



Caring Less About Your Looks

Module 4

Body Checking & Reassurance Seeking

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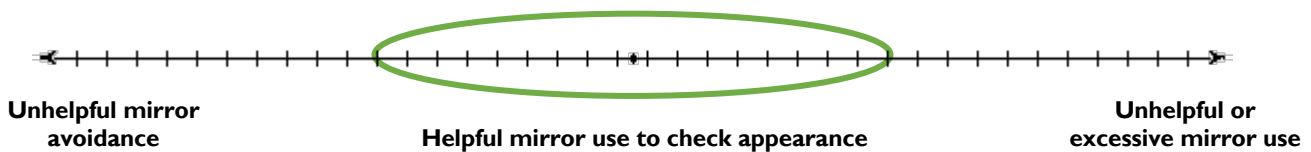
Introduction

When a person is worried about how they look, they often check their appearance in some way, or seek reassurance from others. In Module 2, we discussed how body checking or reassurance seeking can make you more concerned about your appearance. This module explores the impact of these behaviours as well as strategies to reduce them.

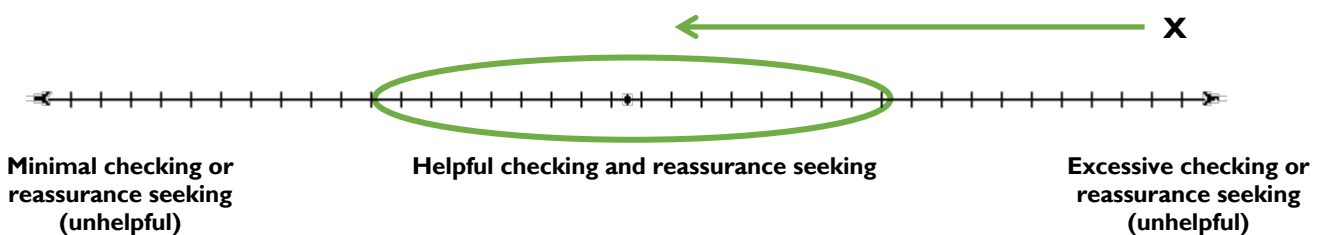
Helpful Versus Unhelpful Checking & Reassurance Seeking

We all check and seek reassurance about our appearance from time to time. So when do these behaviours become a problem? It can vary from one behaviour to the next, but in general it can be helpful to think of these behaviours as lying on a scale from too little to too much.

Let's take mirror checking as an example. Most people look in the mirror at least sometimes – perhaps to make sure their face is clean, style their hair, shave, brush their teeth or put on make-up. Never checking your appearance in the mirror may have consequences, like not noticing you have something in your teeth or missing a spot while shaving. On the other hand, spending long periods of time checking and re-checking your appearance can become a problem, particularly if you are focusing on what you don't like rather than your appearance as a whole, or if it starts negatively impacting on your life. Not only can checking behaviours make you feel worse about your appearance, they also keep you focused on your appearance concerns, keeping the vicious cycle going.



As you can see below, the goal of this module is not to move you from one end of the scale to the other - you don't need to get rid of all checking and reassurance seeking behaviours. Rather, the goal is to move you from checking too often and in an unhelpful way, to checking in a more helpful way, as seen below.



Identifying Unhelpful Checking & Reassurance Seeking

In Module 2, we introduced some common checking and reassurance seeking behaviours. In addition to mirror checking, you may notice yourself comparing your appearance to your friends, colleagues, or even people you pass on the street. You may also find yourself spending hours on social media trawling through images of attractive people.



Look at the list below and consider how much you are doing these behaviours – you may need to add to the list if you check your body in other ways. Since these behaviours often occur automatically and without us thinking about it, you may need to use the following tips to get a clearer idea of what you are doing and how often.



- Place a notepad next to your mirror and keep a tally of how many times you check your appearance and for roughly how long.
- Ask family or friends to note down each time you ask them about your appearance over a set period of time.
- Make note of checking behaviours during times where you tend to be more focused on your appearance e.g., while exercising, first thing in the morning or when socialising.
- Use your phone to keep a record of how often you engage in different forms of checking throughout the day.

How do I check my appearance?	How often? (e.g., 10x per day; 4x per week)	How long do I spend each time? (e.g., minutes; hours)
Looking at my appearance in the mirror		
Checking appearance in reflective surfaces (e.g., windows)		
Weighing myself.		
Checking areas of my body by touching, pinching, or mentally scanning that area		
Taking photographs or video footage of myself		
Measuring parts of my body (e.g., using hands or a tape measure)		
Comparing my appearance to others (in person or in images)		
Looking at old photos of myself		
Seeking reassurance from others about my appearance		
Assessing the fit of my clothing		
Other: -		
-		
-		
-		
Total time spent checking/reassurance seeking (per day):		



Now that you are aware of the extent of your checking and reassurance seeking behaviours, let's think about their impact. Take your mind back to when you were engaging in these behaviours. How did you feel about your appearance after checking? What happened to your mood more generally?

