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Building Body Acceptance

Module 3

Reducing Appearance Preoccupation

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Introduction

In Module 2, we discussed how appearance preoccupation (i.e., time spent engaged in repetitive negative thinking about your appearance) can be distressing and difficult to interrupt, and can reinforce your negative body image and lead to unhelpful checking and reassurance seeking behaviours. This Module will explore ways that you can start to decrease the amount of time spent focussed on your appearance, and thus start to break the vicious cycle of BDD.

Appearance Preoccupation

People who experience BDD will often find that their attention becomes focussed on particular parts of their body and that they then have difficulty controlling how much they continue to think about that aspect of their appearance. To a certain extent, it is normal to be aware of your body, to pay some attention to your appearance, and to think about how you look. However, if you are spending too much time focussing on these and find it difficult to stop thinking about your appearance, you may need to start working on retraining your attention.

Before we start to work on this, let's stop to think about what you tend to focus on when you are feeling anxious, disgusted or depressed about your appearance.

Unanswerable questions

You may find yourself asking the same questions about your appearance over and over again. However, because these questions do not have a simple answer, they continue on and often leave you feeling depressed. Common examples include: *Why do I look like this? Why me? Why couldn't I have had better genes? Why do I have to deal with this when others don't? Why can't I just be normal?*



If you experience any repetitive unanswerable questions about your appearance, take a moment to record some examples below.

Self-criticisms

You may find that you engage in labelling yourself in a generally negative or derogatory manner. Common examples include: *I'm disgusting; I look like a freak; I'm repulsive; I'm ugly; I'm defective; I'm an idiot for trying to fix things.* You may also find that your attention focuses in on particular parts of your appearance and labels them in a negative way. For example: *My hands are freakishly large; I'm so bald; My skin is saggy and horrible; My teeth are so yellow and crooked*

If you criticise yourself in such a way because of your appearance, take a moment to record some examples below.

Fantasies

You may find that your mind wanders off to fantasies about what the past could have been like or what the future may hold, but there is an underlying sense that this could only occur if you looked different in some way. For example: *If I was taller, then I would be more popular; If I didn't have this acne, then I would have a partner by now; When I get bigger muscles, others will accept me; Once I get surgery, everything will be perfect*



Do you find yourself thinking about what could have been or will be if you can change your appearance? If so, jot down an example below.

Negative comparisons

You may find that your attention focuses on the positive aspects of others' appearance, and the negative aspects of your own. This puts you in a position where any comparison you make of yourself with others will always be unfavourable. For example: *I will never look as good as them; They are so much prettier than me; I wish I had their hair – mine is awful; My hands look enormous compared to everyone else I know.*

If you compare your appearance to others in a negative way, take a moment to record some examples of how you do this below.

Overgeneralisations

You may find yourself making broad, generalised and global conclusions on the basis of only a small piece of evidence. Overgeneralisations often include words such as “never”, “always”, “entire”, “all”, and “every”. For example: *My smile ruins my entire appearance; Everyone will notice that my hair is receding; I always have a break-out when something important is going on; Things never turn out well for me.*

If you engage in overgeneralising about your appearance, take a moment to record some examples below.

Worries

You may find that your mind jumps ahead to making a range of negative predictions about the future. Often these worries will come in the form of “what if?” statements, which can be replayed over and over or may jump from topic to topic. For example: *What if I’m like this forever? What if they see me without make-up? What if things never improve? What if I can’t change the way I look? What if they laugh at me?*

Do you worry about your appearance? If so, jot down what you worry about below.

Negative reflections

You may find that you look back at the past and dwell on things that you can no longer change or fix. For example: *If I hadn’t had that treatment, then everything would be fine now; I should never have let them see my body; I wish I had never sunbaked when I was younger.* You may also find that you look back on past events and disqualify, distort or discount any positive information. For example: *They were only nice to me because they felt sorry for me; My partner said I looked good, but that was because he wanted to get going.*

Do you engage in any negative reflecting? If so, record an example below.

