to those patients who could most benefit from it," says Dr. Alexander Bodkin, a Harvard psychiatrist at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts.

"The usual trainers at health clubs or gyms are not attuned to the psychological difficulties of psychiatric patients and would quickly scare them away," he added. "Jeff's tact and sensitivity to this population, along with his knowledge of fitness, provide a physically and emotionally safe environment."

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism estimates 15.3 million Americans abuse alcohol. Another 1.5 million are recovering addicts. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse some 12.8 million Americans use illegal drugs and 30 to 37 million, or 12 to 15 percent of the population, suffer from depression.

"Everyone has some type of stress," says Rutstein. My approach is I think of the emotional benefits first, then the physical. That's what's different about my work."