



Caring Less About Your Looks

Module 7

Overvaluing Appearance & Self-Management Planning

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Introduction

This module will look at the ‘core’ of our model: *overvaluing appearance*. Learning to accept the way you look is key to reducing the impact your appearance concerns have on your self-esteem and your life.

Overvaluing Appearance

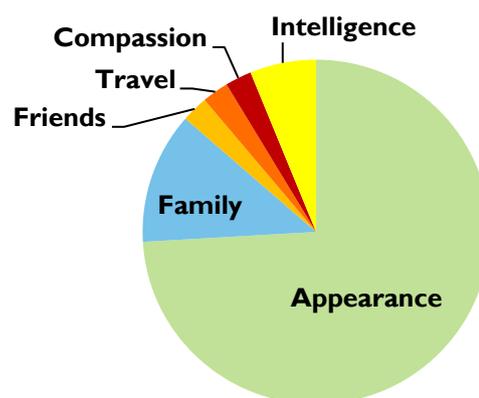
One way to become more accepting of your appearance involves thinking about the values that you hold. Values are a set of beliefs which guide your thoughts and behaviours and reflect what is most important to you. At the moment, one of your key values is probably your appearance – you wouldn’t be reading these modules if it wasn’t!

There is a difference between valuing appearance and over-valuing appearance. Most people value their appearance to some extent, however when appearance is *overvalued*, it can be problematic as it gets in the way of other important areas of your life.

Let’s consider an example.

James is a 29 year old engineer. Over the past few years he has become more and more concerned about his appearance as he believes others think he is ‘too scrawny’. He spends a lot of time at the gym trying to build up muscle (with not much success) and is always thinking about how he can change his appearance. Because of these concerns, he tends to either stay at home or workout, rather than see his friends. More recently, he said “no” to joining his friends on a trip to Bali as he didn’t want to disrupt his gym routine, and he was worried about what his friends might think of his body. James also values being a kind and compassionate person. He used to do volunteer work and was always available to talk to his friends whenever they needed support. James has noticed that his appearance concerns have made it difficult for him to offer support to others or help out like he normally would.

The more you overvalue appearance, the more it can take away from your ability to live in line with other values. This is because a lot of your energy and effort is being directed towards your appearance, which ends up getting in the way of how you spend your time. The pie chart below shows how overvaluing appearance has got in the way of James living a balanced life according to all his values.

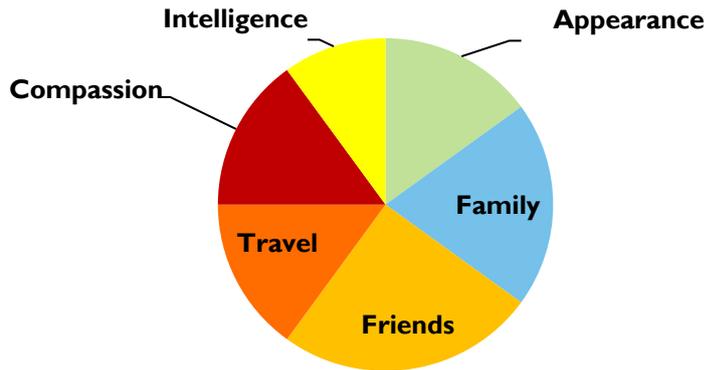


One way of reducing the value you place on appearance is to start living in a way that fits with other values you hold – that is, by enlarging the other ‘slices’ of the pie. When you start to do this (and keep at it!), you will find that your life becomes more balanced with time. You will also find that you are less affected by your appearance concerns, and more content within yourself.



Let's return to our example.

James decided to start behaving more in line with other values he held. Although he felt anxious at first, he started going out with friends more and more. He also decided to miss a few gym sessions to hang out with his sister, after she said she was having a hard time. Over time, he noticed that the more he saw his friends and family (and the less time he spent at the gym), the less focused he was on his appearance. While James was still dissatisfied with some aspects of his body, he found that he was no longer as 'caught up' in thinking about them. He was starting to realise that there were more important things in life than looking a certain way, and that how he felt about his appearance did not need to stop him from living a happy and meaningful life. As shown below, James' pie chart became more balanced and in line with all his values.