Imagery

You may find that you experience distressing mental images, or pictures, of how you look. Often, people with BDD report experiencing mental images of themselves as though they are looking through the eyes of another person. They then believe that this is how the other person is actually seeing them, which can lead to feelings of anxiety and shame. The images may also be of past distressing events that involved your appearance, such as a memory of being teased in your teens due to acne.

Do you experience mental images of yourself? If so, take a moment to write down what you see in those images. If you are someone who likes to draw, you may even wish to draw your mental image on a separate piece of paper.

Negative Impacts

As you can see, there are many different ways that your attention may become preoccupied with your appearance. Unfortunately, this appearance preoccupation can be very distressing.

For example, take a moment to read back through the answers you recorded above. Once you have read through them, think about how these have left you feeling right now. Then, imagine the impact of these thoughts being allowed to keep running through your mind throughout the day, day after day into the future. What do you think will happen if these thoughts are allowed to keep grabbing your attention all day long?

Unfortunately, having your attention fixed on such negative thoughts often leads to feelings of anxiety, shame, disgust, embarrassment and/or depressed mood.

Furthermore, focussing your attention intensely on a particular area of your body can also alert you to peculiarities with that area that would not normally be noticed. This can therefore lead to more worry, negative comparisons, and self-criticism about your appearance.



Try this exercise:

Visually focus your attention in on the tip of one of your fingers...notice all the tiny contours and ridges... the shape... any asymmetry... how your nail really looks...really hone in on what you can see. Stay with this for 1 minute.

Now ask yourself whether you had noticed any of these sights before you purposely focused on your finger? Also as the time spent focusing on your finger dragged on, did you notice more or less things about your finger? Usually people find they notice a whole bunch of things they had not previously been aware of, and that these seem to amplify over the minute, as they pay more and more attention to them (e.g., “my nail looks more asymmetrical the longer I look at it”).

Unfortunately, when we are focussed on our appearance, it can take our attention away from everyday activities and even from important tasks. For example, have you ever found it hard to focus on a household chore, a work project, or even just reading these modules because your attention kept wandering back to a particular area of your body, and back to negative thoughts about your appearance?

Learning to retrain your attention to let go of repetitive negative thoughts about your appearance and to bring your attention non-judgementally back to the present, is therefore an important step in overcoming BDD. It will not only reduce the amount you focus on your appearance, but also free up your attention to focus on other activities and experiences.

Barriers to Attention Training

Before you start to work on retraining your attention, it can be important to examine whether you hold any positive beliefs about the benefits of continuing to focus on and repeatedly think about your appearance. Examples of such positive beliefs about being preoccupied with your appearance include:

- “Focusing on my appearance helps me evaluate how awful I really look”
- “Focusing intensely on that body part helps me work out what I should do about it”
 - “If I don’t question my appearance, others will think I’m vain”
- “Worrying about my appearance gets me prepared for others’ negative comments”
 - “Comparing myself with others helps me feel better”
 - “Thinking this way keeps me grounded”

It makes sense that if you hold such positive beliefs about focusing your attention on and thinking negatively about your appearance, then you will continue to be preoccupied with your appearance. After all, you are telling yourself it is helpful and even protective!

If you hold any positive beliefs about your appearance preoccupation, even to a small degree, we recommend that you first dissect and challenge those beliefs. Once you have evaluated whether your appearance preoccupation really is helpful, you will then be in a better position to decide if you would like to change this. Below are a range of questions you can ask yourself to test out any positive beliefs you hold about focusing attention on your appearance.

