



Caring Less About Your Looks

Module 6

Avoidance & Safety Behaviours

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Introduction

People who are overly concerned about their appearance often avoid certain places or activities. They believe that by avoiding situations, it will make them feel less anxious and uncomfortable about their appearance, as the risk of being judged by others is essentially eliminated. While it's true that people may experience some relief when avoiding a situation, this relief will only be temporary. Soon enough, avoidance behaviours can start to have a negative impact on quality of life, and also keep appearance concerns going.

Your Avoidance & Safety Behaviours

Take a moment to write down some things you might be avoiding because of your appearance concerns. Some examples include:

- Avoid seeing certain friends or family members.
 - Avoid doing particular activities such as swimming or exercising.
 - Avoid certain places like going out with friends, the beach, music festivals or the gym.
 - Avoid dating or being intimate (e.g. hand holding, hugging or having sex).
 - Avoid having your photo taken or looking at photos.
 - Avoid going shopping for clothes.
 - Avoid looking in the mirror.
 - Avoid self-care related to your appearance (e.g. applying sun cream, washing your face).
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You might also find that you are using **safety behaviours**. Safety behaviours refer to the subtle things people do to help them cope with fearful situations. For example, someone with a fear of shopping centres may still be able to go shopping *but only if they are with a trusted friend* (safety behaviour). As you might guess, safety behaviours are also a form of avoidance - they only temporarily reduce your worries and concerns but the next time you are confronted with a similar situation, you will feel the need to use them again.

When we think about appearance concerns, safety behaviours are the things that you may be doing at the moment to try to improve or hide your appearance in fearful situations. In the short term, they help you to feel less anxious about your appearance, as you believe you are less likely to be negatively judged by others.

Some common examples of safety behaviours include:

- Only wearing certain clothes (e.g. black or loose clothing).
- Holding your body in certain postures, turning your face or body a particular way, or covering certain features with your hand during conversations to hide the perceived problem area.
- Only attending social events or going on dates at night or in dimly lit areas.
- Only socialising with particular people.
- Only going out when you can wear makeup.
- Only going to places at certain times to minimise the chance of running into people you may know.
- Only posting images on social networking sites that have been heavily edited, and deleting or untagging those that you think are unflattering.



What safety behaviours do you use to manage your appearance concerns?

Consequences of Avoidance Behaviours

There are many negative consequences associated with avoidance behaviours. By avoiding activities and situations, you are limiting your opportunities to have positive experiences, which in itself can have a big impact on your mood. You might also feel guilty for always saying 'no' to invitations, or for cancelling plans last minute.

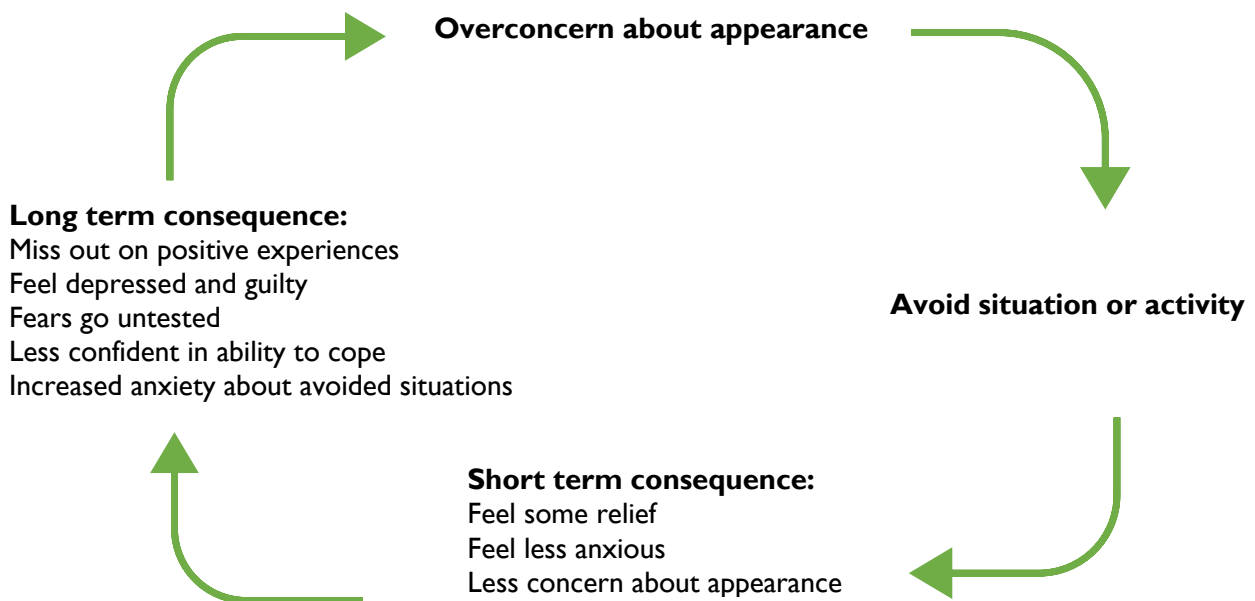
You might be avoiding situations because you predict something bad will happen if you do go along. This can be problematic, as by avoiding the situation, you are robbing yourself of the opportunity to see whether your predictions are in fact true. For example, you might predict that people will make negative comments about your body at a party, or that you will feel so anxious that you won't enjoy yourself. Without going along and seeing what actually happens, you'll never get the chance to see if your fears were true or not.