Did you become more or less concerned or preoccupied with your appearance? Were you able to focus on other tasks after checking?

Did you notice a change in your behaviour after checking (e.g., spending more time getting ready, or debating whether or not to go out)?

Consequences of Checking & Reassurance Seeking

You may be starting to notice that body checking and reassurance seeking can have negative consequences, such as:

- Making it difficult to concentrate and focus on pleasant aspects of day-to-day experiences (e.g., having a conversation).
- It is time consuming, and takes time away from other valued tasks or activities.
- It provides you with more opportunities to criticise your body, which can increase your dissatisfaction with your appearance, and make you feel worse.
- Since the effects of reassurance seeking are only short lived, you continue to seek it over and over again from friends and family, leading them to feel irritated and impatient.
- It keeps you focused on appearance as an important part of how you think and feel about yourself.



Is Body Checking Accurate?

Body checking is not just unhelpful; it can also be inaccurate. The images we see in mirrors, photographs or videos are simply representations of how we look and are not necessarily a true and accurate reflection of our appearance. You may have noticed that you prefer the way you look in some mirrors more than others. Or if your photo was taken several times at a party, you like the way you look in some photos but not others. So let's test out whether images really are accurate and reliable, using a mirror exercise. You will need someone to help you with this exercise.

Stand across the room from a full-length mirror, making sure you can see both your head and feet. You see a full-length version of yourself, don't you? Now ask someone to put a piece of sticky tape on the mirror at the points where you see the top of your head and the bottom of your feet. Using a tape measure, measure the distance between the two pieces of tape.

How tall was this reflection? Chances are it wasn't anywhere near as tall as you. It was a 'mini' version of you! Yet when you looked in the mirror, you didn't say "That's mini-me", you said "That's me". When we look at our reflection in the mirror, our brains convert or distort our reflection so we 'see' a full-length version of ourselves – *because we are expecting to*. Importantly, our brains are wired to seek out information that supports what we are expecting to see, rather than information that differs from what we expect. So, if we look in the mirror at our 'scrawny arms', we see 'scrawny arms' because we are expecting to see them. Likewise, when you look in the mirror to evaluate your 'big nose', you see a 'big nose' – because again, that is what you are expecting to see.

Similarly, when we scrutinise something very closely, it can change what we see, making things seem different to what they actually are. Try this exercise.

Hold your hands out in front of you so you can see both at the same time. Now focus your attention on one hand while ignoring the other hand. Look closely at the little details on the hand for several minutes. Then 'zoom out' to look at both hands again.

What did you notice? Most people find that the hand they paid particular attention to appears much larger when they zoomed out. You may also have noticed details that you never paid attention to before. So focusing in on aspects of your appearance can lead to a distortion in what we see, and while this can seem very convincing, it's not actually accurate.

Remember, because people come in *all* body shapes and sizes, there are naturally going to be differences in our appearance, as no two people look exactly the same. This exercise is not to say that these differences don't exist – rather, it highlights how the way we look at ourselves can be distorted, which in turn can make our appearance concerns worse.



How can you use this information the next time you see your reflection in the mirror?



Unfair Comparisons

People who are overly concerned with their appearance often compare themselves to others. These comparisons tend to be 'upwards comparisons'; that is, they compare themselves to those they believe 'look better' than them in some way. This is unhelpful, as they are only comparing themselves to a very select group of people, setting an unrealistic standard.

Think about the comparisons you make with others. Do you compare yourself with everyone in your life, or do you tend to compare yourself mostly to people whom you consider to be more attractive than you? If so, is this fair or helpful?



Social media has increased our exposure to appearance related images and opportunities to compare ourselves. Comparing yourself with images on social media is even more of a problem. Do you notice that you compare your appearance to images of celebrities, friends or acquaintances on social media?

This can be a big problem as most of these photos have been carefully taken, selected, edited and filtered to present the person in the 'best' possible way. As such, these images are not accurate as no one looks like this in real life. Therefore, how reasonable is it for you to be comparing yourself to these images? Think about how you look at your own image – focusing in on all angles, without expert make-up, filters or editing. Is this really a fair comparison to make? Comparing yourself in this way is likely to leave you feeling inadequate and dissatisfied, and more concerned with your appearance.