Take a moment to think about your values (other than appearance), or what values you would like to live by in the future. Different people value different things and there are no right or wrong answers. See below for some examples of values and circle the ones (or check the box) in the table that are important to you. You may wish to include values that aren't listed below using the space provided.

compassion	friends	environmentally conscious	generosity
family	wealth	ambition/success	creativity
adventure	dedication	achievement	control
popularity	religion	health	honesty
intelligence	independence	recognition	sustainability
travel	sporting ability	power	knowledge

Let's think about how you can live your life more in line with the values you've circled above. Ask yourself, are any of your values being overlooked at the moment? With this in mind, choose 5 values that you would like to dedicate more time towards, and list these in order of importance.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



Let's think about how you can act more in line with the five values you've chosen. What would you like to be doing more of? For example, if you value compassion, you could offer to help out a friend, or do some voluntary work. If you value your family, you might make time to see your grandma more often, or organise a family catch up.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

It's time to take action. Have a go at engaging in the behaviours you've listed above. Once you've done this, write about your experience below.

Another useful exercise involves considering how much you care about other people's appearance. That is, when you think of the qualities that you value in your friends and family, how does appearance rank? Is it a major factor in determining how much you like them? Or are other qualities more important? How does this compare with the importance you place on your own appearance?

Take a moment and write down your responses below.

Accepting Appearance

Another way of reducing appearance concerns is to commit to accepting your body the way that it is. You may be thinking: "How could I possibly accept my appearance when I'm so unhappy with the way I look?" Let's look at an example.



Tammy is 150cm tall. She wished she was taller like most of her friends. In her teens, Tammy kept hoping she would grow, and was miserable when she didn't. By age 19, she started to realise that since both her parents were fairly short, it was unlikely that she would end up growing any more. She decided that since she couldn't change her height, and being miserable about it didn't help, she would start to try to accept it for what it was. She reminded herself that height was not the most important quality in a person and if she didn't judge others based on their height, then why should she be judging herself in this way. Tammy knew she was a kind and loyal person and that these qualities were more important than appearance. She worked hard to accept her height, and with time, she was able to focus on and enjoy the more important things in her life.



As we saw in the example, many aspects of our appearance (e.g., height) are strongly influenced by genetics and are therefore outside of our control. Yes, you can make some changes sometimes, but these may come at a significant cost (as we have talked about in previous modules). With this in mind, it is really worth considering whether or not you are better off learning to accept your appearance just the way it is. Let's consider the pros and cons of this.

<p>Pros of accepting your appearance</p> <p>What are the benefits of accepting your appearance, rather than trying to change it?</p> <p>How would your life be different?</p>	<p>Cons of accepting your appearance</p> <p>What negatives do you expect to occur if you stop trying to 'improve' your appearance?</p>
<p><i>e.g., I'll be able to spend my time doing more important things rather than trying to change my appearance.</i></p>	<p><i>e.g., I'll have to stop looking for a way to make my skin better.</i></p>

Appreciating the Functions of Your Body

Another way to help you work towards accepting your appearance is by appreciating what your body does for you and acknowledging the positive aspects.

We often take for granted what our bodies do for us each day. Our body is a vehicle that helps us live our lives. It can walk, talk, breathe, smile, stretch, embrace and dance. Our bodies also adapt to help us through the course of our lives, growing and changing to meet the demands of our environment. Instead of focusing on how our body *looks*, we can learn to appreciate what our bodies allow us to *do*. Whether it's running to catch the bus, staying up late and talking on the phone for hours, letting you stay on your feet all day at work, bending down to give your kid a hug, or duck diving under a wave, what our body can do is pretty impressive!



What does your body do for you?



One important way to help you appreciate your body is to engage in healthy exercise. Research has shown that regular exercise can improve body acceptance, regardless of whether or not it results in a change in appearance. Exercise can make you more aware of what your body can do, increase your self-confidence, improve your fitness and lift your mood. People also often experience a sense of accomplishment when they are able to run a little further, master a new yoga pose or kick a goal in a game of soccer.

What exercise are you doing at the moment? Would it be helpful to include more movement into your week? It is very important to choose a form of exercise that you enjoy rather than for the purpose of changing your appearance (otherwise this can become another one of those unhelpful appearance altering behaviours!). When thinking about exercise, remember to include all forms of movement such as dancing, stretching, yoga or going for a gentle walk.



