



Caring Less About Your Looks

Module 5

Appearance Altering Behaviours

Introduction	2
Helpful Versus Unhelpful Appearance Altering Behaviours	2
Your Unhelpful Appearance Altering Behaviours	3
Consequences of Appearance Altering Behaviours	4
Reducing Appearance Altering Behaviours	6
Experimenting With Changing Your Behaviour	8
Repeating Experiments	11
Module Summary	12
About the Modules	13

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Introduction

Many people are conscious of how they look and will try to ‘enhance’ their appearance from time to time. For example, it’s not uncommon for people to style their hair in a certain way, wear jewellery and fashionable clothing, shave regularly, get tattoos, wax areas of their body, or use make-up and other cosmetics. As discussed in Module 2, while appearance altering behaviours aren’t necessarily a problem, they can become unhelpful if they keep you overly focused on your appearance, or if they start to negatively impact on your life in some way.



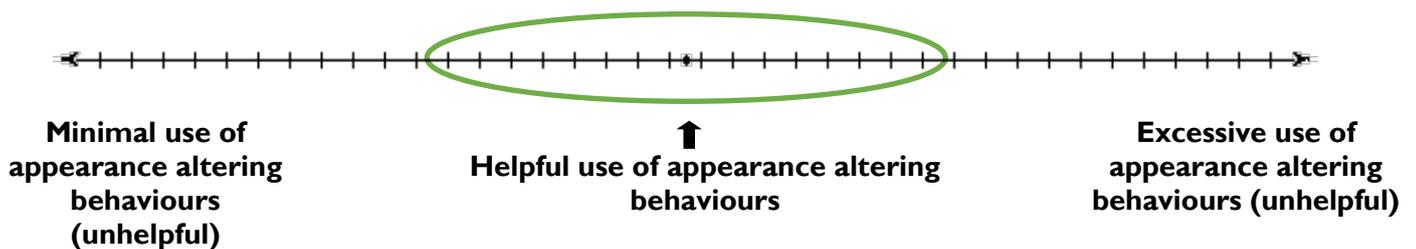
People who are overly concerned about how they look will often try to change their appearance **significantly** as a way to feel better about themselves. This can lead them to:



- Use too many cosmetic products (e.g., make up, fake tan)
- Follow strict and time-consuming face or haircare routines
- Spend lots of time changing outfits or accessorising before leaving the house
- Use extreme diets or cleanses to lose weight
- Use unnecessary dietary supplements (e.g. protein powders)
- Overexercise
- Undergo lots of cosmetic procedures (e.g., liposuction, facial fillers or rhinoplasty).

Helpful Versus Unhelpful Appearance Altering Behaviours

It can be hard to work out what’s ‘normal’ or ‘too much’ when it comes to appearance altering behaviours. As discussed in Module 4, it can be helpful to think about these behaviours as lying on a scale, as shown below. On one end, there is no attempt to change appearance, which is a problem in itself, as it may result in poor hygiene (e.g. body odour, messy hair) or criticism from others (e.g., receiving comments from your boss about looking untidy). On the other end, there is excessive attempts to change appearance, which is also unhelpful, as not only can this negatively affect mood, finances and health, it can also keep people ‘stuck’ in being too focused on their appearance.



Since both ends of the scale are unhelpful, the goal of this module is not to move you from overusing appearance altering behaviours to getting rid of these behaviours completely - rather, the goal is to help you engage in appearance altering behaviours in a more balanced way, and to lessen the negative consequences associated with their use.



Your Unhelpful Appearance Altering Behaviours

Using the table below, have a think about how often you use different types of appearance altering behaviours, and consider whether you believe your use of these behaviours is helpful for you. To help you with this, you might want to ask yourself: “If my friends or family were aware of the extent to which I use these behaviours, would they consider it *appropriate* or *excessive*?”. You may be using other forms of appearance altering behaviours not listed below - if so, do add these to the list in the space provided.

