

## Break Free from ED

*An Active Guide to Recovering from Your Eating Disorder*

### Module 12

## **Body Image 2: Body Avoidance**

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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

In the previous module, we discussed body image and started tackling one of the behaviours that keeps poor body image going – body checking. While some people focus intensely and repeatedly on their body, others try to avoid looking at their body altogether. In this module we will tackle a second behaviour that keeps poor body image going, **body avoidance**. It is very common for people with eating disorders to swing between body checking and body avoidance.



## My Body Avoidance

If you hold negative beliefs about your body you may avoid certain situations where these beliefs are triggered, especially situations where your body is more exposed. Let's think about situations you avoid due to your body image concerns.

- Highlight any situations from the table below that are relevant to you, then add your own examples.
- For each situation, identify your negative body prediction. What do you think would happen if you approached this situation?
- Rate your anxiety about approaching the situation on a scale from 0-10.  
**0** – Perfectly relaxed; **10** – Overwhelming anxiety, you want to escape from the situation

Situations I avoid due to my body image concerns	My negative body prediction “What do I think would happen if I approached this situation?”	Anxiety Rating (0-10)
Going to an exercise class	<i>e.g. people will notice my body wobbling and will laugh at me or call me fat</i>	<i>e.g., 9</i>
Looking in the mirror / window reflection		
Wearing swimwear at the beach / pool		
Shopping for clothes		
Wearing tight fitting clothes		
Wearing clothes that expose body parts (e.g. shorts, singlets)		
Exercising		
Attending events with an increased focus on body (e.g. school dance)		
Socialising with particular people or groups		
Close physical contact with others e.g. dating, being intimate (e.g. hand holding, hugging, sexual intimacy)		
Self-care activities (e.g. applying sun-cream, washing face, shaving legs)		
Being photographed		
Being recorded on video		
Posting images of myself on social media		
Eating in public		

## Problems with Avoiding your Body

Avoiding situations due to body image concerns can help you feel calmer and more in control in the short-term but makes body image concerns worse in the long-term. Body avoidance is problematic because...

1. **We never get to test our fears.** If we approach the situations we fear, we might discover that our fears don't always come true, and that things can turn out better than expected.
2. **Avoidance and anxiety can spread.** As we avoid situations, we tend to lose confidence and our anxiety can start to spread out to more and more areas of our life (e.g. you might notice yourself losing confidence in your social skills).
3. **We miss out on opportunities for positive experiences:** These experiences can build our confidence or allow us to participate in other valued areas of life. For example, swimming at the beach might be scary, but also involves the feeling of cold water on your body or laughing with your friends.
4. **It is impossible to avoid our bodies altogether:** Our bodies are the amazing, miraculous vehicles that we drive around in every day to get where we need to go in life. No matter how hard you try, you will end up catching your reflection in a window or having to pose for a photo. You may never fully like your body but accepting it for all that it does for you and working *with* your body rather than against it will help you get more out of life. This is true regardless of where your weight sits on the scale.



**Note:** Reducing body image concerns is not about loving your body all the time, but about developing body acceptance. You might hear this described as *body neutrality* because it's about caring less about how your body looks rather than having strong positive or negative feelings about your appearance.

## Body Avoidance and Exposure

To tackle body avoidance, you need to experiment with approaching situations that you avoid because of your body image concerns. This is called **exposure**. In the short-term, exposure experiments can increase anxiety, but they also give you the opportunity to test your fears and build confidence in your coping skills, which helps reduce anxiety over time. There are different ways to approach feared situations. You can jump in the deep end and tackle your biggest fears first or you can take a more gradual approach where you work towards the big goal step-by-step. Choose a step that is associated with the most anxiety you think you can handle – this will help you change more quickly.

One form of exposure shown to reduce distress, negative body beliefs, and body dissatisfaction is **mirror exposure**. Mirror exposure encourages you to focus on your body for a prolonged period of time so that you can get used to it without feeling distressed. The step-by-step guide to mirror exposure on the next page shows you how you can take a more neutral approach to looking at your body. Give it a go!

## Mirror Exposure

**Step 1.** Find a full-length mirror where you can conduct mirror exposure without interruption. This might take 30-40 minutes when you first start but will get quicker each time you practise.

**Step 2.** Observe your whole body in the mirror in tight-fitting clothing. It is important to keep your attention on your body throughout the exposure task. Keep redirecting your attention back to your body, even if you notice it feels upsetting or you have an urge to look away.

**Step 3.** Rate your anxiety before mirror exposure and then at 5-minute intervals on a scale from 0 (completely relaxed) to 10 (extremely anxious, urge to escape or look away).

**Step 4.** Adopt a **non-judgemental** approach. Slowly scan your body from head to toe and describe your body as a neutral observer might, one who has just landed from Mars and has no preconception about body shape. Describe the texture, colour, and shape of your body parts in as much detail as you can. For example, instead of saying 'my stomach is disgusting', you might say 'the skin protrudes slightly over the top of my fitted blue jeans'. When your gaze reaches your toes, work your way all the way back up to the top of your head, continuing to describe each part of your body non-judgementally.

