

Body Checking and Avoidance

Body Checking

People who are very concerned about their weight and shape can spend a lot of time checking their body and appearance. For example, they may:

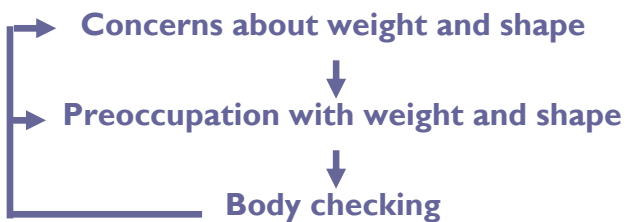
- Study themselves in the mirror repeatedly
- Compare their body to other people's bodies or to images they see in the media
- Focus in on certain parts of their body
- Pinch their skin in an effort to detect fat
- Measure parts of their body using their hands or a tape measure
- Repeatedly assess the fit of their clothing
- Weigh themselves frequently



Problems with Body Checking

Body checking is unhelpful for several reasons.

1) It maintains concern and preoccupation with weight and shape.



When we pay a lot of attention to something we train our brain to focus on the tiny details - this causes us to overanalyse and over-interpret small changes. As both weight and shape can fluctuate regularly, our concern and vigilance is reinforced.

- 2) **Our assessment of weight and shape is not accurate.** Studies have shown that our ratings of our weight and shape are heavily influenced by our mood, what we've eaten, how full we feel, and recent exposure to other bodies in media images. Our memory of how we looked and felt an hour ago is also unreliable. This can make it easy to think "I look bigger" with very little evidence!
- 3) **When we are concerned about weight and shape we monitor for 'problems' with weight and shape.** When we look for something, our brains process information in a way that is likely to confirm what we are looking for. If we are tuned in to and searching for signs of "fatness", then we will find them! This means that we aren't objective and may overlook more positive aspects of our bodies.

- 4) **Body comparisons are selective.** If you compare your body to others, consider who you compare yourself to. Is it everyone you pass on the street? Or only those who you think you 'should' look like? When we compare ourselves to a select group (or to photo-shopped images in media and increasingly, social media) we make unrealistic and unfair comparisons that often make us feel worse.

Body Avoidance

Some people find that they avoid looking at their body altogether, or alternate between periods of body checking and body avoidance. Avoidance might include:

- Wearing loose clothing
- Avoiding looking at themselves in the mirror or when getting changed
- Avoiding clothes shopping
- Avoiding close physical contact with others
- Avoiding swimming or some sports



Body avoidance is also unhelpful, because the focus on weight and shape is still there. Avoiding things that we fear also tends to make our fears worse, or at least keeps them going. By avoiding our body, we do not get the chance to find out whether our fears and predictions about our weight and shape are true or not, and to develop more balanced ways of thinking.

Reducing Checking and Avoidance

If you would like to reduce your body checking or avoidance behaviours, consider using the following steps:

1. Determine the extent and frequency of your checking/avoidance. Which checking or avoidance behaviours occur for you, and how many times each day do they happen?
2. Choose 2 or 3 behaviours to target
3. Set some specific goals. You may want to work on:
 - *Reducing* (e.g., 3x/day instead of 6x/day)
 - *Limiting* (e.g., once per week instead of daily)
 - *Eliminating* (stopping altogether)
 - *Postponing* (e.g., not checking your body until after work) your target behaviours
4. Start with easier goals and make changes gradually
5. Reward yourself for progress!
6. Check out our web-based resources for eating disorders (Overcoming Disordered Eating A and B) that include modules on Body Checking/Avoidance & "Feeling Fat".

