

Gaining the Strength to Stay Sober Ex-Addict Helps Others Quit Through Weight Training

By Carol Krucoff
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Jeff Rutstein started drinking at age 12, and by the time he graduated from college at 22 he was hooked on hard liquor, street drugs and six different kinds of steroids he'd discovered through his hobby of body-building.

"I didn't like myself on the inside, so I tried to build myself up on the outside," says the 29-year-old from Boston, Mass., who decided to quit cold turkey on New Year's Eve 1988. "I could bench press 400 pounds, but I was scared about finishing school and having to go out into the real world."

Severe drug withdrawal landed Rutstein in

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the hospital with an inflamed liver and a "heart attack level" resting pulse rate of 140. After several weeks in the hospital and an addiction treatment center, he landed back in his parents' home in Braintree, Mass., sober but "bottomed out and depressed."

Therapy and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings "helped some," he says. "But they dealt only with the emotional and spiritual aspects of recovery and just gave lip service to the physical side. They'd tell me to go for a walk, but my mind and body were so detached that I'd go out for two minutes and find I could hardly put one foot in front of the other."

Then one morning, about a year into sobriety, Rutstein reached for the first of his three daily pots of coffee and realized he'd "switched from one addiction to another and still felt lousy," he recalls. So he decided to go back to the gym, but with a whole new approach to weightlifting.

He went early in the morning to avoid the spandex and steroid crowd. And instead of grunting and staring at his physique in the mirror as he heaved up the heaviest

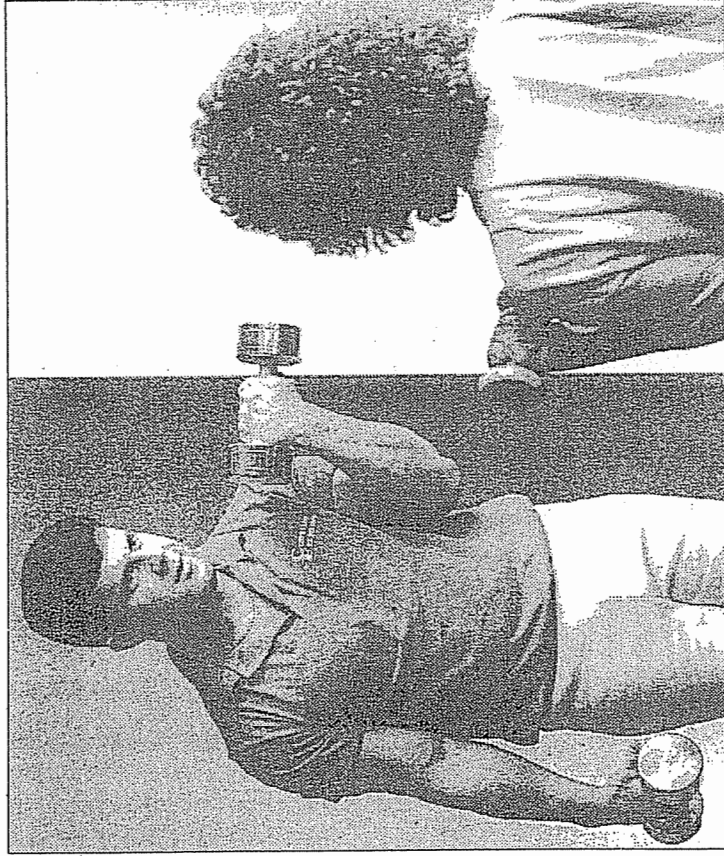


PHOTO BY GARY HIGGINS

Personal trainer Jeff Rutstein helps addicts focus on the physical side of recovery.

weight possible, Rutstein selected a modest weight, closed his eyes and focused on feeling the working muscle as it contracted, then lengthened. He concentrated on his breathing, exhaling tension on each exertion and inhaling strength on each release.

"For the first time in ages, my body and mind connected and I felt fantastic," recalls Rutstein, who began working out daily again. "I realized that the important part of exercise wasn't appearance but relieving stress and feeling better."

Rutstein decided to become a personal trainer specializing in working with people recovering from addictions. Today, he operates his own gym in Boston and is certified as a trainer by several groups, including the national YMCA and the American Council on Exercise.

While there is little research on exercise and addiction, evidence links physical activity to improved mental health. "Regular exercise has been shown to reduce anxiety and depression and relieve stress," notes Daniel K. Flavin, medical director for the New York-based National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence. For this reason, he says, exercise is often a regular component in many drug and alcohol treatment centers.

"Exercise stimulates release of the body's own natural opiates," notes Flavin, who says this may reduce craving for illicit drugs by providing a natural substitute. "And there's anecdotal evidence that exercise helps patients feel better and can be an important adjunct therapy."

Yet despite this mood-elevating effect, people with addictions often can't motivate themselves to get started on an exercise program, says psychiatrist J. Alexander Bodkin, an instructor at

Harvard Medical School. With expert guidance, however, "they find they enjoy exercise, which is quite key, given that the loss of capacity to obtain enjoyment is a symptom of the disease," Bodkin says. "They lose weight, look better, feel better and, to their surprise, discover they can accomplish something." This boosts self-esteem, which can be critical for people breaking a cycle of addiction. ■

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