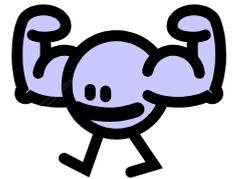
<p>What are my positive beliefs about appearance preoccupation? Being preoccupied with my appearance helps me because...</p> <p>How much do you believe this now (0% = not at all, 100% = completely): _____%</p>
<p>What is the goal of your appearance preoccupation? Does focusing your attention in this way truly reach your goal? How <i>exactly</i> does it help or protect you? How has focusing on and thinking negatively about your appearance truly prepared you, helped you cope, or solved the problem?</p>
<p>Are there any negative consequences to your appearance preoccupation? Does it make you feel better, the same, or worse when you focus your attention on and think negatively about your appearance? Are you drawing your attention to aspects of your appearance that you or others might not normally have noticed anyway?</p>
<p>If a child was focusing on their appearance and thinking about it the way you do, would you encourage them to do it more? If not, why not?</p>
<p>What conclusions can you make from this?</p>
<p>Re-rate the strength of your positive belief (0% = not at all, 100% = completely): _____%</p>

Attention Training

Hopefully, you are now more open to the idea that focusing your attention on your appearance does not truly help you. If so, how do we let go of our appearance preoccupation, and get our attention back to the here and now? Well, think of your attention like a muscle... if you don't exercise it regularly, it will become weak and won't work as well. We need to strengthen it by giving it regular exercise!!

There are two ways you can give your attention a regular workout. One of these involves practicing sustaining your attention while engaged in everyday tasks, and the other involves a more formal meditation practice.

It is important to remember while engaging in these workouts that it is completely normal for our minds to wander off to other things. This is what minds do. They drift off to memories, concerns, sensations, images, planning, and daydreams, to name a few. When you notice that your mind has wandered during these activities, be careful not to criticise yourself for this. After all, it is completely normal. Instead, think about each and every "wander" as another opportunity to practice your skills of bringing your attention back to the here and now. Think of it this way, the skill you are learning is not to have perfectly sustained attention, but instead to catch your attention as it wanders and bring it back. As such, it really doesn't matter how many times your attention wanders, as that is part of the training.



Mundane task focussing

You may have noticed that when you are doing everyday household jobs like the dishes or the ironing, your mind is not really on the task at hand. These are often times that our mind starts to wander. Therefore, these types of tasks are great opportunities to practice strengthening our attention 'muscle'.

With mundane task focussing, the goal is to gradually practice sustaining your attention on a mundane activity for longer and longer periods of time – thus giving your attention a good workout.

Take a moment to think about some everyday household activities that you engage in where your mind might wander frequently (e.g., doing the dishes, ironing, gardening, taking a shower, vacuuming, eating a meal). Write these below so that you can refer back to them when planning your attention workout.

Pick one of these tasks for your first attention workout, and record the task and when and where you will do it on the *My Attention Workout Worksheet*. Now, start the task without intentionally trying to work your attention. You may wish to gauge your 'pre-workout' attention levels by rating the percentage of your attention that is currently focussed on your self (including on your own thoughts, bothersome symptoms and sensations, appearance, etc) versus the percentage currently focussed on the task at hand.

Now, whilst continuing the task, you can officially start your attention workout. Each time you notice your mind has wandered off the task, anchor your attention back to the task by focussing, non-judgementally, on the following:

- Touch: What does the activity feel like? What is the texture like (e.g., rough, smooth)? Where on your body do you have contact with it? Are there areas of your body with more or less contact with the task?
- Sight: What do you notice about the task? What catches your eye? How does the task appear? What about the light... the shadows... the contours... the colours?
- Hearing: What sounds do you notice? What kinds of noises are associated with the task?
- Smell: What smells do you notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there?
- Taste: What flavours do you notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours?

You don't actually have to write down the answers to these questions. Simply use them to help anchor your attention back to the task at hand. Once you have completed the mundane task focussing activity, you may wish to re-rate how much of your attention was self versus task focussed, and think about what you have learned from completing the activity.

