

Break Free from ED

An Active Guide to Recovering from Your Eating Disorder

Module 3

Understanding the Number on the Scale

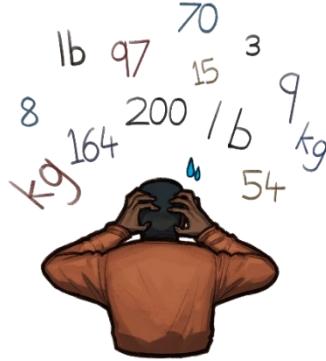
Introduction	2
The Number on the Scale and Natural Fluctuations in Weight	2
How Much Control Do We Have Over Our Weight?	3
The Body Mass Index (BMI)	3
How Accurate Are Our Weight Predictions?	4
Weight Checking and Weight Avoidance	4
Weekly Weighing	5
A Final Note on Weekly Weighing	8
Module Summary	9

If you are restricting your food intake, using self-induced vomiting, over-exercising, laxatives or diuretics for weight-control, or have lost weight recently, it is important that you talk to your medical practitioner and get a full medical check-up, as there are many physical complications that can arise as a result.

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Introduction

In the previous module we discussed the vicious cycle of eating disorders and why it is so difficult to get unstuck. In this module we will be talking about changing weighing behaviours, we will learn more about the factors that affect the number on the scale, and how much control we really have over the number. We will also introduce weekly weighing, a key strategy that aims to help you get used to the number on the scale, to test out your fears related to the number, and to think differently about fluctuations.



The Number on the Scale and Fluctuations in Weight

When you step on the scales you might think that the number you see accurately represents your weight. However, if you have ever weighed yourself several times in a day or over the course of a week you will notice that the number on the scale may go up or down in response to things that are unrelated to your actual body mass. The number on the scale may be impacted by:

- your fluid intake
- the weight of your clothing
- the time of day that you are weighed
- how much you have eaten that day
- your bladder and bowel movements
- hormonal changes (including menstruation, which can cause the number to increase by up to 2kg!)
- the scales you are using (the number can vary from scale to scale, or between uses of the same scale)
- some medications
- even the weather

These and the many other factors that impact the number on the scale result in **natural fluctuations in weight**.

Since weight goes up and down naturally, when you step on the scale you are only getting an estimate of your weight at a particular moment. To reduce the impact of the error that natural fluctuations bring, clinicians suggest that we think about our weight in terms of **trends over time**. Rather than determining weight changes by comparing one's weight from one week to the next, it is more meaningful to track the trend of one's weight over several weeks. We will show you how to do this.




How Much Control Do We *Really* Have Over Our Weight?

With all the diet and exercise regimes out there, it would be easy to believe that with a bit of discipline and hard work you can choose the weight you would like to be. Like other aspects of your physical and psychological makeup such as your height, shoe size, skin colour, intelligence and sporting ability, your weight is largely determined by genetics.

Each human body has a weight range that it is supposed to maintain for optimal health. When you eat regularly, sufficiently, and flexibly, and participate in regular moderate exercise your body will tend towards its set point weight range. Your set point weight is not an exact number, but a range that fluctuates naturally up to 3 kilograms. Our bodies have regulatory mechanisms to keep our weight within its natural set point range. Your body is at its healthiest when it is at its set point weight range. **This range is different for everyone – some people have a higher set point, some people have a lower set point.**

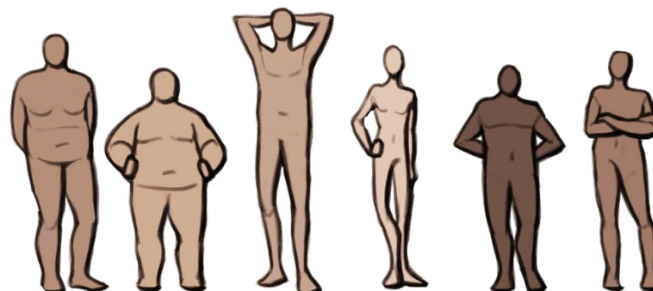


Fighting against your genetic set point weight range by restricting what you eat or engaging in other eating disorder behaviours is only going to be sustainable for a short period of time and you may become very unwell. When trying to recover from an eating disorder, it can help to remind yourself that when you normalise your eating and other weight control behaviours, your body will naturally tend towards its genetic set point range and will not keep going up and up uncontrollably. 

