



Caring Less About Your Looks

Module 3

Appearance Focused Attention

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Introduction

In Module 2, we discussed the factors that keep you overly concerned with your appearance, such as appearance focused attention, body checking and reassurance seeking, avoidance and appearance altering behaviours. This module will explore appearance focused attention.

Appearance Focused Attention

It is hard to focus on other important things when you are really worried about something. For example, if you have a test or exam, you may find that you're focusing on whether you've prepared enough and find it hard to do the things you normally would, like read the newspaper in the morning. However, after the exam, you notice that you can focus on other things again.

People who are overly concerned with appearance tend to be fixated on thinking about how they look. This focus on appearance may be especially noticeable in certain situations (e.g. going to the beach or dressing up for an event).

One problem with this is that our attention is being directed away from fully engaging in everyday activities and meaningful tasks. For example, while exercising at the gym, you may find that instead of focusing on a range of aspects of your workout (e.g., heart rate, the music, how good it feels to move), you are instead caught up in thoughts about your appearance (e.g., “my arms are wobbling”, “my thighs look huge in these gym pants” or “people must think I am unattractive”). This can lead you to feel depressed or anxious, and can make for a very negative workout experience.



Another problem is that focusing on appearance rarely helps us solve the problems we are worried about. It may even provide us with information that makes us even more dissatisfied with our appearance. For example, we know that paying a lot of attention to one part of our body can make us aware of things that we would not normally notice. This can lead to more worry, more negative comparisons, and increased self-criticism.



Let's have a look at this in action...

Look very closely at the palm of your hand...notice all the tiny contours, lines and ridges... the shape... the variations in colour... how it changes as you clench and release...really focus in on what you can see. Stay with this for one minute.

Now ask yourself whether you had noticed any of these details before you purposely focused on your palm. The longer you looked, did you notice more or less things about your palm? Usually people find they notice a whole bunch of things they had not previously been aware of, and that these seem to be more obvious as they pay more and more attention to them (e.g., “the lines look deeper the longer I look at them”). So you can see how paying a lot of attention to a body part can lead you to notice more ‘flaws’ or details you hadn’t noticed before, which can lead you to feel more dissatisfied.

Unhelpful Appearance Thoughts

The way we think affects how we feel. If your thinking is positive (e.g., “my hair looks shiny today”) or even neutral (“my hair is black”), you may feel happy or just neutral about your appearance. However, if your thinking is unhelpful or even critical, it can keep you feeling really dissatisfied with your appearance.



This unhelpful thinking may include questioning why you look the way you do (e.g., “Why are my legs so big?”; “Why can’t I build muscle?”), criticising your appearance with labels (e.g., “I’m so ugly”; “My skin is hideous”), comparing yourself negatively with others (e.g., “I’ll never look as fit as him”), fantasising (e.g., “If I was taller, people would be more attracted to me”) or worrying about whether people are judging your appearance (e.g., “They must be thinking I shouldn’t wear these pants”).



What are some thoughts you have about your appearance? How do these thoughts make you feel? Does this type of thinking increase or decrease your appearance concerns?

“But I Must Focus on My Appearance”: The Role of Positive Beliefs

One type of thinking that can maintain appearance focused attention is when we believe it is *actually helpful* to focus on our appearance. We call these ‘positive beliefs’. Examples include:

“Focusing on my appearance helps me figure out how I really look.”

“Thinking a lot about my appearance helps me work out what I should do about it.”

“Focusing on my appearance will motivate me to make changes.”

“Worrying about my appearance prepares me for others’ negative comments.”

“Comparing myself with others helps me feel better about my appearance.”

If you hold positive beliefs about focusing your attention on your appearance, then it makes sense that you will continue to be caught up in these thoughts. After all, you are telling yourself it is helpful!

If you hold any positive beliefs about your appearance, even to a small degree, we recommend that you first work out what they are, and whether or not they are true. Once you’ve done this, you will be in a better position to decide if you would like to change the amount you think about your appearance. Below are some questions you can ask yourself to test out your positive beliefs.





Positive beliefs: It is important to focus on my appearance because:

How much do you believe this to be true (0% = not at all, 100% = completely)?: _____%

Goal: What am I trying to achieve by focusing on my appearance?

Outcome: Does focusing my attention in this way really help me reach this goal? How *exactly* does it help me? Has it truly prepared me, helped me cope, or solved the problem?

Are there any downsides to focusing so much attention on my appearance concerns?

Does it make me feel better, the same, or worse when I focus a lot of attention on my appearance? Am I drawing my attention to aspects of my appearance that I or others might not normally have noticed anyway?

If a loved one was focusing on their appearance as much as I was and thinking about it the way I do, would I encourage them to do it more? If not, why not?