**Step 5.** Congratulations on completing mirror exposure. What did you notice happened to your anxiety?

### TIPS:

- Try to look at your entire body, paying equal attention to all areas rather than avoiding or focussing intently on certain areas as you may normally do.
- It is important to repeat mirror exposure regularly (e.g. several times a week) until seeing your body reflection no longer triggers strong negative emotions.
- You will learn more quickly if you practise across a range of reflective surfaces (e.g. other mirrors at home, shop mirrors, window reflections).
- If you find yourself getting bored this is a pretty good sign that you don't need to continue, as you are no longer distressed by the image.



## Other Exposure Experiments

There are lots of ways you can experiment with approaching situations you avoid due to your body image concerns. Take a look at the table below for some ideas.

Situation I avoid due to my body image concerns	Exposure experiment to approach this situation
Going to an exercise class	Attend 2 x 45 minute gym classes this week
Looking in the mirror / window reflection	Mirror exposure – see above
Wearing swimwear at the beach / pool	Go to the pool in swimwear
Shopping for clothes	Go shopping for clothes with someone I trust and try on at least 5 items
Wearing tight fitting clothes	I will wear the fitted dress I bought at Christmas when I next go out
Wearing clothes that expose body parts (e.g. shorts, singlets)	Wear shorts this weekend for at least 2 hours in public
Attending events with an increased focus on body (e.g. school ball)	Say yes to the work dinner party that I have been avoiding
Socialising with particular people or groups	Visit my grandmother, even though I know she will comment on my weight
Close physical contact with others, such as dating or being intimate (e.g. hand holding, hugging, sexual intimacy)	Let my partner hug me
Self-care activities (e.g. applying sun-cream, washing face, shaving legs, get a massage)	Take time for self-care – I can use the new lotion I got for my birthday or go to a salon and get a pedicure
Being photographed / recorded on video	Allow my friends to take photos of me when we go out
Posting images of myself on social media	Post a photo of myself that is not edited

Select 3 situations you avoid due to your body image concerns and plan some exposure experiments using the ideas listed above or your own ideas.

### Body Exposure Experiments: My Plan

Situations I avoid due to my body image concerns	My exposure experiment to approach this situation
1.	
2.	
3.	

## Step-by-step Approach to Exposure

Remember you can jump straight in with facing your biggest fears or you may prefer to take a step-by-step approach, as outlined in the example below.

<b>GOAL:</b> To swim at the beach in swimwear with my friends for at least 1 hour		<b>Anxiety 0-100</b>
		90
<b>STEP</b>		
5	To wear swimwear at home on my own for at least 1 hour	75
4	To wear swimwear at home on my own for at least 30 minutes	65
3	To go to the beach in singlet and shorts with a friend for at least 1 hour	60
2	To go out with friends wearing a singlet and shorts (exposing my arms, shoulders and legs) for at least 30 minutes	50
1	To go out to the shops in a singlet that exposes my shoulders and arms for at least 30 minutes	30

You can use the blank exposure table below to develop your own step-by-step plan if you need to take a more gradual approach.

<b>MY GOAL:</b>		<b>Anxiety 0-100</b>
<b>MY STEPS</b>		
5		
4		
3		
2		
1		

**TIP:** Regardless of whether you jump straight in with exposure or take a more gradual approach, you will learn more quickly if you complete a behavioural experiment worksheet to identify and test out your fears. What do you predict will happen when you face the feared situation? Did your prediction come true?

## My Weekly Progress Review

First, complete your symptom tracker:

Eating Disorder Behaviour	Frequency (# days per week)	
Restrict or dieting		
Exercise (including time spent)		
Binge eating	# days	# episodes
Vomiting to control my weight/shape		
Laxative misuse		

Second, reflect on your self-monitoring:

What did I learn from my self-monitoring this week? e.g., “now that I have been eating regularly for a while, it feels less effortful and I have less negative thoughts about my meals”; “when I check more I feel more urges to restrict or binge”

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Third, review your homework from last week:

Task	Completed? Y/N
Weekly weighing	
Completing self-monitoring daily, and in real-time	
Eating regularly	
Eating adequately	
Feared food experiments, exercise experiment	
Checking UP/DOWN experiment	

Finally, set some goals! What do you want to work on this week?

(e.g., mirror exposure, body image exposure experiments - go to the beach with my friends in swimwear)

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## Module Summary

- If you hold negative body beliefs you may avoid certain situations where these beliefs are triggered, such as situations where your body is more exposed.
- Avoiding your body keeps body image concerns going and this avoidance can spread to other valued areas of life.
- It is important to experiment with approaching situations you have been avoiding due to your body image concerns, even though this feels uncomfortable. We call this body exposure.
- Mirror exposure is an effective way of reducing body dissatisfaction in people with eating disorders.
- You will need to conduct lots of exposure experiments to improve body image – such as, wearing swimwear or letting others hug you.
- It is okay to jump straight in and tackle your biggest fears first or you might prefer to take a step-by-step approach.

**Coming up...**Core beliefs



## About the Modules

### CONTRIBUTORS

**Dr. Bronwyn Raykos** (PhD, MPsych)  
Senior Clinical Psychologist

**Samantha Bank** (MPsych)  
Clinical Psychologist

**Dr. Bruce Campbell** (DPsych, MPsych)  
Consultant Clinical Psychologist

**Katharina Targowski** (MPsych)  
Clinical Psychologist

**Dr. Olivia Carter** (DPsych)  
Clinical Psychologist

### REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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