My Attention Workout

Mundane task: _____ Where and when will I do my workout: _____
Before starting the attention workout, where do I notice my attention is focussed? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-focussed attention (i.e., focussing on my appearance or negative thoughts): _____ % • Task-focussed attention (i.e., the task I was actually engaged with): _____ % <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 5px;"> 100 % </div>
During the attention workout, anchor my attention back to the task at hand by focussing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touch: What does the activity feel like? What is the texture like (e.g., rough, smooth)? Where on my body do I have contact with the task? Are there areas of my body with more or less contact with the task? • Sight: What do I notice about the task? What catches my eye? How does the task appear? What about the light... the shadows... the contours... the colours? • Hearing: What sounds do I notice? What kinds of noises are associated with the task? • Smell: What smells do I notice? Do they change during the task? How many smells are there? • Taste: What flavours do I notice? Do they change during the task? What is the quality of the flavours? <p>Remember that it is normal for my mind to wander off. Rather than beating myself up over this, use each time my mind wanders as an opportunity to workout my attention muscle again.</p>
Having completed the attention workout, where did I notice my attention was focussed during the workout? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-focussed attention (i.e., focussing on my appearance or negative thoughts): _____ % • Task-focussed attention (i.e., the task I was actually engaged with): _____ % <div style="text-align: right; margin-top: 5px;"> 100 % </div>
What did I learn from this? What conclusions can I make from this?



Meditation training

Using a meditation exercise is another way that you can obtain regular practice at being present focussed, dealing with a wandering mind, and disengaging from your negative preoccupation with your appearance.

Mindfulness involves practicing how to notice when your attention has wandered off, and then skilfully redirecting your attention back to the present, to the here and now.

It is not an attempt to control your thoughts or to make them go away. It is actually about allowing these thoughts to be present in your mind and body, but choosing to shift your attention back on to your breathing.

Mindfulness can be combined with a “letting go” activity, where you choose to notice but then let go of distressing thoughts, emotions or physical sensations.

It is important to remember that this is not a quick fix, it is not easy, and requires regular practice. By practicing daily you may eventually become better at letting go of your focus on your appearance, and at disengaging from your distressing thoughts about your appearance in a more informal way as they pop up throughout the day.



Meditation Steps

- 1) To begin the practice, sit down in a chair and adopt a relaxed and alert posture, then ask yourself, *what am I experiencing right now?* What thoughts are around, what feelings are around, and what body sensations? Allow yourself to just acknowledge, observe and describe these experiences to yourself, without judgment and without trying to change them or make them go away. Spend 30 seconds to 1 minute just doing this.
- 2) Now bring *your focus of awareness to your breath*, focusing on the sensations of your breath as it moves back and forth in your belly. Binding your awareness to the back and forth movements of the sensations in your belly from moment to moment, and letting all thoughts go. Maybe say to yourself ‘relax’ or ‘let go’ on each outward breath. If your mind wanders away to other thoughts, feelings and sensations – again do not try to change them or make them go away. Simply acknowledge their presence, allowing them to be there, then letting go with your attention and focusing back on your breath. Spend about 1 or 2 minutes doing this.
- 3) Now *expand your awareness to sensing your whole body breathing*, being aware of sensations throughout your body. If there are any strong feelings around, maybe saying to yourself “whatever it is, it is OK, just let me feel it.” Allowing yourself to breathe with these feelings, and if your mind wanders to bothersome thoughts or sensations, just acknowledge and let go of these - focusing back on sensing your whole body breathing. Continue doing this for about another 1 or 2 minutes.

As you start to get more familiar with this skill you can try increasing the time of steps 2 & 3. We would recommend that you keep increasing this until you are able to practice twice per day for ten minutes or more, and then try to keep practicing daily at this level.

Remember, your attention is like a muscle; if you stop the regular exercise your muscle won't work quite so well. You can use the Attention Training Diary to keep track of your progress.

Attention Training Diary

You can use this sheet to both plan your attention training and to record your progress along the way. The last column asks you to jot down any comments about the experience – What did you notice? Where did your mind wander off to? Were you able to notice this? Were you able to interrupt this? How did it compare to other times you have practiced?