Conclusions: What do your answers say about your positive beliefs?

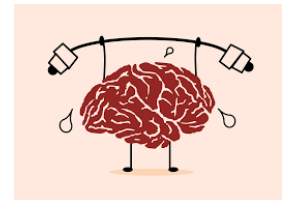
Re-rate the strength of your positive belief (0% = not at all, 100% = completely): _____%



Training Your Attention

Hopefully you are now open to the idea that focusing your attention on your appearance does not truly help you. So how do we let go of our appearance focused attention? We need to learn skills in attention training. Attention training helps you to let go of thoughts about your appearance and bring your attention back to the present moment. It can be helpful to think of your attention like it's a muscle... if you don't exercise it regularly, it will become weak and won't work as well. So to strengthen our attention 'muscle', we need to give it regular exercise!

It is important to remember while doing the exercises below that it is completely normal for our minds to wander off to other things. This is what our minds do. They drift off to memories, worries, sensations, images, planning, daydreams and thoughts (including thoughts about our appearance). In fact, it is impossible to have perfect attention 100% of the time, or to have a blank mind with no thoughts! When you notice that your mind has wandered during these activities, be careful not to criticise yourself for this. Instead, think about each and every 'wander' as another opportunity to practice the skill of bringing your attention back to the task at hand (i.e. whatever it is that you were focusing on). It really doesn't matter how many times your mind wanders, as that is part of the training.



EXERCISE 1: Mundane Task Focusing

You may have noticed that when you are doing everyday tasks that don't require much attention, like washing the dishes or taking a shower, your mind is not really on the task at hand, and quickly starts to wander. These types of tasks are great opportunities to practice strengthening our attention 'muscle'. With mundane task focusing, the goal is to gradually practice keeping your attention on a mundane activity for longer and longer periods of time – this gives your attention a good workout.

Write down some everyday household tasks where your mind might usually wander (e.g., driving, ironing, gardening, brushing teeth, vacuuming, eating a meal).

Pick one of these tasks and use the worksheet on the next page to begin practising. Before starting the exercise, rate how much of your attention is focused on the task and how much is focused on yourself.

When completing the task, use the following prompts to help you stay focused. Each time you notice your mind has wandered off the task, anchor your attention back to the task by focusing, non-judgementally, on the following:

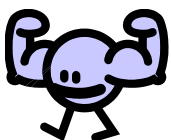
- **Touch:** What does the activity feel like? What is the texture like (e.g., rough, smooth)? Where on your body do you have contact with it? Are there areas of your body with more or less contact?
- **Sight:** What do you notice about the task? What catches your eye? How does the task appear? What about the light... the shadows... the shapes... the colours?
- **Hearing:** What sounds do you notice? How many different sounds can you hear?
- **Smell:** What smells do you notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there?
- **Taste:** What flavours do you notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours?



You don't need to write down your answers to the above prompts. Simply use them to help bring your attention back to all the sensory aspects (i.e., touch, sight, hearing, smell, taste) of the task. Once you have completed the mundane task focusing activity, go back to the worksheet and re-rate how much of your attention was self-focused versus task-focused, and have a think about what you have learned from the activity.

My Attention Workout: Mundane Task Focusing

Mundane task: _____				
Where and when will I do my workout: _____				
Before starting the attention workout, where do I notice my attention is focused?				
Self-focused attention (i.e., focusing on thoughts, feelings, appearance, etc):				_____ %
Task-focused attention (i.e., the task I was actually engaged with):				_____ %
Total:			100%	
During the attention workout, anchor my attention back to the task at hand by focusing on:				
Touch	Sight	Hearing	Smell	Taste
Remember that it is normal for my mind to wander off. Rather than beating myself up over this, I will use each time my mind wanders as an opportunity to work-out my attention muscle again.				
Having completed the attention workout, where did I notice my attention was focused during the workout?				
Self-focused attention (i.e., focusing on thoughts, feelings, appearance, etc):				_____ %
Task-focused attention (i.e., the task I was actually engaged with):				_____ %
Total:			100%	
What did I learn from this? What conclusions can I make from this?				

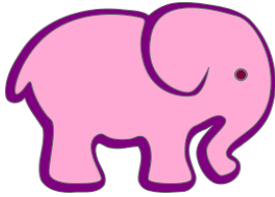


Since we are using mundane task focusing to train our attention muscle, we encourage you to practice many times a day to help you build up your muscle 'strength'. It can be helpful to first use mundane task focusing under easier conditions, before using it in more difficult situations where your appearance concerns are triggered. It is a bit like learning to swim in a shallow pool, before jumping into the ocean. Once you have improved your ability to shift your attention during mundane tasks, the next step is to practice this skill in more challenging situations, like during a gym class or at a social gathering.



