



Overcoming Disordered Eating

Information Pack B

In Charge...Mindset Matters

Module 3

Challenging Dietary Rules

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This is the third module of Information Pack B, which provides information and strategies to help you start changing the *thoughts* associated with your disordered eating and weight control habits. We recommend that you do not proceed with this Information Pack unless you have worked through Information Pack A, which offers strategies to change your disordered *behaviours*. We also recommend that you work through all the modules in this Information Pack in order.

If you do think you might suffer from an eating disorder, it is important that you talk to your General Practitioner, as there are many physical complications that can arise from being at an unhealthy low weight or from losing weight very quickly, or from purging. We advise you to seek professional help with working on an eating disorder.

If you use any extreme weight control behaviours – even rarely – you should also see your General Practitioner for a full medical check-up, as your health might be compromised. Such extreme measures include:

- extreme food restriction/fasting (and/or rapid weight loss)
- purging (self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives or diuretics)
- extreme exercise

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Introduction

In the previous module we gave you some strategies for challenging thoughts. We first addressed strict dietary rules in Information Pack A, and we revisit them here so that you can build on the skills you learned in the last module. Dietary rules can be challenged either by using thought diaries as we did in the last module, or by doing specific things to test how valid our rules are, as we will be doing in this module, using behavioural experiments. In this module we will also analyse any binges you may still be having, and introduce a problem-solving strategy that you can apply to all kinds of problems in your life.

As we have outlined earlier, in Information Pack A, engaging in dietary restraint and dietary restriction isn't a solution, it is a problem. You will never get healthy, or conquer your disordered eating and unhealthy weight control behaviours until you loosen up your strict dietary rules. By now we hope you have loosened up *some* of your dietary rules, but it is likely that you are still stuck in the black-and-white thinking of certain rules. Remember, keeping those rigid rules sets you up to break them – and this can lead you to binge and/or feel bad about yourself - which keeps up the vicious cycle of this and other disordered eating habits and weight control behaviours.

Overcoming Food Avoidance

It is likely that you still feel uncomfortable eating certain foods because you're afraid they will make you gain weight, or you might lose control whilst eating them. You may have developed strict rules about not eating these foods and try to avoid them. A major step in overcoming strict dietary rules is to *stop avoiding* certain foods. When you stop avoiding foods you are addressing a set of dietary rules about *what* to eat. You probably have a list of "forbidden" or "bad" foods. And now you might be more aware now of some of your unhelpful thinking styles, such as "black and white" thinking!

We have noted that strict dietary rules tend to get broken, and this can be upsetting and reactivate the eating disorder cycle you've been working so hard to break. For this reason, it is important that you overcome your fear of these foods, and practice eating them as part of your normal life. As we said in the earlier module, some foods (like fruit and vegetables, meat/fish/tofu, bread/rice/potatoes/pasta, dairy and oils) you need to be able to eat everyday, while others, like chocolate and ice-cream, can be thought of as 'occasional foods'. *It is physically impossible to put on weight by eating one normal size serving of any food.* You need to challenge your worries about eating these foods, as these worries are part of the unhelpful thinking patterns related to eating disorders. Remember, *we are not saying that you will have to eat lots of these foods every day.* We just want you to be able to eat them from time to time without fear, and to rid yourself of the eating disorder mindset that forbids you to eat them. Then you'll be able to go out and eat with others.

By challenging your unhelpful thoughts as you did in the last module (using a Thought Diary), you can continue to weaken the hold that the eating disorder thinking has on you, and to challenge unhelpful thinking such as labelling foods "good" or "bad". The next step in challenging your strict dietary rules is to find out how accurate your unhelpful thoughts really are, like a scientist doing an experiment to test out your expectations or predictions. We call exercises such as these 'Behavioural Experiments', because you are experimenting with new behaviours, like a scientist conducting an experiment. Behavioural Experiments are especially useful when you are unsure, or haven't got much evidence for and against your unhelpful beliefs, because you have been avoiding certain things for a long time.

Using Behavioural Experiments

It is important to set up the experiment and be specific about what it is you will actually do and how you will gather evidence. You can conduct a survey, gathering evidence either by making observations or



questioning people; read up on things to obtain information; stay in a situation that you would usually avoid or leave early; or plan to behave in a certain way and see how it pans out.

The best way to describe a Behavioural Experiment is to walk you through one.

Supermarket Exercise

Let's begin with the Supermarket Exercise. Before you start this Behavioural Experiment, you will need to go on a fact-finding mission. You will need to go to the supermarket, taking this sheet of paper and a pen – you may need more paper so take some more sheets or a small notebook.