Appearance altering behaviours	How often? (e.g., 1x per day; 3x per week)	Duration (e.g., minutes, days)	Appropriate or Excessive?
e.g., <i>Doing my hair</i>	<i>1x in morning 3x at work</i>	<i>60mins 15 minutes each</i>	<i>Excessive</i>
Strict dieting, cleanses, or weight loss supplements			
Body transformation programs e.g., 30-day diet or fitness programs			
Clothes shopping (including online shopping)			
Use of protein powders/work-out supplements			
Steroid use to build muscle			
Use of make-up			
Hair treatments e.g., gel, colour, products			
Hair styling e.g., straightening, curling			
Use of cosmetic products e.g., moisturisers			
Use of fake tanning products			
Cosmetic procedures e.g., Botox, surgery, laser treatments, liposuction			
Hair removal e.g., face and body waxing			
Exercise focused on changing body shape/composition			
Beauty treatments including skin rejuvenation, tinting, tattooing, manicures, pedicures			
Researching ways to improve appearance			



Consequences of Appearance Altering Behaviours

Time

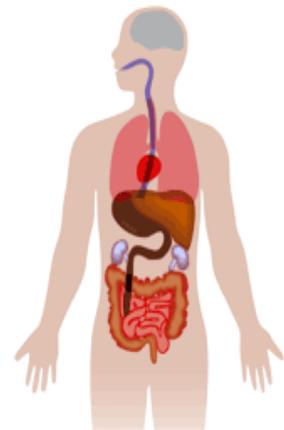


Look back at the table above and work out how much time you spend on appearance altering behaviours. Does this come as a surprise? Do you spend more time than you thought? What are the consequences of spending this amount of time altering your appearance? How does it impact on your day-to-day life? Does it take time away from family, friends, work, study, and other important areas of your life?

Physical Health

People who are overconcerned about their appearance can find themselves driven to engage in behaviours that can be harmful to their physical health, including the following:

- Extreme dieting can lead to many serious health problems such as cardiac issues, electrolyte disturbance, hormone disruption, loss of sexual desire, poor bone health, hair loss, tiredness and muscle loss. See CCI handout 'Starvation Syndrome' for further information if this applies to you.
- Excessive exercise can also lead to health problems, including vital organ dysfunction and bone damage as well as reproductive, muscular and metabolic issues. This typically occurs when exercising repeatedly to the point of exhaustion, or exercising even when injured or unwell. See CCI handout 'Unhealthy Exercise' for further information.
- Steroid misuse can result in serious health effects such as kidney problems, liver damage and cardiovascular issues (e.g., high blood pressure, increased risk of blood clots and stroke) regardless of age. Steroid misuse can also impact on hormone levels, and can lead to severe acne, reduced sperm count, baldness and excessive body hair.
- There are also many health risks associated with cosmetic procedures. With this in mind, it is important to investigate the potential risks or side effects of any procedure before proceeding.



How is your physical health affected by the use of appearance altering behaviours?



Financial

Weight loss programs, cosmetic products, supplements and/or exercise regimens are expensive to maintain and, even after spending a lot of money, people often find that they are still not satisfied with their appearance. This often leads them to consider “What next?”, leading to more money being spent on new products, and a vicious cycle forms.



How much money do you spend on your appearance? What would you rather be spending this money on?

Emotional

Using too many appearance altering behaviours can also impact on how you feel. Constantly thinking about how to change your appearance can make you feel anxious or depressed, particularly if you don't have the time or the money to dedicate to changing your appearance. You may also feel guilty if you do end up spending a lot of money trying to 'improve' how you look, or hopeless if your efforts to 'improve' your appearance aren't 'working' in the way you wanted.

What impact do appearance altering behaviours have on how you feel?

Maintaining Concern With Appearance

It can be true that changing your appearance in some way can lead to feel better about your appearance in the short term. However, keeping up with these changes to your appearance in the long term may come with a lot of costs. Let's use an example.

Caitlin has fine, straight hair. She has always wanted to have thick, curly hair. Over the years she has spent a fortune on curling irons, perms and hair-thickening products. For a while (sometimes minutes, sometimes weeks) her hair would look curly and she felt great. Since it would always return to its normal state, Caitlin needed to go to all the effort over and over again in order to keep up the appearance of having curly hair (which even her partner believed was natural). After some time, Caitlin realised that having curly hair wasn't worth the huge effort or the cost involved, and she decided to work towards accepting her hair the way it was naturally. She had her hair cut in a way that enhanced her fine hair, and found that there were certain benefits to having naturally straight hair.

