

Break Free from ED

An Active Guide to Recovering from Your Eating Disorder

Module 11

Body Image 1: Body Checking

Introduction	2
What is Body Image?	2
What Keeps Body Image Concerns Going?	2
Body Checking	3
Problems with Body Checking	4
Why People Engage in Checking Behaviours	4
Body Checking “Up” and “Down” Experiment	5
My Body Checking “Up” and “Down” Experiment	6
Tips for Reducing Body Checking	7
My Weekly Progress Tracker	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

By now, we hope that you have been able to put in place strategies to break free from: restriction and food rules, starvation syndrome, binge eating, purging, and driven exercise. In doing so, you have already started to challenge many of the beliefs you hold about eating, weight, shape, and their control. Often at this stage, people say, 'I am doing all the things I need to do to stay on track, but I still feel bad about my body'. Let's now turn to understanding what body image is and how we can tackle body image concerns as part of recovery. If you jumped straight to this part without addressing your eating, we encourage you to go back!

What is Body Image?

Body image refers to the attitude we have toward our body as well as our perception of our body. Body image is influenced by positive and negative attitudes we have accumulated towards our bodies over our lifetimes, and is reinforced by the way we talk to ourselves about our bodies, how we look after our bodies, and how we experience others talking about and treating our bodies. Body image is not stable; it can fluctuate between accepting and self-critical over the course of a day or a week, even when there is no evidence of change in your weight or shape!



FACT. Body image is rated as one of the top concerns by young people and adults in the general population. In today's society, not liking your body and wanting to change it is far too common!

What Keep Body Image Concerns Going?

There are several factors that keep body image concerns going. In fact, this topic is so large that we have developed a separate workbook to cover it all. If body image remains a problem for you after completing this workbook, then we encourage you to complete [Caring Less About Your Looks](#) next.

Body image concerns are driven by beliefs about your body or about bodies in general that are often unhelpful and inaccurate. We will refer to these as **negative body beliefs**. Just as with food rules, negative body beliefs tend to be **rigid and inflexible**, and based on opinion rather than facts. Negative body beliefs not only leave you feeling unhappy about your body, but they also drive your attempts to control eating, weight, and shape and can leave you at risk of relapse, even after you have made significant changes towards eating more normally and reducing other eating disorder behaviours.

Negative body beliefs often lead to **two key types of behaviours** that keep you stuck in the vicious cycle of eating disorders:



- **Body checking:** Body checking behaviours involve intensely and repeatedly scrutinising or focusing in on your body. You might compare yourself to other people in images or in real life, check your appearance in the mirror repeatedly, think a lot about your body, or research ways to 'improve' your body.

- **Body avoidance:** Body avoidance behaviours involve trying to hide or cover up your body, so it is not visible to yourself or others. This might include avoiding looking in mirrors, only wearing loose-fitting clothing, or avoiding situations where others might see your body (e.g. an exercise class).

It is common for people with eating disorders to swing between checking their body repeatedly and intensely and avoiding their body altogether. We will start by addressing body checking (Module 11) before turning to body avoidance (Module 12).

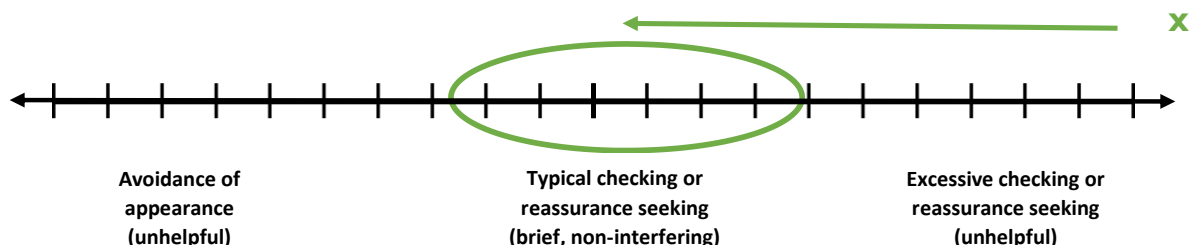
Body Checking

When people are worried about something, it is human nature to focus on it. If you are concerned about your body then you may focus intensely on it and even find it difficult to shift your attention away from it. People with eating disorders often engage in behaviours intended to check whether there is something 'wrong' with their body, or to reassure themselves that their body is not as bad as they first thought. We will refer to these as **body checking behaviours**. Below we have listed common body checking behaviours. Tick any that are relevant to you, then add your own examples.