Date & Time	Attention Task	Duration	Comments
<i>e.g., Monday 5th, 9:00am</i>	<i>Meditation</i>	<i>2 mins</i>	<i>This was quite hard as my mind kept drifting to thoughts about how ugly my feet are, which made me want to look at them</i>
<i>Monday 5th, 6.00pm</i>	<i>Mundane task focussing (while doing the dishes)</i>	<i>10 mins</i>	<i>I noticed lots of things I didn't usually notice, but I was still thinking a lot about my feet. It was probably a little easier than the meditation as I had something to focus on.</i>

The Last Word On Attention Training...

Initially it may be quite difficult to use mundane task focusing or meditation training to bring your attention back to the present moment when it is preoccupied with your appearance. This is normal. **So for now, just practice the skill of mundane task focusing or meditation training in itself, rather than specifically trying to use these to reduce your appearance preoccupation.** This means practicing mundane task focusing and meditation training at times when you are least preoccupied with your appearance. This way you will be training your attention during easier times (i.e., when you are not preoccupied with your appearance), so you can later apply your new attention skills during harder times (i.e., when you are preoccupied with your appearance). It is a bit like learning to swim in a safe paddling pool, before venturing into the ocean. You need to learn the skill first in easy conditions, before using it in more difficult situations where you really need it.

So for now practice your attention training skills without necessarily expecting them to immediately reduce your preoccupation with your appearance. The changes you will make to your behaviour and thinking through Modules 4 (*Reducing Checking & Reassurance Seeking*) and 5 (*Overcoming Negative Predictions, Avoidance & Safety Behaviours*), will later enable you to apply your new attention skills to disrupt any preoccupation with your appearance and bring your mind back to the here-and-now.

We recommend that you practice at least daily mundane task focussing workouts and twice daily meditations. If you find it difficult to fit the regular meditation exercises in, you could instead increase the number of mundane task focussing workouts you do per day. Remember, mundane task focussing isn't asking you to do anything extra, only to use those activities you are already doing in a particular way.

Postponing Appearance Preoccupation

Even though you have started to exercise your attention muscle to ultimately help overcome your preoccupation with your appearance, as just mentioned, in these early stages of practice you may notice that your attention keeps wandering back to thinking about your appearance. Given we have spent a lot of time explaining that focusing in on your appearance is unhelpful, as an alternative you may find yourself trying to stop these thoughts about your appearance by trying to distract yourself or telling yourself not to think about your appearance.

Unfortunately, trying not to think about something can have the opposite effect by making us think about it even more! For example, try not to think of a pink elephant for the next 60 seconds and see how well you do...

So, if *focussing on your appearance* creates more distress about your appearance, and *trying not to focus on your appearance* actually increases how much you think about your appearance, what should you do?!? Fortunately, there is a third option called **Postponement**.

Postponing your appearance preoccupation means that it is **perfectly OK for an initial thought about your appearance to pop in to your mind** (e.g., "I can't stand my disgusting freckles" or "life would be so much better if I was taller"). However, as soon as you notice this thought, **you make a decision not to 'chase' the thought any further at that particular time.**

Not chasing the thought about your appearance any further means that it doesn't 'snowball' into bigger and more distressing thoughts about your appearance. This snowballing effect happens when we start to anticipate the worst or run scenarios and solutions related to our appearance through our head over and over again (e.g., "I'll never meet anyone who wants to be with someone who looks like this, I'll end up alone, life will be pointless, I should go see a different dermatologist to fix this, if only I could get rid of this, etc"). Instead, you postpone



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thinking about your appearance until a later time, using your attention skills to bring your attention back to the here and now.

How to postpone

1. Set a preoccupation period

- Nominate a set time, place and length of time when you are allowed to be preoccupied with your appearance (i.e., a time each day when you can think about your perceived flaw as much as you like)
- Try and keep your preoccupation period the same everyday (e.g., 6pm, dining room, 20mins). We recommend no more than 30 mins per day
- Try not to set your preoccupation period immediately before going to bed.