1. In the supermarket...as you walk along the aisles, imagine yourself eating the foods on the shelves. Ask yourself if you are scared to eat them. List everything that you consider a "forbidden" food.
2. When you get home...take your list and rate your level of fear (on a scale of 1-10) if you had to eat one serving of that food.

| Avoided foods | Fear level (1-10) |
|---------------|-------------------|
| 1 | |
| 2 | |
| 3 | |
| 4 | |
| 5 | |
| 6 | |
| 7 | |
| 8 | |
| 9 | |
| 10 | |
| 11 | |
| 12 | |
| 13 | |
| 14 | |
| 15 | |
| 16 | |
| 17 | |
| 18 | |
| 19 | |
| 20 | |



Take your list of the supermarket foods and categorise them into the 3 columns overleaf, according to the level of fear you would experience if you were asked to eat that particular item of food. You may wish to add foods that you didn't see at the supermarket.

| Foods I avoid a little (1-4) | Fear level | Foods I avoid a lot (5-7) | Fear level | Foods I avoid totally (8-10) | Fear level |
|---|-----------------------|--|-----------------------|---|-----------------------|
| <i>E.g. Avocado (in salad)</i> | 4 | <i>E.g. Peanut butter (on toast)</i> | 7 | <i>E.g. Chocolate</i> | 10 |
| | | | | | |

We are now suggesting that you construct a behavioural experiment that will allow you gradually to begin eating some of these foods you've been avoiding. It might be difficult – so you will need to challenge yourself (and those negative thoughts about the foods).

Begin your first experiment with your easier foods - those in Column A. Choose one food item from this column that you rated approximately 3 or 4 out of 10. Plan to eat your selected food in the next week. You may want to introduce the food on a day that you feel more confident. Eat it in place of or as part of a normal meal or snack (e.g., ½ avocado sliced in a salad). Don't worry if you only try it once! Note your reactions to eating the food in your food records. In this instance, you may want to consider *when* and *where* you eat your avoided food, as well as *how much* and *who you will be with*.

It is important to realise that if your prediction is related to weight change (e.g., "If I eat two slices of white toast every morning, I'll put on 2 kg a week") then your experiment would have to last four weeks. (Remember what we said – that you need four weeks to see if a weight change represents a real change in body mass or is just a normal fluctuation.) Why not start with testing out a belief not related to weight?



Setting up a Behavioural Experiment

Here are some steps you will need to work through to test out your beliefs and predictions. Steps 1-6 are done ahead of the experiment, and Steps 7 and 8 after the experiment. Read through the steps first and then read the completed example on the next page.



Step 1: Identify your belief to be tested

Identify what belief or prediction you would like to test out. Ask yourself questions such as, “What will happen if my belief is true?” (e.g., “If I eat a slice of white bread, I will start a binge.”)

Step 2: Record how strongly you believe your prediction (between 0 and 100%).

Step 3: Identify an alternative belief

What is another possible belief about this subject? What might happen if this alternative belief were true?

Step 4: Record how strongly you believe in this alternative prediction (between 0 and 100%).

Step 5: Plan your experiment

This involves planning what you will do to test the accuracy of your predictions. Be specific about what it is you will actually do and how you will gather evidence. Are you going to conduct a survey? Do research? Or plan to behave in a certain way and see what happens? Starting with easier conditions is often a good idea when you are starting out.

Step 6: Agree to a timeframe

Give yourself enough time to test whether either belief has support.

Step 7: Record what happened & evaluate the results

Once you have planned your experiment, follow through with what you set out to do in Step 5. Carry out the experiment and record what actually happened. Remember to write down all the details. Which belief was supported by the evidence?

Step 8: Revisit and re-rate the beliefs.

The last step is to reflect on what actually happened and how this compares to what you were predicting in Steps 1-4. Ask yourself: “What did I learn from the experiment? What do the results say about my original predictions? How am I going to use this information in the future?” Then, re-rate how much you now believe your original belief and your alternative belief (0 to 100%).

If the results of your experiment do not support your original belief, which is often the case, that is great! However, should your prediction be partially supported, which may happen at times, it will be important to ask yourself some questions about this. Ask yourself: *Were there any other reasons for the results? What else was happening at that time? Are there other ways of viewing what happened? What could I learn from the experience to adjust my attitudes in the future?*

It is important to note that not everything we think is inaccurate, or has no grain of truth to it. However, we rarely step back to question our predictions or test them out. We often blindly believe our thoughts and expectations even when they are unhelpful to us. This is a habit that is important to break.