As seen with Caitlin, you may initially think that taking action to change your appearance will reduce your dissatisfaction, however this just keeps you really focused on how you look, causing a vicious cycle. Not only can this lead you to experience even more dissatisfaction, it can also reinforce the importance that your appearance has in determining how you feel about yourself.



Reducing Appearance Altering Behaviours

Now that we know just how unhelpful appearance altering behaviours can be, we can start to make some changes. Refer back to the table on page 3 and select three behaviours that you would like to change. Using the table, set some goals to reduce the behaviours you've chosen. Refer to the examples below as a guide to help you to set goals that reflect more appropriate use.

My goals

Appearance altering behaviours:	Current use:	Goal:
<i>Examples:</i> Applying make-up each morning Juice cleanse Going to the gym Cost of beauty products	2 hours per day 1 per month 90 minutes per day \$400 per month	30 minutes 0 60 minutes, up to 3x per week \$200 per month
Goal 1:		
Goal 2:		
Goal 3:		

The next step is to take action. Just like reducing your body checking in Module 4, we can either stop immediately or reduce gradually.

Stop immediately:

There may be some behaviours that you are willing to stop immediately, such as stopping an unhealthy weight loss program or deciding against a certain cosmetic procedure.



Gradual reduction:

Another option is to gradually reduce how much you engage in appearance altering behaviours using a series of steps. Start by identifying 5 steps from easiest (Step 1) to most difficult (Step 5) that will help you reach your goal. Begin with the easiest step and gradually work your way up the stepladder. This method is helpful for appearance altering behaviours where some use is considered normal (e.g., styling your hair each morning). Just start with one behaviour. When you are familiar with the steps, you can use the same method to reduce other unhelpful appearance altering behaviours. See the example on the next page.





GOAL: <i>Reduce time spent exercising from 90 minutes daily to 60 minutes, 3x per week</i>	
STEPS	
5	<i>Exercise 60 minutes, 3x per week</i>
4	<i>Exercise 60 minutes, 5x per week</i>
3	<i>Exercise 60 minutes, 6x per week</i>
2	<i>Reduce exercise to 60 minutes daily</i>
1	<i>Reduce exercise to 75 minutes daily</i>

Now you have a go:

GOAL:	
STEPS	
5	
4	
3	
2	
1	

Make sure you set yourself a time frame to achieve your goal using your stepladder. You could take one step each day, or if this is too challenging, you may prefer to repeat each step every day for one week before moving on to the next step.

Reflect on what it was like to work towards your goal. What did you notice as you reduced the behaviour?

What is the impact of reducing or stopping this behaviour (e.g., on your finances, health, mood, how preoccupied you were with your appearance)?



Experimenting With Changing Your Behaviour

You might find yourself really worried about reducing your appearance altering behaviours. You may even predict that something bad will happen if you were to make some changes. Such predictions may be keeping you stuck in a cycle of thinking you *need* to stick to all of these behaviours to prevent your predictions from coming true. For example, you might think that if you don't cleanse your face by following a strict series of steps, your skin will break out and people will notice and comment on it. Because of this fear, you continue to cleanse your face in this way. But what if stopping your cleansing routine doesn't lead to a skin breakout? How do you know if your predictions are actually true if you've never tested them out?

The best way to find out whether or not your predictions are realistic is to test them out using a behavioural experiment. Like a scientist doing an experiment, behavioural experiments involve testing out what really happens when you make a change to one of your appearance altering behaviours. This will take some courage, but it will provide you with the opportunity to gather more scientific information about the accuracy of your beliefs.



On the next page, have a look at an example of a behavioural experiment that uses one of the appearance altering behaviour goals we discussed earlier. After you've read through this example, you can work on testing out one of your own appearance altering behaviours using the worksheet that follows.



Step 1: Identify your current belief or prediction. What are you afraid will happen?

If I spend 30 minutes applying make-up instead of my usual 2 hour routine, I will look noticeably worse and my colleagues will make negative comments about my appearance.