How can you use this information the next time you notice yourself making comparisons?





Reducing Unhelpful Checking & Reassurance Seeking

If your goal is to reduce your appearance concerns and be more accepting of how you look, then reducing your checking behaviours is an important step. Go back to the table on page 3 and begin by selecting three body checking behaviours that you would like to change. Using the table below, set some goals to reduce either how often and/or how long you engage in the behaviour you've chosen to change. Refer to the examples below as a guide to help you to set your goals.

My goals

Type of checking behaviour	How often? How long?	Goal
Examples: <i>Pinching 'fat' on my arms</i> <i>Looking at my arm muscles in the mirror</i> <i>Asking my partner if I look 'ok' when I leave home</i> <i>Comparing the size of my stomach to that of co-workers</i>	<i>10 times per day</i> <i>Entire 30 min workout</i> <i>5 times when leaving</i> <i>5-10 times per day at work</i>	<i>0</i> <i><1 minute total</i> <i>Once</i> <i>0</i>
Goal 1:		
Goal 2:		
Goal 3:		

Now that you have goals to reduce unhelpful checking behaviours, the next step is to take action. There are two ways to do this; **stop immediately** or **gradual reduction**.

Remember, a lot of these checking behaviours may be so habitual and automatic that we may be halfway through the action before we catch ourselves doing it! In these cases, it can be helpful to:

- Get rid of the things you use for checking (e.g., tape measures, rulers, callipers etc);
- Put up reminders or use flashcards to remind you of your goal;
- Ask those close to you to let you know if they notice you doing the behaviours.

Stop immediately:

There may be some behaviours that you are willing to stop immediately. For example, you may choose to stop checking for 'arm wobble' or measuring certain body parts with a tape measure straight away. After choosing to stop a behaviour you may find it useful to use mundane task focusing (from Module 3) to help you redirect your attention away from your appearance concerns and back to whatever you were doing.



Gradual reduction:

Another option is to gradually reduce how often or how long you engage in checking behaviours using a series of steps. Start by identifying 5 steps from easiest (Step 1) to most difficult (Step 5) that will help you reach your goal. Begin with the easiest step and gradually work your way up the stepladder. This method is helpful for checking behaviours where some use is considered normal (e.g., looking in the mirror). Start by working on one behaviour. When you are familiar with the steps, you can use the same method to reduce other unhelpful body checking behaviours. See the example on the next page.



GOAL: <i>Reduce how often I look at my stomach in the mirror from 15 times per day to 3 times per day for less than 10 seconds each time.</i>	
STEPS	
5	<i>Reduce to 3 times per day, 10 seconds maximum duration each time.</i>
4	<i>Reduce to 3 times per day, 30 seconds maximum duration each time.</i>
3	<i>Reduce to 5 times per day, 1 minute maximum duration each time.</i>
2	<i>Reduce to 10 times per day, 1 minute maximum duration each time.</i>
1	<i>Record how often I check my stomach in the mirror using my phone.</i>

Now you have a go. Use the table above to guide you in developing your own stepladder.

GOAL:	
STEPS	
5	
4	
3	
2	
1	

Set yourself a time frame to achieve your goal using your stepladder. You could take one step each day, or if this is too challenging, you may prefer to repeat each step every day for one week before moving on to the next step.

Reflect on what it was like to work towards your goal. What did you notice as you reduced your checking or reassurance seeking?

What was helpful about reducing or stopping this behaviour? What impact did it have on your mood, your thinking, your ability to stay focused on other activities?

As mentioned, it is important to continue reducing your overconcern with appearance by repeating this process with other unhelpful checking and reassurance seeking behaviours you have identified, until they are no longer getting in the way of your life.



Module Summary

- People who are overconcerned and dissatisfied with their appearance often check their appearance or ask for reassurance from others.
- The more you check your appearance the more 'tuned in' you will be to finding things you don't like. This increases your focus on your appearance, which can make you feel worse about yourself (and the vicious cycle continues).
- To escape this cycle, we need to limit how often and how long we spend checking or asking for reassurance. We can either stop immediately or take gradual steps to reduce these behaviours.
- Stopping or reducing unhelpful checking behaviours will help you reduce overconcern with your appearance so that you can focus on other, more important parts of your life.



Coming up ...

In the next module, we will discuss ways to reduce unhelpful appearance altering 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”

This module forms part of:

Andony, L., Hill, S., Raykos, B., & Campbell, B. (2019). *Caring less about your looks*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

ISBN: 0 9875479 3 4

Created: December 2019