EXERCISE 2: Postponing Appearance Thoughts

When trying to redirect your attention, you may notice that your mind keeps wandering back to thoughts about your appearance. You may have started trying to stop these thoughts by distracting yourself, or by telling yourself not to think about them.



Unfortunately, *trying* not to think about something can have the opposite effect - it can make us think about it even more! For example, try not to think of a pink elephant for the next 60 seconds and see how well you do... It's almost impossible, isn't it?!

So, if *focusing on your appearance* brings you more distress, and *trying not to focus on your appearance* makes you think about it more than what should you do?!? Luckily, there is a third option, which we call **postponement**.

Postponing your appearance thoughts involves expecting that a thought about your appearance will pop into your mind (e.g., "I can't stand my thighs" or "life would be so much better if I was more toned"). However, as soon as you notice this thought, you make a decision not to 'chase' the thought any further at that particular time.

Not chasing the thought will stop it from 'snowballing' into bigger and more upsetting thoughts. This snowballing effect happens when we start to expect the worst or run scenarios and solutions related to our appearance through our head over and over again. For example, "Who would ever want to be with someone who looks like me?" → "I'll never find a partner" → "I'm going to end up alone" → "My life will be pointless". Instead, you choose to *postpone* thinking about your appearance until a later time, and, using your attention skills, you bring your attention back to the here and now, using the steps below.

Step 1. Set a preoccupation period

- Decide on a set time and place when you will allow yourself time to think about your appearance concerns.
- Try and keep your preoccupation period the same everyday (e.g., 6pm, study, 20mins), and we recommend no more than 20 minutes per day.
- Make sure not to set your preoccupation period immediately before going to bed.

Set your preoccupation period below:

Start Time:	End Time:	Place:
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Step 2. Postpone appearance thoughts

- When you notice appearance concerns throughout the day, list the initial thought that set you off thinking about your appearance on a notepad, or on your phone.
- Note the thoughts about your appearance **briefly** in a couple of words only (e.g., "skinny arms", or "fix cellulite", or "I'm so ugly").
- Decide to come back to the thought later during your preoccupation period.
- Use your attention training skills to bring your attention back to the present task at hand.

Step 3. When you get to your preoccupation period

- Only think about the things you've listed if you feel you **must**.
- You don't have to think about them if they no longer seem relevant to you.
- If you do feel the need to think about your appearance, only do this for the set amount of time.
- If you run out of time to cover all the things on your list, remind yourself that these items will be covered the following day during your next preoccupation period.



The most important aspect of postponement is actually **allowing** the initial thought about your appearance to come up, but then choosing not to chase the thought then and then. It doesn't matter how many times that same thought pops back up, just postpone it again, choosing not to engage with it now, but storing it for later instead.

We recommend that you practice this strategy every day until you are less focused on your appearance. It may seem simple but it can take time to learn this skill properly. People find it very powerful in gaining some control over how much they think about their appearance. It also means that instead of spending hours thinking and stressing about your appearance, you will only be spending a maximum of 20 minutes.

After practicing this daily for some time, take a moment to think about how you went with the postponement strategy.

What happened to the thoughts you postponed? Did you still need to think about them later? If you were able to postpone, what happened to your concerns with your appearance? What was it like to give yourself permission to not chase your thoughts about appearance concerns right then and there?

If you had trouble postponing - did you actually write down your thoughts (recommended) or just try to remember them (not recommended)? Have you been consistently practicing your attention training exercises? Have any positive beliefs about staying focused on your appearance started to creep back in?



Module Summary

- People who are overconcerned with their appearance will often find that their attention is drawn to aspects of their appearance they don't like. This gets in the way of being able to focus and enjoy daily experiences.
- Sometimes people hold beliefs that focusing on appearance is a helpful thing to do. However, when they question this, they often realise that focusing their attention on their appearance doesn't bring any real benefit.
- Learning to retrain your attention can reduce the amount of time you spend focused on your appearance and can allow you to be more present and engaged in life.
- Mundane task focusing is one way you can learn to redirect your attention. It involves practicing keeping your attention while engaging in everyday household tasks.
- Another attention retraining strategy is appearance postponement. This involves reducing the amount of time you spend thinking about your body and appearance by only setting aside a small amount of time each day where you allow yourself to focus on such thoughts.
- With practice, practice, practice, you can strengthen your attention muscle so that in time, you can become less caught up in your appearance concerns.



Coming up ...

In the next module, we will discuss ways to reduce body checking and reassurance seeking behaviours.



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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“CARING LESS ABOUT YOUR LOOKS”

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