

Break Free from ED

An Active Guide to Recovering from Your Eating Disorder

Module 14

Maintaining Your Gains and Dealing with Setbacks

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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

Congratulations on making it to the end of this workbook! The most important thing for you to do now is to continue to practice and apply the strategies you have learned until they become more like habits that have been integrated into your lifestyle. In this final module we will summarise the important strategies you have learned and help you develop a plan for managing setbacks which may occur in the future.

Summary of Skills

These modules have covered a range of new skills and strategies that have been drawn from cognitive behavioural therapy for eating disorders. Consider how helpful each of these strategies has been for you and commit to apply them regularly so you maintain the gains you have made and build your confidence.

Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring is one strategy that you used in overcoming your eating disorder. In Module 4, you learnt how to review your eating in real time, so you could really understand what is happening with your eating



patterns, develop awareness of what you're thinking at meal and snack times, and give yourself the opportunity to do things differently! While you don't need to self-monitor forever, it can be a helpful tool in your toolbox to help you 'reset' if you notice old habits creeping back in!

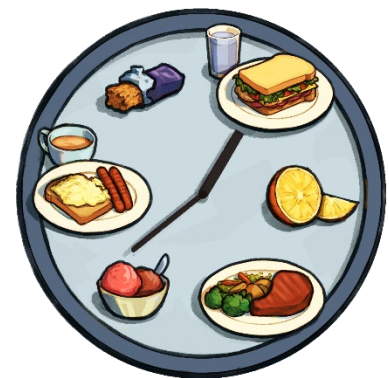
Weekly weighing

Weekly weighing involved learning about factors that impact the number on the scale, and testing out your beliefs about the relationship between eating, exercise, purging and weight. It also addressed the consequences of weighing too frequently (i.e. feeling 'obsessed' with weight) or avoiding the scales altogether (i.e. anxiety about the number). If you are still actively engaging in behavioural experiments and making changes to your eating, you will likely benefit from continuing to weigh yourself weekly and plotting this on your weekly weighing chart. Over time, this can reduce to monthly or only as required.

Regular Eating

In Module 6 and 7, we introduced you to regular eating for recovery, where you focussed on the content, structure, and variety of your nutritional intake to ensure you had enough energy to keep you going throughout the day. This included:

- Eating every 3-4 hours (3 meals and 2-3 snacks)
- Including a range of food groups, ideally a mix of protein, carbohydrates and fats throughout the day, as well as including 'fun foods'
- Ensuring that you are eating enough to fuel your body
- Introducing feared foods using behavioural experiments



It is a helpful guideline to try to keep up regular eating for at least 12 months after you finish treatment. If you notice any setbacks, come back to your eating and check in if it is regular, adequate, varied, and including previously feared foods.

Urge Surfing

Modules 8 and 9 discussed using urge surfing to ‘ride out’ the urge to engage in binge eating or purging behaviours, based on our knowledge that all emotions, urges and physical sensations become less intense over time. Remember, this is something always available to you when you are experiencing something distressing or uncomfortable, and you can use delay and distract methods to help you surf the urge, or simply practice tolerating your discomfort and distress without having to do anything but mindfully observe your experience. If this is something you’re still struggling with, check out our *Facing Your Feelings* modules.



Behavioural Experiments

Behavioural experiments are a key strategy that can test out the accuracy of all kinds of beliefs and predictions you may hold. By now, you’ve used behavioural experiments to test out your predictions about the impact of breaking food rules and eating feared foods, the helpfulness of checking behaviours, your beliefs about how others perceive your appearance, and much more. There’s a blank behavioural experiment worksheet in the appendix that you can use as many times as required in the future.



Exposure

Avoidance leads to increased fear and anxiety, and the best way to reduce anxiety is through exposure to the thing that we are fearful of. We used exposure in the context of approaching feared foods, eating socially, and engaging in valued areas of life that you were avoiding due to your body image concerns. Remember, exposure works best when it is **repeated and sustained**. This means that you need to continue to expose yourself to these foods and situations, otherwise that anxiety will resurface.

