



# Caring Less About Your Looks

## Module 2

### **What Keeps Appearance Concerns Going?**

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## Introduction

In Module 1 we discussed how your appearance concerns are impacting on your relationships with others, ability to work or study, physical health, finances, mood and overall quality of life.

In this module we are going to look at the key factors that keep you 'stuck' being overconcerned with your appearance. Once we know what these factors are, we will introduce ways for you to become less preoccupied and more accepting of your appearance. Remember, the goal of these modules is not to learn how to 'love' your body all the time (as this is downright unrealistic!) but to lessen the impact of your appearance concerns on your ability to live the life you want for yourself.

### Imagine if you weren't so concerned with your appearance...



We know that it might seem difficult right now, but let's start by imagining what it would be like if you weren't as concerned or focused with your body and appearance. That is, imagine you didn't care that much about your appearance, and you no longer got caught up in thinking about it all the time. How would your life be different? What would you be doing day to day that differs from the way you are living your life right now?

To help you imagine your life in this new way, close your eyes for a minute or two, and really picture what this might look like for you. Bring to mind an image of yourself or an imaginary scene that captures this new way of living. Spend some time really thinking about it in a lot of detail. What do you see? What are you doing differently? Who are you with? How do you feel?

Open your eyes. Describe what you saw, and jot down what it was like for you to be less concerned about your appearance.

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We encourage you to bring this image to mind as often as you need, as you work your way through these modules. These modules are designed to help you start living in line with this image, by changing the way you think and behave in relation to your body and appearance.

## What Keeps Appearance Concerns Going?

### *Appearance Focused Attention*

When we are worried about something, it is human nature to focus on it more and more. We might even find it hard to shift our attention away from it. It's not surprising that people who are overly concerned about their appearance have great difficulty shifting their attention away from how they look. With their attention so caught up in these thoughts, it becomes very difficult for them to be mindful and present in everyday activities and situations. Time spent churning over these concerns can make people feel more and more depressed, anxious and even disgusted by their appearance.



Take a moment to reflect on how much you focus on your appearance throughout the day. Have you noticed that you think about your body while chatting to others, doing chores around the house, or when watching TV? Write down your responses below.

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## **Body Checking & Reassurance Seeking**

It is normal to check on something from time to time, or to ask for reassurance about things we might be worried about. For example, you may have thought to yourself “I’m not sure I locked my car”, and walked back to check it is locked. You may have even asked the person you were with, “did I lock the car?”. Checking or asking for reassurance can help us feel less worried about the particular issue on our mind so we can move on with our day.

With appearance, many people *quickly* check how they look in the mirror, or ask others whether an outfit looks ‘okay’ before heading out. However, people who are overconcerned with their appearance will often seek reassurance from others about their looks over and over again, check mirrors and reflective surfaces many times a day, and frequently compare themselves with others. They do this to see whether there is something ‘wrong’ with their appearance, or to see if their appearance is as bad as first thought.

Unfortunately, the more you check and ask for reassurance, the more ‘tuned in’ you will be to seeing things in your appearance that you don’t like. You will also start to notice things that you (or others) may not normally notice, creating a vicious cycle.

Here are just a few checking and reassurance-seeking behaviours people may engage in:

- Mirror checking, including using mirrors that magnify.
- Checking appearance in reflective surfaces (e.g., shop windows).
- Weighing yourself a lot (i.e. more than once a week).
- Checking areas of your body by touching, pinching, or by mentally scanning that area.
- Taking photographs or video footage of yourself.
- Measuring parts of your body.
- Comparing your appearance using old photos of your younger self.
- Comparing your appearance with that of others.
- Asking family members, friends, and professionals about your appearance, either to reassure yourself that your appearance is okay, or to convince yourself and them that there is a real problem.





Write down the checking behaviours you engage in, including any that are not listed above.

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What are the negative consequences of checking and reassurance seeking? How do they make you feel? Do they influence your behaviour (e.g., what you choose to wear or whether you go out)?

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### Appearance Altering Behaviours

Most people are conscious of their appearance. They keep up good self-care, and change aspects of their appearance to reflect their sense of style from time to time. For example, people often wear make-up, iron their shirt before work, change their hairstyle, shave regularly, wear fashionable clothing and so on. Others may make small changes to their exercise or eating habits to try to change their body weight and shape. Appearance altering behaviours are not necessarily a problem, however they *can* become unhelpful or even harmful when taken to the extreme.