The Body Mass Index (BMI)

BMI is a quick, practical measure of a person's overall size which can provide helpful information when considered in combination with their physical and mental health, lifestyle and their personal and family history. BMI was conceived in the early 19th Century to study the distribution of weight in the **general population**. It was never intended to be a measure of an **individual** person's health.

Using a person's BMI on its own to classify a person's weight as 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' or as a reason to encourage weight loss is unhelpful and potentially very damaging. It is important to recognize that a healthy body can come in many different shapes and sizes. It is not unusual for elite athletes, with very high muscle mass to have a higher BMI or for the average BMI to vary across cultures and age groups. People with eating disorders may have a BMI that falls within or above the 'typical' range despite being in starvation.



How Accurate Are Our Weight Predictions?

People with eating disorders often describe ‘feeling bigger’ or ‘feeling heavier’ or ‘just knowing’ that they’ve put on weight. But did you know that *heavier* or *bigger* **are not actual feelings**? What people are usually saying is that they **think** they are bigger or heavier, and the belief is held with a lot of confidence. When people with eating disorders **think** they have gained weight they may **feel** anxious, upset, ashamed, or guilty, even though there may not be any factual evidence to support the belief.



Relying on what you **think** is happening with your weight rather than what is *actually observable* on the scale can be risky for people with eating disorders. Research shows that even people who don’t have eating disorders are not good at predicting the number on the scale. We will be asking you to have a go at predicting your own weight later in this module to test this out.

Weight Checking and Weight Avoidance

People with eating disorders are often fearful of gaining weight and place high value on the number on the scale, which can lead to two types of behaviours – weighing too often or avoiding being weighed at all costs.

Weighing too often

If people weigh themselves too often, the natural fluctuations can be misinterpreted as more meaningful than they really are. For example, if a person drinks 1 litre of water, the number on the scale will increase by approximately 1 kilogram even though this won’t change the person’s actual body mass. Since our bodies are made up of about 60% water, any temporary shifts in fluid can have a large impact on the number on the scale. When you tell yourself that a natural weight fluctuation is actually due to what or how much you have eaten or exercised, you might try to cut back on what you are eating or exercising even harder. What’s more, frequently checking your weight keeps the focus of your attention on your weight at the cost of other things in our life, like family, friends, work, or enjoyable activities. This makes weight seem more important than it needs to be and keeps eating disorders going.

Avoiding weighing at all costs

You might be thinking that the best approach is to avoid weighing altogether. One problem with avoidance is that it is not realistic to think that you will be able to live your life without ever getting weighed. Whether it’s for a medical assessment for work, or so your doctor can determine the appropriate medication dosage, at some stage in your life you will find that you need to be weighed. When this happens, people who have been avoiding weighing might feel distressed and increase their eating disorder behaviours.



More importantly, avoidance leads to fears getting stronger in the long-term. This is true for all sorts of things that we feel afraid of - for example, you are not going to overcome a fear of spiders without going near a spider. Avoidance of weighing is usually related to specific thoughts, such as ‘I cannot tolerate seeing my weight’ or ‘I just know the number has gone up’. If you are so scared that your weight will increase that you avoid seeing the number, then you won’t learn that weight fluctuates normally up and down, and that you have the skills to cope whatever the outcome.

Weekly Weighing

If we know that weighing too often is problematic, and avoiding weighing at all costs is equally problematic, how often should we weigh ourselves? Clinicians who work with people with eating disorders recommend weighing yourself about once a week while you are testing out your fears related to the number on the scale.

