

Body Checking and Avoidance Behaviours

People with an eating disorder often over evaluate their body, weight and shape, and their ability to control them. Their self-worth is commonly based on their body, weight and shape, and these intense concerns about weight and appearance result in many disordered behaviours.

Many people weigh themselves frequently and become preoccupied with small changes, while others actively avoid weighing themselves, but are still constantly concerned about it. Many individuals check or scrutinise their bodies, focusing all their attention on parts that they dislike, whereas others actively avoid seeing their own bodies, but assume that they look fat and are horrible.

Body checking and avoidance is unhelpful because:

- It maintains a preoccupation with weight and shape
- The person's perceptions may be distorted
- Body checking is often aimed at finding something the person dislikes - and everyone can find something they dislike
- Weight fluctuates through the day

Examples of body checking and avoidance behaviours:

I am always looking in mirrors or reflective surfaces to check how I look.

I avoid the beach, swimming pools or wearing a swimsuit.

I don't want my body to be touched, it makes me feel uncomfortable.

I always feel fat and I get depressed when I don't lose weight.

I weigh myself constantly, and become preoccupied every time I notice small changes.

I avoid weighing myself, but I know I am overweight.

I am always looking at my body, checking parts that I don't like.

I'm always touching my arms, shoulders, or collar bones to check I can feel my bones.

I measure parts of my body with a tape measure or with my hands.

I used to check my body all the time but now I avoid it, because it is too distressing.

I avoid body checking by other means (e.g. not looking at photographs or wearing loose clothing).

I am constantly preoccupied with the way I look, my weight and/or my shape.

I frequently compare my shape with others, and realise I am not attractive enough.

Every time I look at myself in the mirror I feel depressed about my body.

I am constantly afraid of gaining weight and being fat.

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Besides the concern about shape and weight, people with an eating disorder may show an over-evaluation of control over eating. This can occur together with over-evaluation of shape and weight, or in isolation.

Some people might show little body checking, body avoidance or feeling fat, but they control their eating, diet intensely, and engage in various forms of dietary checking and avoidance behaviours (e.g. calorie-counting, food avoidance). This might be difficult to deal with, since many individuals with control behaviours strongly value the sense of self-control that they get from engaging in these forms of behaviour.

All these forms of behaviour are called “checking and avoidance behaviours” and tend to maintain or exacerbate the over-concern about shape and weight.

Everyone checks their body to some extent, but people with an eating disorder will repeatedly check their bodies and often in a way that is unusual, whether they are aware of it or not.

Body checking, avoidance behaviours and constant concerns about weight and shape have a profound effect on social functioning and intimate relationships. They can prevent a person from socialising, going to public events, and a range of other consequences.

These behaviours are problematic because they allow concerns and fears about weight and shape to persist.

As a result they can cause stress and distress, and together with the fear that drives them can keep you trapped in the cycle of body checking and feeling bad about the way you look.

Make a list of your own body checking/avoidance behaviours:

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Keep a record of your behaviours

To be able to work on these body checking and avoidance behaviours in a helpful way, you need to know exactly what weight and shape checking you are doing.

Record every time you check your body and weight, or every time you compare someone else’s body with your own. Since our behaviours change according to the environment that we are in, record one work day (or school day) and on one day when you are not working.

Use the table on the next page. Make a record of what behaviour is done, how it is done, and for how long. It is also important to record the thoughts and feelings that emerge during and after checking.


Time	Place	Checking (What is done, for how long)	Thoughts & feelings

Reference: Fairburn, C. (2008). Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Eating Disorders. London: The Guilford Press.

Challenging your behaviours

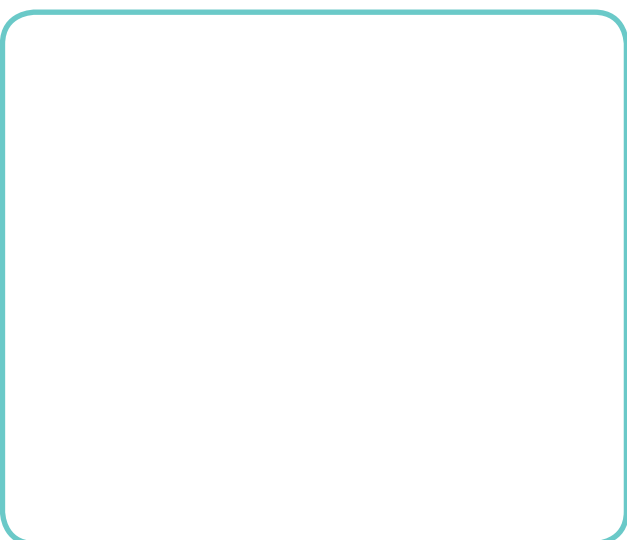
Body checking and body avoidance are usually connected to an underlying belief that your body is your worth or at least defines a great portion of your worth. You may need to examine this using cognitive challenging techniques and challenge whether this is really true, whether you really believe worth is (or should be) defined by what your body looks like.

List 2-3 behaviours that you are prepared to challenge.

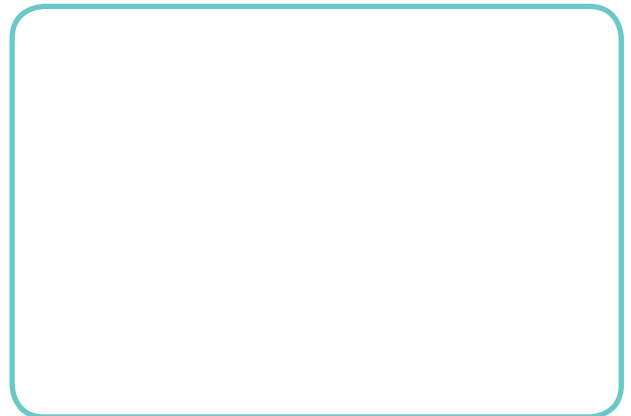


How are you going to challenge each behaviour? Set a goal for each behaviour.

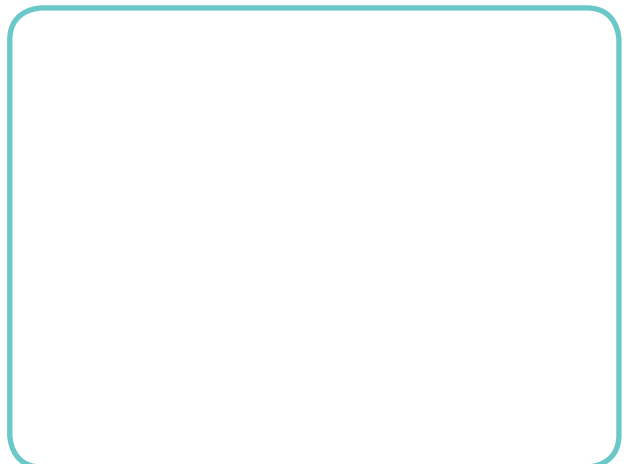
Postponing (delaying the behaviour)
Eliminating (stopping the behaviour)
Reducing (cutting back the frequency)



Write down what else defines your worth.



What can you do to value your self-worth, through means that do not involve appearance or weight?



What alternative thoughts can you use to help yourself when these behaviours occur?