Now read through the example on the next page, to give you an idea of what a Behavioural Experiment might look like.



My Behavioural Experiment

(example)

| | | | |
|--|-----|---------------------------|-----|
| Current belief to be Tested | | | |
| What is my unhelpful belief or prediction to be tested? What am I afraid will happen? How strongly do I believe in this prediction (0 to 100%)? | | | |
| <i>If I eat ¼ of an avocado, I'll feel so bad (that I've eaten fats) that I'll binge within the next hour (80%)</i> | | | |
| Alternative belief to be tested | | | |
| What alternative belief or prediction can I test out? What will happen if this belief is true? How strongly do I believe in this prediction (0 to 100%)? | | | |
| <i>I might enjoy the avocado and eating ¼ won't lead to a binge (30%)</i> | | | |
| Experiment Plan | | | |
| What are the specific things I will do to test the predictions? When, where and how will I test it out? | | | |
| <i>I make my lunches at home so I'll put ¼ of an avocado in my lunch wrap on Monday next week.</i> | | | |
| Agree to a timeframe | | | |
| How long my experiment will last? | | | |
| <i>90 minutes = 30 minutes to eat lunch and 60 minutes where I'm predicting a binge</i> | | | |
| What Happened? | | | |
| What actually happened when I carried out the experiment? Which belief was supported by the evidence? | | | |
| <i>It tasted SOOO good! It felt a bit scary at first and because I was worried about binge eating. It did cross my mind, but I didn't binge in the hour, or later that day. I think I should probably practice a few more times to get used to it.</i> | | | |
| Revisit | | | |
| What do the results say about my original prediction? What did I learn? | | | |
| <i>I learned that things I'm scared of don't always come true. I learned that my fear that eating ¼ of an avocado didn't lead to a binge</i> | | | |
| Re-rate the original belief and the alternative belief | | | |
| How strongly do I believe my original thought now that I have carried out the experiment? How much do I believe in the alternative belief? | | | |
| Original belief | 30% | Alternative belief | 65% |

Now you are ready to conduct an experiment. Read over the steps on Page 5, and start! There is a blank worksheet for you overleaf. Start with the Supermarket Exercise from Page 4, using a food from Column A which you usually avoid.



My Behavioural Experiment

Current belief to be Tested

What is my unhelpful belief or prediction to be tested? What am I afraid will happen? How strongly do I believe in this prediction (0 to 100%)?

Alternative belief to be tested

What alternative belief or prediction can I test out? What will happen if this belief is true? How strongly do I believe in this prediction (0 to 100%)?

Experiment Plan

What are the specific things I will do to test my predictions? When, where and how will I test it out?

Agree to a timeframe

How long my experiment will last?

What Happened?

What actually happened when I carried out the experiment? Which belief was supported by the evidence?

Revisit

What do the results say about my original prediction? What did I learn?

Re-rate the original belief and the alternative belief

How strongly do I believe my original thought now that I have carried out the experiment? How much do I believe in the alternative belief?

Original belief:

Alternative belief:



It is important to practice this behaviour. Experiment eating this same food a few times until the fear level (rating out of 10) comes down and you are able to incorporate the food into your regular eating pattern.

You are now ready to move onto other foods on your list – remember that the key is to break things down into steps. So if one regular sized chocolate bar is 10 out of 10 you may need to start by eating a fun-size bar or a Freddo frog and then work up to the regular bar. Chocolate is an ‘occasional food’ and it may take several weeks before you’ve worked through this fear. You don’t have to eat chocolate all the time – you just need to be able to cope with eating some from time to time without your eating disorder mindset getting reactivated.



This process will take time. In the beginning it may well cause anxiety and distress. However, the more you practice this task, the easier it will become. You need to start facing your fears in order to overcome them. You may want to tackle only the foods in Column A for now, and come back later to tackle foods in Columns B and C.

Take a moment to think about how you will introduce different “forbidden” foods into your own life. Consider what might get in the way of succeeding with this exercise, and what you will need to do to succeed in eating the foods that you have been avoiding. Please write your thoughts below.

Overcoming Other forms of Dietary Rules

We can address other forms of dietary rules in a similar way, as Behavioural Experiments. You may want to challenge some other rules by testing out your predictions (or fears) of what might happen. Other rules may include: keeping to a low daily calorie intake, not eating in front of people, and not eating in restaurants because you don’t know what ingredients have gone into the dish. You might like to take another look at Module 8 from Information Pack A. Look at your food rules, and decide which you would like to challenge first. Take one at a time and be systematic. Write down the dietary rule that you will challenge first.