We would like you to have a go at weekly weighing using the **weekly weight chart**.

- **You will need:** A set of scales that you can use to weigh yourself. If you do not have scales at home, you may wish to borrow some or visit your local pharmacy.
- **Schedule:** Choose one day/time of the week to weigh yourself. You will need to stop weighing yourself on other days. If this sounds difficult you could ask a friend or family member to look after the scales for you outside of your weighing day or put the scales in a place that is difficult to access.
- **Predicted number:** Before you step on the scale, make a prediction about what the number will be. Plot that on the chart.
- **Actual number:** Step on the scale. Record the number on the chart in a different colour so you can easily compare your predicted and actual weight
- **Weekly reflection:** Was my prediction accurate? What conclusions can I draw about my weight (if any)? Did anything else surprise me?
- **Trends over time:** After 4 weeks of weighing, you have enough information to draw a conclusion about the trend. e.g. *my weight is fluctuating over a stable range OR my weight is going up as I renourish my body*. Now you can start examining the trends for the next four-week period.
- **Repeat:** Continue weekly weighing while you are working through these modules, especially when you are testing out fears about how changing your eating disorder behaviours will impact on the number on the scale.

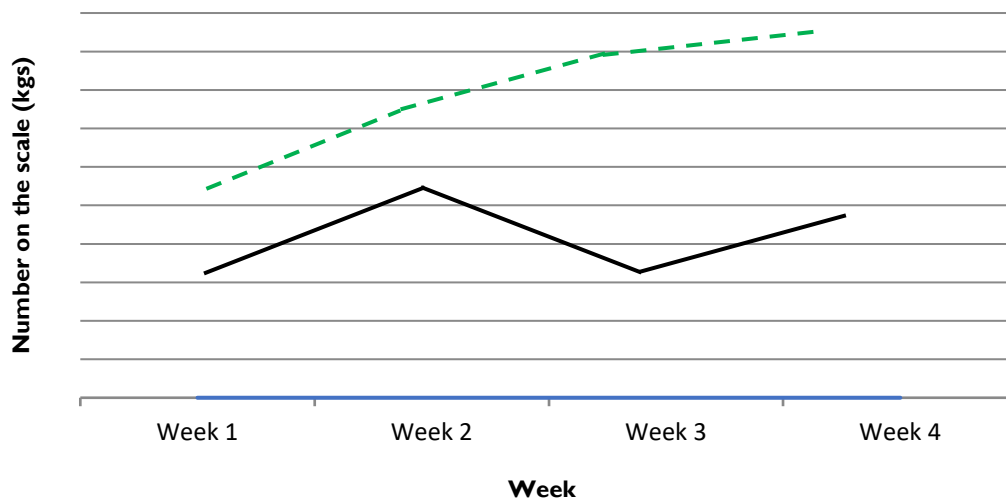
Take a look at the example on the next page. Then it will be your turn to start weekly weighing.

Weekly Weighing Worksheet - Example

Day I will weigh myself: Thursday

Predicted versus actual weight: Before you step on the scales, think about your eating over the past week and make a prediction as to what you think the number will be. Record your predicted weight on the chart below. Then step on the scale and record the actual number. Use a different colour pen to record predicted weight and actual weight so you can see the patterns.

My weight chart:



Week 1 reflection:

The number is higher than I would like but not as high as I predicted. I can't really draw any conclusion about patterns based on just one number so will need to see what happens over the next few weeks.

Week 2 reflection:

The number is up today and I feel anxious but I need to remember that fluctuations are normal and this may be due to drinking more water today or weighing myself later in the day. I still need more data to see the trend.