Learning to Accept Your Appearance: A Fork in The Road

At this point in the module, you may find yourself faced with a fork in the road. It is now up to you to decide whether you are willing to work towards accepting your appearance as it is.

If you choose *not to accept* your appearance, you will probably remain really preoccupied with thoughts about your looks and how to change them, and continue to engage in many unhelpful behaviours. Chances are that despite your efforts, you will still be unhappy with your appearance, and this will continue to have a big impact on your life.

Alternatively, if you choose *to accept* your appearance as it is, you will continue to take steps towards creating a meaningful and fulfilling life that is less affected by your appearance concerns. This path may have some bumps in the road, and may require some hard work at times, but in the long run, the challenges will be so worth it. Not only will you develop resilience, you will experience the satisfaction of not letting your appearance concerns dictate how you live your life.

Remember the image you brought to mind in Module 2? This image reflected what life would be like if you weren't so concerned with your appearance or caught up in thoughts about your body all the time. When faced with challenging times, it will be helpful to bring this image to mind as a reminder of why you're working so hard to accept your appearance.

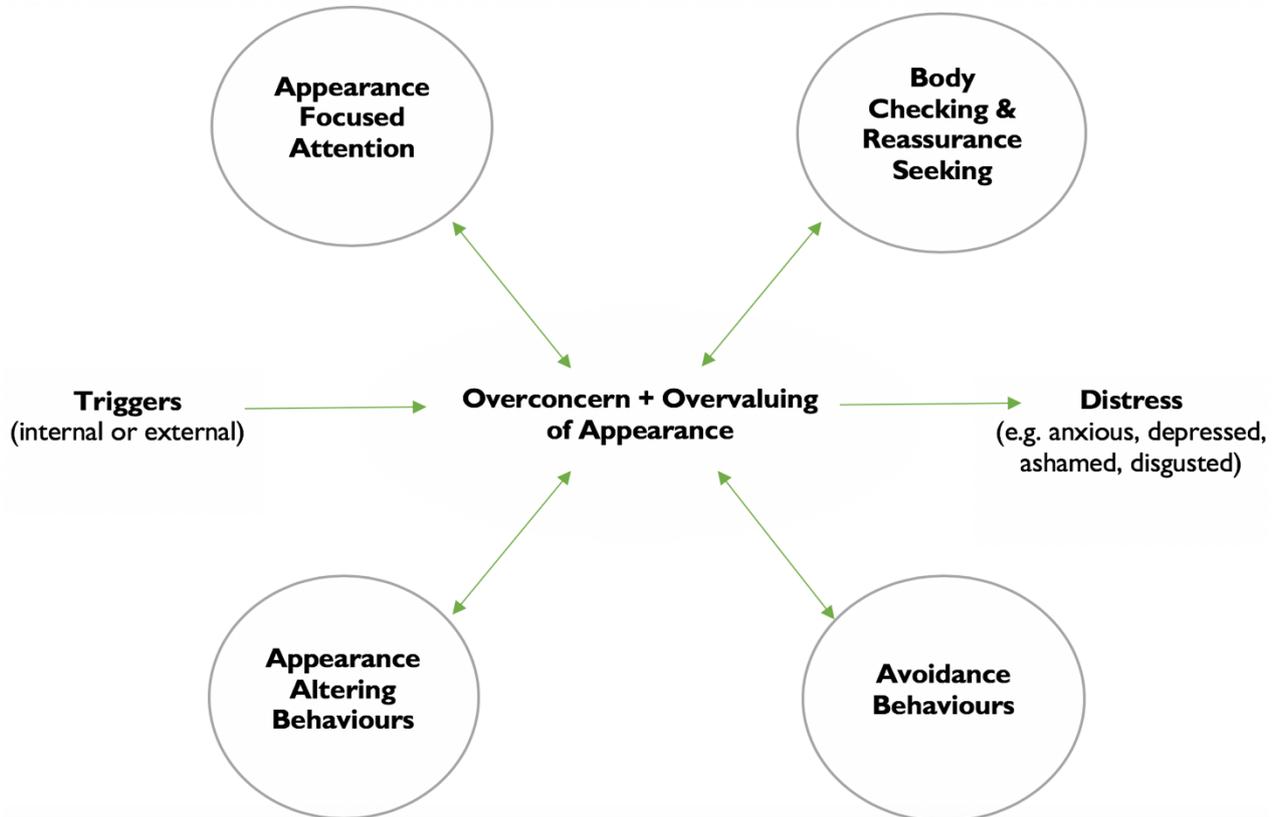
What will help you commit to choosing the path of acceptance? What can you do to help you persevere when this seems hard?