Identifying and challenging unhelpful beliefs

Negative body beliefs can trigger two behaviours that keep body image concerns going – in Module 12 we discussed **body checking** and tested out whether checking is as helpful as you believe and how you can reduce it. In Module 13 we discussed **body avoidance** and taught you how to use exposure experiments to test out fears related to your body. Core beliefs are often at the root of unhelpful thoughts and are very tricky to change. Module 14 helped you identify and challenge your negative core beliefs so that you could re-engage with other important areas of your life. This involved collecting evidence that showed your core belief was not 100% true all the time and forming new, balanced beliefs. Acting in line with your new core beliefs will help strengthen them – look back to your Core Belief Action Plan if you need a reminder.

Other resources

Sometimes there are other factors that keep you stuck in your eating disorder. These might include perfectionism, difficulties with anxiety, or low self-esteem. If you believe it would be helpful to do some work in any of these areas, here are links to workbooks for:

- [Perfectionism in Perspective](#)
- [What? Me Worry?](#)
- [Improving Self Esteem](#)

You can take a look at our complete list of resources here:

[Looking After Yourself: Self Help Resources for Mental Health Conditions](#)

Dealing with Setbacks

The road to recovery is rarely a smooth ride so planning for some ups and downs is essential. It is normal to experience setbacks from time to time during recovery from an eating disorder. There are many events and experiences that could increase risk of a return of eating disorder beliefs and behaviours. We've listed some below – highlight any that might be relevant for you and add any others you can think of:

- Stress at work or university (e.g. exams)
- Pregnancy
- Illnesses or medical procedures that might impact my appetite, digestive system, or weight (e.g. food poisoning or surgery)
- Relationship difficulties
- Moving out of home
- Financial difficulties
- Gaining weight e.g. on a holiday, during menopause
- Events with an increased focus on my appearance e.g. ball, wedding, public speech
- Direct comments from others about my eating, weight or shape
- Others around me going on a diet or discussing weight loss
- _____
- _____

The important thing is how you respond to these setbacks, not that they have occurred in the first place. Try not to focus too much on any setbacks that you experience. Instead, focus your attention on what you will do next to get back on track. If you respond to a setback by thinking in unhelpful ways like 'I'm back to square one', you will probably start to fall back into old habits. If you instead try and learn something about the experience then you can use this information to build skills and resilience over time.

On the next page you will find an example 'Dealing with Setbacks' Plan followed by a blank Plan for you to complete. This Plan is designed to help you to recognise the signs of a setback and take action as soon as possible. This way you can prevent a small setback from turning into a large one.

In this plan, you will identify:

- **Your Triggers:** These are the types of situations that could potentially trigger a setback in your eating disorder in the future.
- **Your Warning Signs:** Clues you can keep watch for that indicate your eating behaviours might be starting to become disordered again.
- **Your Action Plan:** What do you need to focus on and remind yourself when an eating disorder setback occurs? What do you need to do when an eating disorder setback occurs? Which strategies that you've used and found helpful will be important for you to put in place?

Dealing with Setbacks Plan - Example

Setbacks are normal – it is how I respond to setbacks that is most important

My Triggers: When are setbacks in my eating behaviours more likely to occur? In what types of situations might I have a setback?

- *Big events such as getting married or being in a friend's wedding, pregnancy*
- *Stress at work, school or studies*
- *Transitions such as ending a relationship, moving out of home*
- *Physical triggers such as food poisoning or changes to my digestive system, appetite or weight*
- *Financial difficulties*

My Warning Signs: How do I know when I have had a setback in my recovery? Are there any emotional, thinking, behavioural or physical signals?