Week 3 reflection:

Surprisingly the number is lower than last week even though I ate very regularly. I keep predicting it will be higher than it actually is. There is no evidence that it is going up at the moment

Week 4 conclusion:

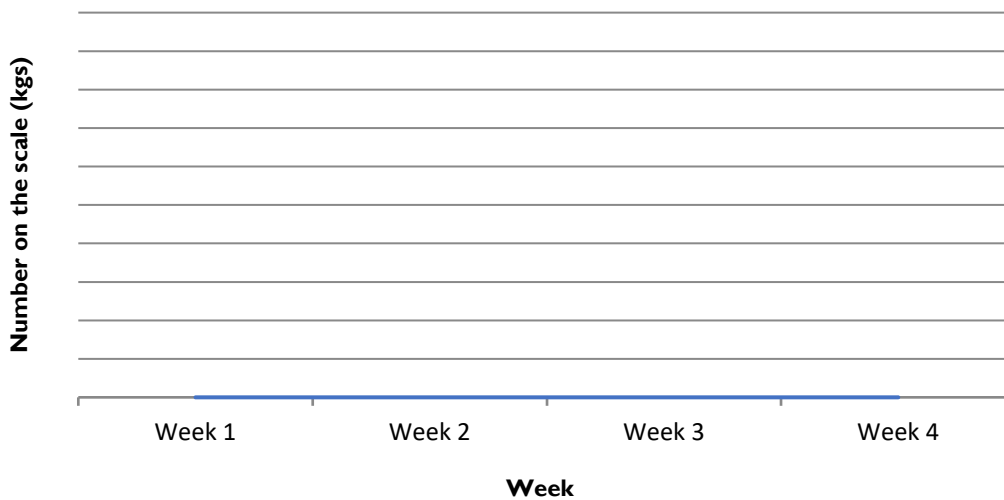
I can see from the trend over 4 weeks that my weight is stable, even though there have been fluctuations from week to week. My predictions are not very accurate - in fact, eating regularly is not leading to sudden weight gain as I was predicting. I need to keep testing out what happens to my weight as I tackle other eating disorder behaviours.

Weekly Weighing Worksheet

Day I will weigh myself: _____

Predicted versus actual weight: Before you step on the scales, think about your eating over the week and make a prediction as to what you think the number will be today. Record your predicted weight on the chart below. Then jump on the scale and record the actual number. Use a different colour pen for predicted weight and actual weight so you can see the patterns.

My weight chart:



Reflections: e.g. *The number is up today. Fluctuations are normal and this may be due to me drinking a lot of water today or my menstrual cycle. I will have to wait and see what happens to the pattern of weight over the next few weeks before I can draw a conclusion.*

Week 1 reflection: _____

Week 2 reflection: _____

Week 3 reflection: _____

Week 4 conclusion: _____

A Final Note on Weekly Weighing

Weekly weighing is designed to help you understand the relationship between your eating and the number on the scale. Weekly weighing also helps you get less stuck on a particular number on the scale and to focus instead on trends over time. If you are below your healthy set point weight range, the trend will need to go up initially and weekly weighing will allow you to see that it can stabilize within a healthy range for you over time. If you are within your set point weight range, you may be surprised to find that the trend remains stable even when you make large changes such as eating more and reducing purging behaviours.

You don't need to weigh yourself every week forever. When you no longer have strong fears about your weight and your predictions are pretty accurate, you may decide that you don't need to complete the weekly weight chart anymore.

Module Summary

- There are many factors that influence the number on the scale other than your body's true weight, and we refer to these factors as natural fluctuations.
- Weight fluctuates naturally so it is more accurate to draw conclusions about the number on the scale based on trends over time rather than based on a single number.
- When you normalise your eating and other weight control behaviours, your body will naturally tend towards its genetic set point range and will not keep going up and up uncontrollably.
- Weighing too often or avoiding weighing altogether are both problematic and keep eating disorders going so we recommend weekly weighing.
- The Weekly Weighing Sheet will help you find out how accurate your weight predictions are, learn to draw conclusions based on patterns over 4 weeks, and gather more accurate data to understand the impact of reducing your disordered eating behaviours on the number.

Coming up...Self-Monitoring

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REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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IMAGES

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