- ☐ Analysing my body in the mirror
- ☐ Checking my body in reflective surfaces (e.g. windows)
- ☐ Weighing myself frequently
- ☐ Checking areas of my body by touching, pinching, or mentally scanning that area
- ☐ Taking photographs or video footage of myself
- ☐ Measuring parts of my body (e.g. using hands or a tape measure)
- ☐ Comparing my appearance to others (in person or in images on social media)
- ☐ Looking at old photos of myself
- ☐ Seeking reassurance from others about my appearance
- ☐ Assessing the fit of my clothes
- ☐ My examples _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

When it comes to bodies, many people will quickly check how they look in the mirror or ask someone whether an outfit looks okay before heading out. So, what is 'normal' when it comes to checking your body? It can vary from one behaviour to another but in general it can be helpful to think of body checking behaviours as existing on a scale from too little to too much. As shown in the scale below, you don't need to get rid of these behaviours altogether. Rather, the goal is to move you from checking in an unhelpful way, to just briefly checking your body from time to time and in a way that doesn't interfere with other valued areas of life.

TASK: If you are unsure if checking is a problem for you, try monitoring your checking behaviours for 1 week. Record on your self-monitoring form each time you engage in a checking behaviour. You can record the checking behaviour, how many times you checked, and how long you spent checking.



Problems with Body Checking

Focusing too much on your body is problematic because:

1. **If you look for flaws you will find them.** By focusing on areas of your body you dislike you will notice things that you (or others) don't normally notice, which may increase your anxiety and lead to even more checking! You will also overlook more positive aspects of your body that help build body acceptance.
2. **Comparisons tend to be unfair.** People usually compare their bodies with people who they think look 'better' in some way (e.g. those who are thinner, more toned, taller) rather than comparing to all body shapes and sizes. This skews your perspective of 'normal' when it comes to bodies!
3. **It is time consuming and distracting.** Constantly checking and comparing your body is time consuming and takes you away from being present in everyday situations. You might notice that others start to get frustrated when you seek reassurance, and this puts a strain on your relationships.
4. **Self-worth:** When you spend so much time focusing on your body, it can become the primary way in which you measure your self-worth. Instead of considering lots of factors like relationships, work performance, intelligence, or your character, self-worth can be reduced to how you look in a picture!



Note: Comparisons in media are particularly problematic as the images of bodies have been carefully photographed, selected, edited and filtered. This promotes unrealistic expectations of what bodies should look like - even the people in the images don't look like that in real life!

Why People Engage in Checking Behaviours

Many people believe that checking behaviours are helpful or necessary in some way. Highlight any beliefs you hold about checking:

- *Comparing myself to others motivates me to make helpful changes*
- *If I don't check my body I will miss something and completely let myself go*
- *If I look in the mirror and like what I see, checking gives me a confidence boost*
- *Seeking reassurance from my loved ones makes me feel better*
- *Checking keeps me on track with my eating*
- *I feel less anxious when I check*
- *Checking shows that I care about my appearance*
- _____
- _____

As long as you hold beliefs that checking behaviours are positive or helpful in some way, you will continue to check. Let's have a go at experimenting with body checking and see whether it is as helpful as you think.

Body Checking “Up” and “Down” Experiment

If you are often body checking and believe this is helpful and valuable to you, then you can conduct an experiment to see what happens when you deliberately increase body checking behaviours and when you deliberately decrease checking. If body checking behaviours truly are helpful, you should feel more confident, motivated, and reassured on the days you increase your checking! Let’s conduct an experiment to find out

If things don’t change on the days when you do check and when you don’t check, then your beliefs about body checking don’t hold up.

Also, if things happen to be worse on days when you do check compared to days when you don’t check, then your beliefs about body checking certainly don’t hold up.

In this experiment we want you to alternate between each day of the week, **turning DOWN the volume on body checking** one day, then **turning UP the volume on body checking** the next day. It should look something like this:



Day 1 (Down Body Checking): On the first day, attempt **not to engage in body checking behaviours** at all, or only very minimally for the whole day. If you notice yourself checking, just redirect your attention to focus on whatever you are doing at the time. Remind yourself to postpone your checking and **leave it until the next day**.



Day 2 (Up Body Checking): On the next day, **increase your body checking behaviours** and re-visit that old habit of intensely and repeatedly focusing in on your body.

On Day 3, turn the **Body Checking** volume DOWN, and on day 4, turn the **Body Checking** volume UP again, and so on.

TIP: If you already recognise that body checking is unhelpful for you then the UP and DOWN experiment will help increase your awareness of the impact of these behaviours and help you start practicing skills to reduce the amount of time you spend body checking. Even if just 5% of you believes that body checking behaviours are helpful, that 5% will keep drawing you back in!

Now it’s your turn. Use the worksheet on the next page to test out whether your body checking behaviours are really helpful.

My Body Checking “Up” and “Down” Experiment

Step 1: Rate how helpful you think checking is: ____ (0-100%)

Step 2: Record specific predictions:

- Ask yourself - what do I think will happen on the “UP” days when I increase body checking? Particularly, what benefits will I notice? *E.g., on days I check more, I will feel better about my body.*
- Enter your predictions into the left column

Step 3: Record what happens:

- At the end of each day, rate what happened in relation to your predictions. For example, if you predict you will feel better about your body when you increase checking then you would rate how you feel about your body on a scale from 0 (“I feel terrible about my body”) to 10 (“I feel great about my body”).
- You may like to record any other observations.