Step 2: Strength of prediction. How much do I believe this will happen (0-100%): 90%

Step 3: Identify an alternative prediction. What might happen instead?

There won't be a noticeable difference in my appearance and no one will comment negatively.

Step 4: Strength of prediction (0-100%): 10%

Step 5: Behavioural experiment to test the two predictions.

I will only spend 30 minutes applying my make-up before leaving for work and I'll keep a record if my colleagues do comment. I will act as normal, and will not purposely seek out or avoid attention.

Step 6: Specify a timeframe (enough time to test whether either belief is supported).

I will spend 30 minutes doing my make-up before I leave for work for the next two days.

Step 7: Evaluate the results. What actually happened?

I spoke to 15 colleagues over the two days and sat in a meeting with about 20 colleagues. None of them commented on my appearance. I thought one colleague looked at me differently, however I know this doesn't necessarily mean they thought I looked bad.

Step 8: Reflect on the experiment. What did I learn? What does this say about my original prediction?

No one commented on my appearance so perhaps people don't notice when I spend less time applying my make-up.

How much do I believe my original prediction (0-100%): 60%

How much do I believe the alternative prediction (0-100%): 40%

Step 9: How will I use this new information going forward? How will I change my behaviour?

I plan to stick to spending only 30 minutes doing my make-up and will remind myself of this experiment to keep me on track.



Now it's your turn to conduct a behavioural experiment to test out one of your fears about reducing an appearance altering behaviour.

Step 1: Identify your current belief or prediction. What are you afraid will happen?

Step 2: Strength of prediction. How much do I believe this will happen (0-100%)? _____

Step 3: Identify an alternative prediction. What might happen instead?

Step 4: Strength of prediction (0-100%)

Step 5: Behavioural experiment to test the two predictions.

Where, when and how will I test this out?

Step 6: Specify a timeframe (enough time to test whether either belief is supported).

Step 7: Evaluate the results. What actually happened?

Step 8: Reflect on the experiment.

What did I learn? What does this say about my original prediction?

How much do I believe my original prediction (0-100%) _____

How much do I believe the alternative prediction (0-100%) _____

Step 9: How will I use this new information going forward? How will I change my behaviour?



Repeating Experiments

You might be thinking “how many times do I need to do an experiment?” The answer to this varies for each person. The bottom line is that you need to keep doing experiments over and over again until you have enough evidence to see whether your predictions are true. This may involve doing experiments with different people or in new situations. Remember, the goal is for you to start thinking in more realistic and helpful ways.

If an experiment seems to confirm that your initial prediction is correct (e.g., someone does make a very negative comment about your appearance), ask yourself if other reasons could explain this other than it being only about your appearance. It is also not the time to back off from experimenting, no matter how much you may want to. Keep going! Repeat the experiment in different situations and with different people. No good scientist would make wide sweeping conclusions based on one experiment – so you shouldn’t either. For example, some people may have very strong views about appearance and do in fact make negative comments, but this won’t be the case with everyone. Repeated experiments with different people will give you the opportunity to learn that people can respond in a variety of ways.

Finally, if you find that a particular person or group of people overvalue appearance and do indeed make lots of negative comments about your appearance, the experiment will still be helpful in testing out your ability to cope with such situations. You might also find yourself preferring to spend time with people who place less value on physical appearance.





Module Summary

- People who are overly concerned and dissatisfied with their appearance will often attempt to improve their appearance by engaging in lots of appearance altering behaviours.
- Appearance altering behaviours can be expensive, time consuming and can have a negative impact on physical health and mood.
- The more you engage in these behaviours, the more preoccupied you will be with your appearance, and the more likely you will feel dissatisfied with how you look. This can reinforce the importance that appearance has in determining how you feel about yourself.
- You can reduce unhelpful appearance altering behaviours by stopping immediately, using a stepladder approach, or by conducting behavioural experiments to test whether your predictions about reducing your behaviours are accurate or not.
- Addressing unhelpful appearance altering behaviours will help you to reduce your concerns with your appearance and will allow you to live your life in a more meaningful way.



Coming up ...

In the next module, we will discuss ways to target avoidance behaviours relating to appearance concerns.



About the Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT).

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

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