- *Eating mindlessly, avoiding certain foods or eating around others, buying binge foods*
- *Thinking about food all the time, counting calories*
- *Covering up my body, checking my appearance in photos or the mirror, wearing baggy clothes*
- *Feeling tired, dizzy, nauseous or getting cold easily*
- *Snapping at others around me*
- *Prioritising exercise over other valued areas of life*

ACTION PLAN

What do I need to focus on and remind myself when a setback occurs?

- *I worked really hard to eat more regularly and when I did, I felt better*
- *If I spend too much time focussing on what I've done wrong instead of getting myself back on track, I'm more likely to get stuck in the eating disorder.*
- *Even though eating disorder behaviours can make me feel better in the short term, they lead to big problems in the short term.*

What do I need to do when a setback occurs? What specific actions can I take?

- *Review summary of skills*
- *Review modules*
- *Recommence self-monitoring*
- *Eat more regularly (every 3-4 hours)*
- *Eat enough*
- *Include a variety of all food groups (especially carbohydrates!)*
- *Practice mirror exposure*
- *Practice urge surfing*
- *Talk to a support person, speak to my GP, or seek a referral for psychological treatment*

Dealing with Setbacks – My Plan

Setbacks are normal – it is how I respond to setbacks that is most important

My Triggers: When are setbacks in my eating behaviours more likely to occur? In what types of situations might I have a setback?

My Warning Signs: How do I know when I have had a setback in my recovery? Are there any emotional, thinking, behavioural or physical signals?

ACTION PLAN

What do I need to focus on and remind myself when a setback occurs?

What do I need to do when a setback occurs?
What specific actions can I take?

Maintaining Gains

Congratulations again on making it to the end of this workbook! It may be helpful to revise the modules from time to time, especially if you are going through a difficult period. It may also be helpful to take this opportunity to consider whether there are any strategies in the Summary of Skills you think you would benefit from using more often. Are there any specific symptoms you still need to address? Is it time to get started and continue to build on the gains you have made?

There are some important things to remember about maintaining your gains:

Expect Slip-Ups

Slip-ups in progress can happen at any time and are to be expected. Use your new skills to start moving forward again when setbacks occur. Remind yourself that most people have 'down days' or days where life's hassles are harder to deal with – it's part of being human!

You can also use setbacks as a way of learning something new about yourself to help avoid similar problems in the future. Ask yourself, what made this particular situation difficult for me? What could I do to manage it differently next time? What skills could I use to help prepare myself for similar situations in the future? Regularly consult the Summary of Skills and your Dealing with Setbacks Plan.

Social Support

It is wise to find people in your life with whom you can talk through what's going on in your life, what your goals are, and share both your progress and your setbacks. This might be a friend, a family member, a partner or a therapist. Social support has been found to be very important in preventing relapse. Often, problems seem bigger than they really are when a person tries to deal with them on their own. Talking through difficulties can help to put them into perspective.

Acceptance

You may still experience eating disorder thoughts from time to time. This is normal and OK, and it is your choice whether or not you listen to them and change your behaviour. Often the best way to respond to eating disorder thoughts is to notice them, accept them, and move on by engaging in other valued areas of life.

Remember – progress is a bumpy road, but if you continue taking small steps you will get there. We hope that you feel proud of the progress you have made so far and encourage you to do something fun to celebrate your achievements!



Module Summary

- To maintain and build on the gains you have made, continue to apply the strategies you have learned through reading these modules:
 - Eating consistently, adequately and with good variety
 - Testing predictions and beliefs with behavioural experiments
 - Dropping safety behaviours
 - Challenging negative core beliefs
 - Acting consistently with new, more balanced core beliefs
- It is normal to experience setbacks in your recovery, but rather than focussing on them, use your Dealing with Setbacks Plan to recognise them early and get back on track.
- Social support is an important factor in staying strong in your recovery. Identify your supports and don't be afraid to lean on them
- Celebrate your achievements! Completing this workbook has been a very important step in recovering from your eating disorder.

About the Modules

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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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