Finally, avoidance can actually increase your preoccupation and dissatisfaction with your appearance. By avoiding situations, you are reinforcing the belief that there is something wrong with the way you look.

The vicious cycle of avoidance:

As seen in the cycle below, avoiding activities may initially provide some short-term relief but in the longer term, it will bring about a series of negative consequences, and will also reinforce the concerns you hold about your appearance.





Let's consider an example. Imagine your friends invite you to join their social soccer team. You say 'no' because you think others will think your legs look too big in shorts. You initially feel relieved as you won't have to show your legs, however after seeing a photo of the team celebrating their first game, you start to feel down about missing out on quality time with your friends. So not only has this experience impacted negatively on your mood, you've also missed out on the opportunity to see whether anyone actually commented on your legs, as you had predicted. As such, your concerns about your appearance remain unchallenged.

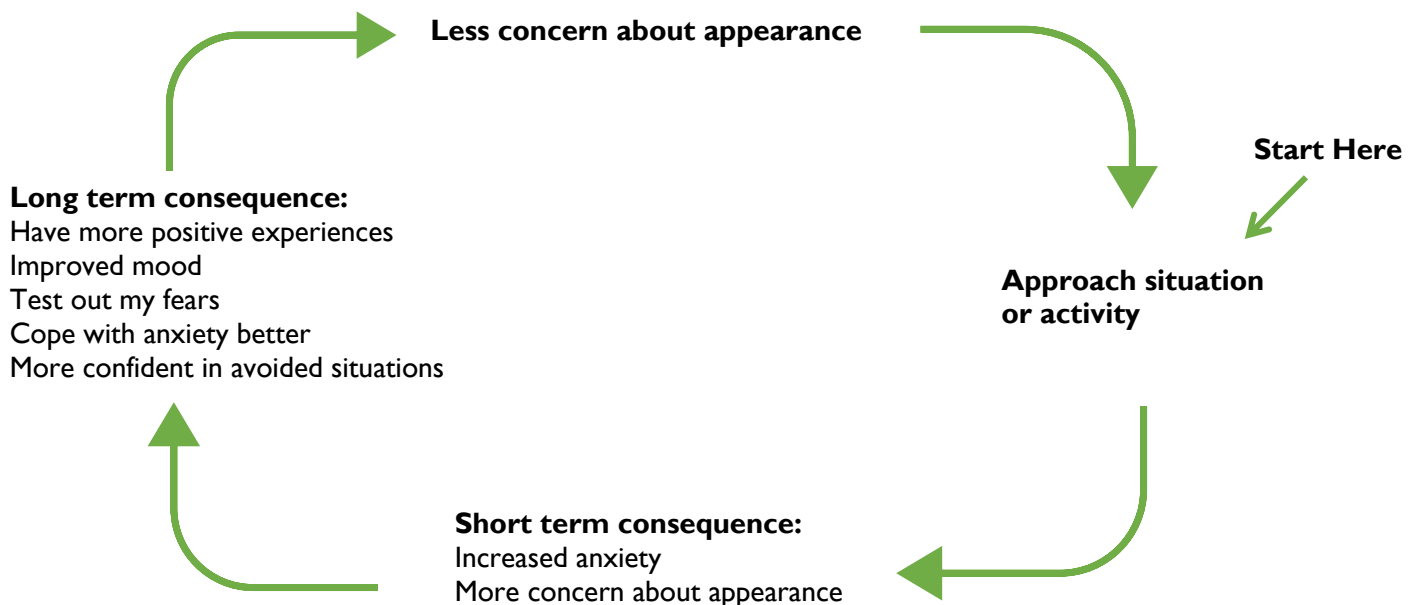


How do avoidance behaviours impact on your life? How have they affected your relationships, work or study commitments, daily activities or your mood?

Let's take a longer-term perspective. If you continued to engage in avoidance behaviours, what might the impact be on your life in 2 years, 5 years or even 10 years?

Reversing the Cycle of Avoidance

Now that you understand the unhelpful consequences of avoidance, you will probably be thinking that you want to make some changes. An essential step in reversing the cycle of avoidance is to begin *approaching avoided situations*. While this will take some courage (as it may result in some anxiety at first) it will lead to a range of positive long-term consequences, as outlined below.





My Goals

Use the following table to set some goals to address your avoided activities or situations. Remember, safety behaviours are a type of avoidance behaviour too, so it will be important to include these also.

Current avoidance behaviour:	Goal:
<p><i>Examples:</i></p> <p><i>Going to the beach and swimming in a baggy t-shirt to hide my body.</i></p> <p><i>Not going to the gym with friends.</i></p> <p><i>Not letting my partner see me naked when intimate.</i></p>	<p><i>Swimming in bathers only.</i></p> <p><i>Going to the gym with friends without using safety behaviours.</i></p> <p><i>Allowing my partner to see me naked.</i></p>
1:	1:
2:	2:
3:	3:
4:	4:
5:	5:

Now that you have identified your goals, it's time to take action. As described in previous modules, you can either use a stepladder approach to change your behaviour, where you gradually take small steps with increasing difficulty towards your goal or, alternatively, you can 'jump in the deep end' and tackle your feared situation head on. You may need to refer to Module 5 for tips on how to use these methods. Remember to set yourself a time frame to achieve your goal.



If you choose to use the stepladder approach, you can use the following table to guide you.

GOAL:	
STEPS	
5	
4	
3	
2	
1	



You may notice that you become more preoccupied with your appearance when you first start to engage in avoided situations. If this is the case, it may be beneficial to use your attention shifting strategies from Module 3 to help you to refocus your attention on the task.



Reflect on your experience working towards your goal. What happened to your anxiety? Did it reduce throughout the experience? What happened when you repeated the task? Did your anxiety reduce further?

What was the impact of engaging in your avoided situations? What benefits did you experience from having the courage to face these situations? What effect did it have on your mood, relationships and quality of life?

What have you learnt from this experience? How will it change the way you behave in the future?





Module Summary

- People who are overly concerned with their appearance will often avoid situations to reduce the chance of being negatively judged, and to reduce the distress they feel about their body.
- Avoidance and safety behaviours keep appearance concerns going, and can have a significant impact on mood and relationships.
- By avoiding situations, you miss out on the opportunity to have positive and meaningful experiences. In addition, by avoiding situations your predictions about situations go untested (so you continue to believe your fears), you become less confident in your ability to cope, and you experience more anxiety about facing these situations in the future. This creates a vicious cycle.
- To reverse the vicious cycle of avoidance behaviours, it is important to start by approaching feared situations, either gradually or 'head on'.
- Addressing avoidance behaviours will help you to become less affected by your appearance concerns, which in turn will help you improve your quality of life.



Coming up ...

In the next module, we will address overvaluing of appearance head on, and will help you to develop a self-management based on what you've learnt in these modules.



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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