Guidelines not Rules

If you wish to cease dietary restraint, it is crucial to cease *all* dietary rules. Instead of removing your rules all together, you may find it easier to convert them into general guidelines. For example, if you have been following the rule: “I must not eat chips”, you can convert this rule to the guideline: “I will not eat chips every day”. Remember – chips can be an *occasional* food for you. Guidelines are more user-friendly than rules. Guidelines do not have an all-or-nothing feel to them. They do not come over as dictatorial demands, so they do not bring on severe emotional consequences when they are not followed. A healthy eater may have a guideline such as: “I only eat ice-cream at weekends”, but if he goes out with a friend mid-week and they end up eating ice-cream, he doesn’t worry about it – there is no rigid rule to break, and no unhappy consequences. Ice-cream for him is an *occasional* food – he still doesn’t eat it every day.

However, not all of your rules should be converted to guidelines. Some rules ought to be totally eliminated as they do not lend themselves to a conversion to a healthy guideline. For example, if you have been using a rule such as: “I must only eat 1200 calories a day”, this rule ought to go. This is because it is an unreasonably low daily calorie limit which is unhealthy in that it can result in malnutrition





and starvation. Furthermore, it is unhelpful as it lowers your metabolism, and it can lead to binge eating. It is also unhelpful for your morale, as at some point you will break this rule and feel like a failure.

Take a moment to consider how you will cease your dietary rules. Are there any rules you would like to convert to guidelines? What rules should you remove completely? How will you make this work for you? Please write your thoughts below.

If you are still having problems ceasing dietary rules, you may find it useful to use a Thought Diary, which we introduced in the last module. You can use this strategy to address any difficulties you have in achieving behavioural change.

Addressing Residual Binges

Having strict dietary rules makes it likely that you will break a rule and eat more than you wish, or even binge. Even if you are following all the advice in this Information Pack, it is likely, if you have a tendency to binge, that you are still having an occasional binge. It is important at this point to examine what is going on in every single binge. Then you can make appropriate changes. One good way of examining the “evidence” is through self-monitoring. Are you still completing your self-monitoring forms daily? In “real time”? Are you filling out that last column? You can learn a lot from what you write down about your thoughts and feelings and the situation.

We have addressed how breaking a strict dietary rule- can lead to binge eating. What else can contribute?

Alcohol and drugs

It is common for people with problems to overuse alcohol or recreational drugs, or even some prescription drugs, to help them cope. Some ways in which they help are by making you “zone out”, feel numb, not care so much. But alcohol and many drugs lower your inhibitions. Say, for example, that you decided not to eat at night and instead you drink half a bottle of wine. This will lower your inhibitions about eating, which will make you more likely to break that rule of not eating. Some drugs, such as marijuana, increase your appetite (resulting in ‘an attack of the munchies’) and make it more likely that you will overeat. The next day’s hangover may also adversely affect your eating pattern.

Once you start drinking or taking drugs, what role might alcohol or drugs play in any residual binges that you have? Do your best intentions not to binge disappear? Think about this for a few moments and if this is relevant for you, write down some thoughts.





Crises/problematic events/negative mood

Sometimes, even with the best will in the world, people find it hard to stop binge eating. This can be because of chaos going on in their personal lives, unexpected upheavals, or a deterioration in mood, and the resulting heightened emotions. Does this describe what is going on in your life? If this is relevant for you, jot down some thoughts about this.

If you are having problems with managing your moods, you may want to revisit Module 7 in Information Pack A. And if your life has suddenly been thrown into turmoil, this may not be the best time to be working at overcoming your eating disorder. If this is true for you, please consider dealing with the other priorities in your life and then, when your situation is more stable, you can return to addressing your disordered eating habits and weight control behaviours.

Problem Solving

It is easy to feel hopeless about a situation, believing that there is nothing you can do to change it or improve it. So you don't do anything - and the problem continues. We are now going to describe a strategy that can help you identify not only the problem, but possible solutions.