Putting It All Together

Let's take a look at what we've learned in these modules and revisit the key factors that maintain your appearance concerns. Now is also an opportunity to put together a self-management plan so you have a clear 'road map' to guide you as you continue this journey.

Let's begin by reminding yourself of the factors that keep you overly focused on your appearance and the strategies to address them, as outlined below.



Self-Management Plan

Step 1. Reducing appearance focused attention

The first step to addressing appearance concerns is to recognise when you are getting 'caught up' in thoughts about your appearance. At these times, it is important to redirect your attention away from appearance worries, and to re-engage in the activities of the here and now. You learn this skill by practicing: (1) mundane task focusing, which involves learning how to focus your attention while engaging in everyday household tasks; and (2) postponement, where you choose to postpone or delay thinking about appearance thoughts until a particular time each day.

How can I ensure I continue to use these attention strategies each day?



Step 2. Reducing body checking and reassurance seeking behaviours

The more you engage in body checking behaviours or seek reassurance from others, the more 'tuned in' you'll be to noticing aspects of your appearance that you dislike. This will not only have a negative impact on your mood, it will also keep your appearance concerns at the forefront of your mind. To escape this cycle, we have learnt to limit how much we engage in these behaviours by either stopping them immediately or by taking gradual steps to reduce their frequency and/or duration.

How will I continue to reduce body checking and reassurance seeking behaviours?

Step 3: Addressing appearance altering behaviours

It is normal to engage in some appearance altering behaviours, however we know that doing this excessively not only maintains appearance concerns, but can also become expensive, time consuming and have negative consequences on your physical health and mood. You can reduce unhelpful appearance altering behaviours using a stepladder approach, or by using behavioural experiments to test out whether your predictions about reducing your behaviours are accurate or not.

In what ways can I continue to address unhelpful appearance altering behaviours?

Step 4: Reducing avoidance behaviours

If you avoid situations because of your concerns with your appearance, you miss out on opportunities to have positive and meaningful experiences. This can quickly start to have an impact on your mood, relationships, and your overall quality of life. To reverse the vicious cycle of avoidance, it is important to start by approaching feared situations, and examine the impact this has on your life.

How can I continue engaging in meaningful experiences that I've previously avoided?



Step 5: Addressing overvaluing appearance

The more you overvalue appearance, the more it can take away from your ability to live in line with other values you hold. To combat this, it's helpful to first look at valued areas of your life that may have been overlooked, before starting to dedicate more time and energy towards them. Another way to reduce the value you place on appearance is to commit to accepting your appearance for what it is, and to start appreciating what your body *does* for you, instead of just focusing on how it *looks*. Exercise can help with this, as it can highlight all the remarkable things our bodies can do.

How can I ensure I live my life in accordance with all my values?

How can I work towards appreciating my body?

Managing 'Bumps' in the Road

Congratulations on making it to the end of these modules! We hope that the information and strategies shared have been helpful in facilitating meaningful change. Remember, the goal of these modules is to help you live an enjoyable and meaningful life that is not consumed by worries about your appearance.

There is no doubt that reducing your appearance concerns will take time, practice, persistence and patience. We need to expect that there will be both good days and bad – this is how change works! There will be times where you feel comfortable within yourself and enjoy getting on with your life, and there will be times when you slip back into caring too much about your appearance. As long as you commit to change for the longer term, and regularly review these modules, there is no reason why things can't continue getting better and better for you!





Module Summary

- To reduce overconcern with appearance, it is important to work on:
 - Letting go of preoccupation with your appearance.
 - Reducing unhelpful checking and reassurance seeking behaviours.
 - Reducing avoidance and safety behaviours (by engaging in new and meaningful experiences).
 - Reducing excessive use of appearance altering behaviours.
 - Living your life in accordance with all values.
 - Committing to accepting your appearance the way it is.
- Reducing your appearance concerns will take time and lots of practice.
- Expect setbacks, but rather than focusing on them, use these modules to help you get back on track.
- Remember, change is hard... but so worth it!



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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