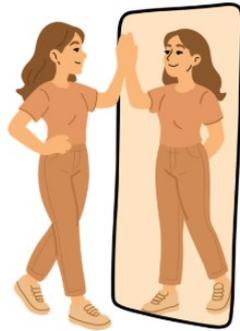# Body Avoidance Behaviours

Body avoidance is common among people who hold negative beliefs about their appearance, weight, shape, or size. People often avoid situations where body image concerns are triggered, especially situations where their body is more exposed.

Body avoidance behaviours may include:

- Wearing clothes that expose certain body parts (e.g., shorts, singlets, bathers)
- Looking in the mirror
- Close physical contact with others (e.g., hand holding, hugging, sexual intimacy)
- Self-care activities (e.g., applying sun-cream, washing face/body, having a bath)
- Shopping for clothes
- Exercising
- Socialising with particular people or groups
- Eating in public

Problems with Body Avoidance

Avoiding situations due to body image concerns may help you to feel safe, reassured, or less anxious in the moment. However, body avoidance behaviours are unhelpful for several reasons.

1. You never get to test your fears.

If you approach the situations you fear, you give yourself the opportunity to discover that your fears don't always come true, and that things can turn out better than expected.

2. It maintains negative ideas about your body.

If you never look at your body as a whole, it is impossible to get a picture of how you actually appear. Instead, you rely on negative thoughts/ images of how you *think* you appear, which is usually based on how you feel.

3. Avoidance and anxiety can spread.

As you avoid situations, you can lose confidence in yourself and your anxiety can start to spread out to more and more areas of your life.

4. You miss out on opportunities for positive experiences.

These experiences can build your confidence and allow you to participate in other valued areas of life. For example, swimming at the beach might be scary, but also involves the feeling of the cold water on your body or laughing with your friends.

5. It is impossible to avoid your body altogether.

Our bodies are the amazing, miraculous vehicles 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 find yourself 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 your appearance, weight, shape, or size.

Overcoming Body Avoidance

To overcome body avoidance, you need to experiment with approaching situations that you would typically avoid due to 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 to reduce anxiety over time. There are different ways to approach feared situations that you have been avoiding:

- 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 your goals step by step

If you are interested in finding out more information about exposure strategies, check out our self-help modules (*Break Free from ED*) that include specific modules for Body Avoidance (Module 12).

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