People who are overconcerned with their body and appearance often feel driven to change their appearance *significantly* and *repeatedly* in an attempt to feel better about the way they look. This may lead them to:



- Use too many cosmetic products (e.g., make up)
- Follow strict facial or haircare routines
- Spend lots of time changing outfits before leaving the house
- Use extreme diets
- Take unnecessary dietary supplements (e.g. protein powders)
- Overexercise
- Overuse cosmetic procedures (e.g., liposuction, facial fillers or rhinoplasty).

While people believe these behaviours will improve how they feel about their appearance, the opposite tends to happen. People often spend large amounts of money on weight loss programs and cosmetic procedures, only to find that they are still not satisfied with their appearance. These behaviours also lead to more time spent thinking about appearance, and can have other negative consequences. For example, restrictive diets and overexercising can lead to physical, cognitive and emotional consequences (see CCI handouts “*Starvation Syndrome*” and “*Unhealthy Exercise*” for further information). Supplement misuse can also lead to serious health issues including liver and kidney damage.

What unhelpful appearance altering behaviours are you using or considering using in the future? In what ways are they unhelpful or unhealthy for you?

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## Avoidance Behaviours

If you are worried others will think badly about your appearance, you may avoid certain situations where you think this is likely to occur. For example, you might avoid exercising in public, going to the beach, seeing certain people or leaving the house without make-up on.



You might have noticed that avoiding situations can make you feel less anxious about your appearance in the short-term. By staying at home rather than going out, there are fewer reminders of your appearance concerns, less chance for people to judge you and therefore less worry and concern. However, in the longer term, avoidance actually keeps your fears going. In fact it can make them worse, as you are robbing yourself of the opportunity to see whether your fears about the situation are in fact true.

For example, if you avoid going to the beach, you never get the chance to test out your fears about how others see you, or learn that you can enjoy the beach even though you feel anxious. This means that your fears remain unchallenged and you miss out on having positive experiences such as the feel of the cold water as you jump in the ocean.

Write down the people, places, or activities you avoid because of your appearance. Examples include wearing certain clothing, exercising, going to restaurants, looking in the mirror, playing with the kids at the park, photos or shopping for clothes.

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## Overvaluing Appearance

Learning to accept your appearance is key to feeling better about yourself and living your life the way you want to. At this point you might be thinking, “but I *do* have lots of flaws with my appearance. It’s not like I’m imagining them. How can I learn to accept myself when I look like *this*?”

For arguments sake, let’s say you do have a ‘flaw’ in your appearance (based on how society says you ‘should’ look). Perhaps you do have cellulite (who doesn’t?!), or a bigger bum. Maybe you do, maybe you don’t. Maybe others will notice and even judge you because of it, maybe they won’t. What we do know is that we can still learn to enjoy our lives despite having these so-called ‘flaws’. We can learn to stop getting so caught up in thinking about our appearance all the time, and work to focus our energy towards more important areas of our lives.