My UP and DOWN Body Checking Record

My predictions What do I think will happen if I increase my body checking?	DAY 1: Down Body Checking Rating (0-10)	DAY 2: Up Body Checking Rating (0-10)	DAY 3: Down Body Checking Rating (0-10)	DAY 4: Up Body Checking Rating (0-10)	DAY 5: Down Body Checking Rating (0-10)
Example prediction “I will feel better about my body” 0: feel terrible about my body 10: feel great about my body	5 <i>Feeling a bit anxious not checking</i>	3 <i>Noticed things I didn’t like about my body</i>	6 <i>Pretty neutral</i>	3 <i>Feeling awful, had a binge</i>	6 <i>Not thinking about my body as much</i>
My prediction 1					
My prediction 2					
My prediction 3					

Step 4. Evaluate the results. Compare what actually happened on UP days compared to DOWN days? Was body checking helpful? What else did you learn about body checking?

Step 5. Re-rate how much you believe that body checking is helpful: ____ (0-100%)

Step 6. Double-down for improved learning. If you still believe that body checking is helpful to some degree, what experiment could you conduct to ‘prove’ that checking is helpful?

Tips for Reducing Body Checking

If your goal is to be more accepting of your body, then reducing body checking, reassurance-seeking, and comparisons is an important step. If you are finding it hard to reduce checking behaviours, here are some tips to get you started:

1. Set time limits to reduce the amount of time you spend on activities that increase body checking. For example:
 - Limit your use of mirrors to 10 minutes in the morning before work
 - Reduce time spent on social media to 30 minutes per day
2. Ask a support person to assist you. For example, ask your support person to:
 - Stop providing reassurance about your body, even if you continue to ask for reassurance
 - Cover up a mirror that is promoting unhelpful checking
3. Check in with your use of media and social media
 - What pages are you following?
 - Do they contain unrealistic images or images that make you feel worse about your own body? Do they represent all body shapes and sizes?
 - Does following these pages increase or decrease your body image concerns?
 - Curate your social media and disengage from any platforms that primarily focus on appearance
4. Check in with other sources of information
 - What books are you reading?
 - Are they related to dieting, food, exercise, or appearance?
 - Does the material you are reading increase or decrease your body image concerns?
5. Check in with your phone use
 - What apps are you using? Do they promote an intense focus on changing your body weight, shape, or fitness? (e.g. tracking daily steps, daily calorie consumption, following people who have an intense focus on body weight, shape or eating)
 - Are these apps increasing or decreasing your body image concerns?
6. If you notice yourself getting stuck in checking, congratulate yourself for noticing and then re-direct your attention back to the present moment.
7. Remember that urges eventually pass with enough time and practice. You may wish to practice the 'delay' and 'distract' strategies discussed in previous modules to help you sit with urge to check.



My Weekly Progress Tracker

First, complete your symptom tracker:

Eating Disorder Behaviour	Frequency (# days per week)	
Restrict or dieting		
Exercise (including time spent)		
Binge eating	# days	# episodes
Vomiting to control my weight/shape		
Laxative misuse		

Second, reflect on your self-monitoring:

What did I learn from my self-monitoring this week?

Third, review your homework from last week:

Task	Completed? Y/N
Weekly weighing	
Completing self-monitoring daily, and in real-time	
Eating regularly	
Eating adequately	
Feared food experiments	
Exercise experiment	

Finally, set some goals! What do you want to work on this week?

(e.g., continue experimenting with feared foods and exercise, practice urge surfing, reduce my checking behaviours)

Module Summary

- Body image refers to the attitude you have toward your body as well as your perception of your body
- People engage in different types of behaviours to manage their body image concerns. One of these behaviours is body checking
- Body checking behaviours include scrutinising yourself in the mirror, looking at old photos, trying on old clothes repeatedly to see if they fit, comparing yourself to others online, and many more
- In the long run, these behaviours **keep body image concerns going** because they increase the amount of attention you pay to your appearance, increase the likelihood of noticing 'flaws' and are often negatively biased. They also increase the amount of importance you place on how you look
- You can reduce your checking behaviours by conducting an experiment to see whether they truly are helpful for you

Coming up...Body Image 2: Body Avoidance

About the Modules

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Bronwyn Raykos (PhD, MPsyCh)
Senior Clinical Psychologist

Katharina Targowski (MPsyCh)
Clinical Psychologist

Samantha Bank (MPsyCh)
Clinical Psychologist

Dr. Olivia Carter (DPsyCh)
Clinical Psychologist

Dr. Bruce Campbell (DPsyCh, MPsyCh)
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

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

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