When you identify an obstacle - or, in fact, any problem - it can be useful to follow a problem solving strategy. Problem solving can be extremely helpful in tackling residual binges. Instead of feeling hopeless, you have a range of possible solutions to choose from. You can apply the following strategy to help address binge eating or indeed any barriers to change that you have identified. Here is the procedure, and then we will practice:

1. Identify your problem. Be specific. (What is preventing you from achieving a goal?)
2. Consider all the possible solutions to your problem. You may think of solutions by reviewing previous modules, or you may develop some solutions of your own. Don't dismiss anything at this stage even if it does sound silly or unlikely.
3. Consider the pros and cons of each of your possible solutions. Is it achievable, and will it address all of the aspects of your problem?
4. Now, choose the best alternative.
5. Develop an action plan. Take time to consider how you will implement the plan in your life.
6. Next, act on your plan. Don't give up if change is hard to achieve in the short term. The more you work at it the easier change becomes.
7. Finally, evaluate the process. Examine how well you followed your plan. The important thing to remember when evaluating the process is not to be self-critical if the plan didn't work. Start at the beginning again, and you can find a solution that works for you.

Overleaf is an example of a completed worksheet designed to help you with problem-solving, and on Page 12 is a blank worksheet for you to complete. Remember, this is an **extremely** useful strategy that you can use in all areas of your life, not just with disordered eating habits. Keep practicing, and problem solving will become an automatic response to problems, rather than hopelessness.





Problem Solving

(Example)

1. Identify your problem. Be specific.

I always binge when I get home in the afternoon

2. Consider all the possible solutions to your problem. Brainstorm!

3. Consider a) the pros and b) the cons of each of your possible solutions. Is it achievable, and will it address all of the aspects of your problem?

| 2) Possible solution | 3a) Pros | 3b) Cons |
|--|---|---|
| <i>Don't come home after uni.</i> | <i>I wouldn't binge!</i> | <i>Impossible, I have to come home sometime</i> |
| <i>Eat before I come home</i> | <i>I would be less likely to binge if I'd eaten</i> | <i>I'd have to take food to uni</i> |
| <i>Do something else with friends before I come home</i> | <i>I wouldn't binge with them</i> | <i>I'd still binge when I got home</i> |
| <i>Binge before I go to uni!</i> | <i>That would get it out of the way</i> | <i>That's silly! I don't feel like binge eating in the mornings</i> |

4. Now, choose the best alternative.

Eat before I come home

5. Develop an action plan. Take time to consider how you will implement the plan in your life

Take a snack to my afternoon classes so I can eat it before I come home and I will be less likely to binge

6. Next, act on your plan. Don't give up if change is hard to achieve in the short term. The more you work at it the easier change becomes.

I'll start tomorrow.

7. Finally, evaluate the process. Examine how well you followed your plan. The important thing to remember when evaluating the process is not to be self-critical if the plan didn't work. Start at the beginning again, and you can find a solution that works for you.

It went better than I'd expected. It was helpful to think through all the alternatives, it made me realise there were possible alternatives to my binge. It was a bit weird taking fruit to uni but I did it and it was OK. I still ate too much when I got home but it wasn't really a binge



Problem Solving

1. Identify your problem. Be specific.

2. Consider all the possible solutions to your problem. Brainstorm!

3. Consider the pros and cons of each of your possible solutions. Is it achievable, and will it address all of the aspects of your problem?

| 2) Possible solution | 3a) Pros | 3b) Cons |
|----------------------|----------|----------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

4. Now, choose the best alternative.

5. Develop an action plan. Take time to consider how you will implement the plan in your life.

6. Next, act on your plan. Don't give up if change is hard to achieve in the short term! The more you work at it the easier change becomes.

7. Finally, evaluate the process. Examine how well you followed your plan. The important thing to remember when evaluating the process is not to be self-critical if the plan didn't work. Start at the beginning again, and you can find a solution that works for you.



Module Summary

- A major way to cease dietary restraint is to stop avoiding certain foods.
- Behavioural Experiments are useful to test out your beliefs or predictions, and can be used to help you tackle avoided foods.
- It is important to identify the issues related to any residual binge eating, and identify any roadblocks to progress, such as alcohol or drugs, or life crises that may be diverting you from your progress.
- Learning a problem solving strategy is useful, as it can be applied not only to binge eating, but all areas of your life.

What I Have Learned in this Module

Think about what you have learned in this module and any useful bits of information, tips or strategies that you want to remember. Write them down below so you can refer to them later.

Think about how you might use the information you have just learned. Write down some ways in which you could make use of this information.

Coming Up...



In Module 4 (Body Checking/ Avoidance & “Feeling Fat”) we’ll explore further the effects of basing one’s self-worth on controlling eating, shape and weight.



About This Module

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BACKGROUND AND REFERENCES

The concepts and strategies in this module have been developed from evidence-based psychological treatment of eating disorders, primarily Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT). This can be found in the following:

- Fairburn, C. G. (1995) *Overcoming Binge Eating*. New York: The Guilford Press
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