2. Postpone

- When you notice yourself preoccupied with your appearance throughout the day, list your initial thought that set off the preoccupation on the *Postponing Appearance Preoccupation Worksheet* (or even on a piece of paper or a notepad if the worksheet is not available to you).
- Note the thoughts about your appearance **briefly** in a couple of words only (e.g., “disgusting freckles”, or “how to fix my skin”, or “never going to meet anyone”)
- Decide to think about it later and save your thoughts for your preoccupation period
- Use your attention training skills to bring your attention back to the present task at hand, and reassure yourself that you will deal with these thoughts during your preoccupation period.

3. When you get to your preoccupation period

- Only think about the things you’ve listed if you feel you **must**
- You don’t have to think about them if they no longer seem relevant to you
- If you do feel the need to think about your appearance, only do this for the set amount of time specified
- If you run out of time during your preoccupation period to cover all the things on your list, remind yourself that these items will be covered the following day during your next preoccupation period.

The most important aspect of postponement is adopting the attitude of **allowing** the initial thought about your appearance to arise, but then **choosing not to chase** that thought right now. It doesn’t matter how many times that same thought pops back, just postpone it again, choosing not to engage with it now, but saving it for later.

We recommend that you practice this strategy over the next week by completing the *Postponing Appearance Preoccupation Worksheet*. We then suggest that you then continue to use postponement as a strategy for as long as you continue to be preoccupied with your appearance. Try this strategy out properly, because whilst it may seem deceptively simple, when done properly people find it very powerful in gaining some control over how much they think about their appearance. Using this strategy means the distress associated with thinking about your appearance will take a maximum of 30 minutes a day, as opposed to all 24 hours of the day.

Postponing Appearance Preoccupation Worksheet

Set Your Preoccupation Period

Start Time:	End Time:	Place:
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Briefly record your appearance thoughts

Then use your attention strategies to bring your attention back to the present. Remind yourself that you will come back to these thoughts during your preoccupation period.

Day	Appearance Thoughts (in a few words only)
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	
Sunday	

After practicing this for a week, take a moment to review how you went with the postponement strategy

What happened to the thoughts you postponed? Did you still need to think about them later? If you were able to postpone, what happened to your preoccupation with your appearance? And how did you feel?

If you had trouble postponing - Did you actually write down your thoughts (recommended) or just try to remember them (not recommended)? Do you need to work more on your attention training exercises?

Module Summary

- People who experience BDD will often find that their attention becomes focussed on particular parts of their body, and that they then have difficulty controlling how much they continue to think about that aspect of their appearance.
- Sometimes people with BDD hold positive beliefs that being preoccupied with their appearance is a helpful thing to do. However, when they question this, they often realise that focusing their attention on their appearance doesn't bring any real benefit.
- Learning to retrain your attention, so that you can decrease the amount of time you spend thinking about and focussed on your appearance, is an important step in overcoming BDD.
- There are two ways you can retrain your attention:
 - Mundane task focussing involves practicing sustaining your attention while engaged in everyday household tasks.
 - Meditation involves a more formal daily practice of focussing your attention back onto your breathing each time your mind drifts off to different thoughts or sensations.
- With both attention training exercises, the goal is to practice non-judgementally bringing your attention back to the here-and-now by using either your breathing or the task at hand as an anchor.
- For now just focus on strengthening your attention 'muscle'. Later on you can then apply these attention strategies to disrupt any distressing thoughts and preoccupation you are experiencing regarding your appearance. With time and practice, you will therefore get better at letting go of these thoughts and concerns.
- You can also combine your new attention skills with a postponement exercise to decrease the amount of time you spend preoccupied with your appearance. The most important aspect of postponement is allowing the initial thought about your appearance to occur, but then choosing not to engage with that thought until a later time.



Coming up next ...

In the next module, you will learn ways to start reducing checking and reassurance seeking 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). CBT for Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is based on the approach that BDD is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

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