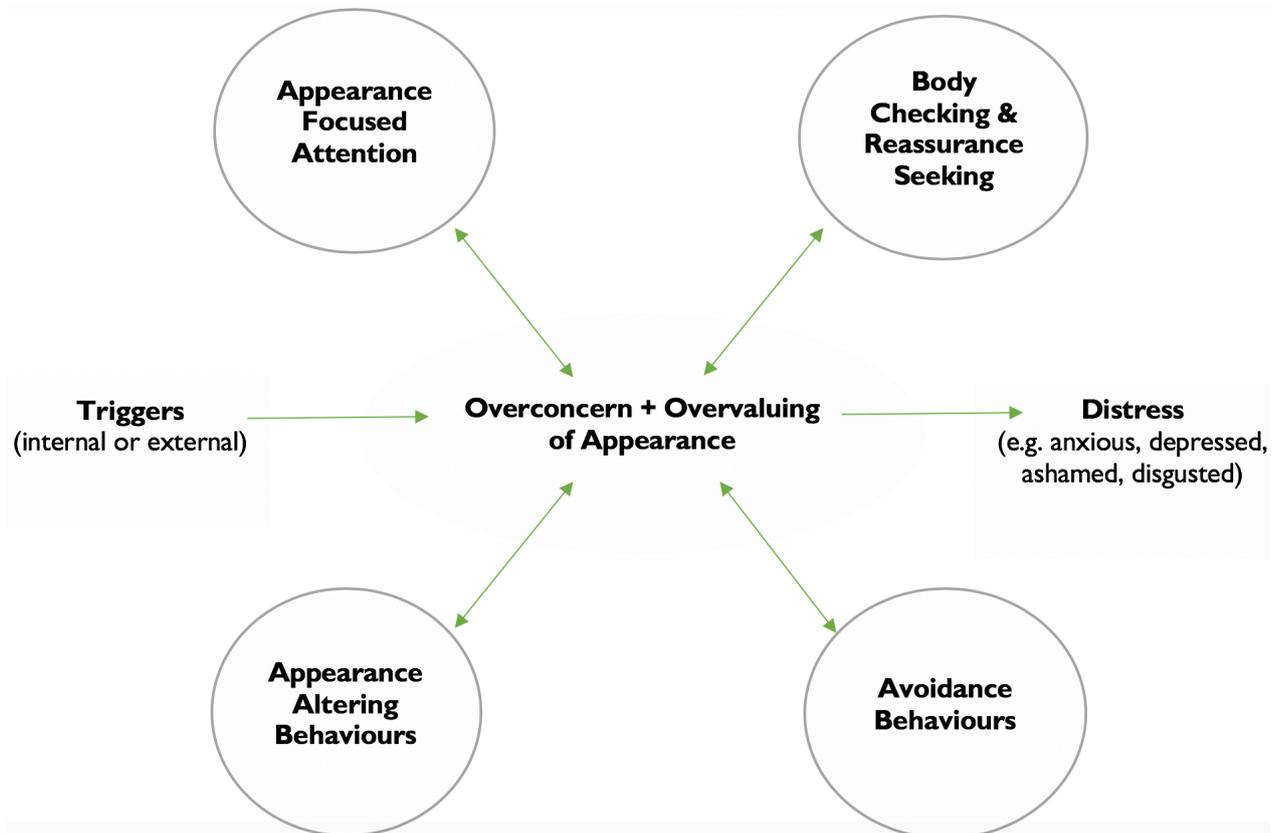
It will be hard for you to let go of your concerns unless you are willing to learn how to become more accepting of your appearance. After all, our bodies are largely just an expression of our genes.

Let’s consider an example. If you have blue eyes, but are really set on having brown eyes, you have two choices. You can commit to the expense and the hassle of having to buy and wear contact lenses every day, or you can learn to accept your eye colour for what it is. Similarly, if you have naturally straight hair, but wish for curly hair, you can either commit to spending a lot of time curling your hair each day and using expensive hair products, or you can accept your hair for what it is. By learning to accept your appearance in this way, it will open the door for you to live your life in line with other values you hold.



## How It All Fits Together: The Model

So how do these factors all fit together? Have a look at the model below, which shows how these key factors keep you overly concerned about your appearance.



As the model shows, we experience triggers, both internal (e.g., our thoughts or physical sensations) and external (e.g., comments from others) in our day to day life that remind us of our concerns with our appearance. In an effort to reduce the distress (e.g., shame, anxiety, disgust), we engage in behaviours that give us a sense of relief or control in the short term. However, in the long term, these behaviours leave us feeling more worried and concerned about our appearance.

These four unhelpful behaviours each create a vicious cycle, keeping your appearance concerns and dissatisfaction going. The longer it goes on, the more of a problem it becomes. It can very quickly start to have a big impact on your life, and lead you to miss out on enjoyable and meaningful events. Finally, by continuing to overvalue appearance, it will drive you further away from living your life in line with your values.

## The Good News...

It may initially seem overwhelming that the very things you have been using to help control or reduce your appearance concerns are in fact strengthening them. However, now that you understand the factors that keep your appearance concerns going, we can move on to discussing strategies that address each of these factors in turn. As you move through these modules, we encourage you to have a good go at the strategies so that you can give yourself the best chance to see what it is like to think and behave in this new way.



## Module Summary

- The following four factors play a role in keeping you overconcerned with your appearance.
  - Appearance preoccupation
  - Body checking and reassurance seeking behaviours
  - Avoidance behaviours
  - Appearance altering behaviours
- In the short term, these behaviours may provide a brief sense of relief or control over your appearance concerns, however in the long term, they keep you focused on your appearance and how dissatisfied you are.
- Learning to accept your appearance is an important step in reducing appearance concerns.
- Understanding what keeps your appearance concerns going will help you to care less about your looks.



### Coming up ...

In the next module, we will introduce strategies to reduce preoccupation with appearance concerns.



## 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).

### REFERENCES

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

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