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Building Body Acceptance

Module 4

Reducing Checking & Reassurance Seeking

Introduction	2
Common Checking & Reassurance Seeking Behaviours	2
Helpful vs. Unhelpful Checking & Reassurance Seeking	3
Why Checking Can Be Unreliable and Unfair	4
Reducing Unhelpful Checking & Reassurance Seeking	5
Worksheet – Example	9
Worksheet	10
The Last Word on Mirrors...	11
Module Summary	12

Introduction

In Module 2, we identified that people with BDD will often engage in repeated checking and reassurance seeking behaviours. Generally this is done in an effort to ease concerns you have about your appearance. However, these behaviours can actually fuel the problem, keeping you preoccupied with your appearance, magnifying your negative body image, increasing your distress, and stopping you from learning the necessary skill of tolerating your physical imperfections. In this Module, we will revisit the different ways people check and seek reassurance about their appearance, discuss helpful and unhelpful levels of checking, and explore strategies to reduce or eliminate these behaviours.

Common Checking & Reassurance Seeking Behaviours

Most of us will engage in checking and reassurance seeking behaviours with regards to our appearance. We do this to reduce any questions or worries we have about how we look, to increase our sense of control and certainty about our appearance, and to reassure ourselves that we look okay or that there is a real problem to be dealt with.

Unfortunately, while these behaviours often give us some short term relief, sooner or later those same doubts and concerns pop back in to our mind, and we feel compelled to start the cycle of checking or reassurance seeking all over again. One way to break this “Reassurance Cycle” is to reduce our checking and reassurance behaviours to a more helpful level, and to practice tolerating and accepting some of the uncertainty and anxiety that goes along with not checking or seeking reassuring information.

In Module 2, we introduced a range of commonly reported checking and reassurance seeking behaviours. To recap, take a moment to look over the list below and see whether any of the behaviours listed are things you are doing *frequently and repeatedly*. You may also be aware of other behaviours not listed here, so there is additional room to list these below.

- Mirror gazing, including using mirrors that magnify
- Checking your appearance in reflective surfaces e.g., shop windows
- Checking areas of your body visually, by touch, or by mentally scanning that area
- Verifying your appearance by taking a photograph or video footage of yourself
- Measuring parts of your body e.g., using tape measure or callipers
- Making comparisons e.g., by looking at old photographs of yourself, or comparing your own appearance with that of others, and
- Asking family members, friends, and professionals about your appearance
- Other checking or reassurance seeking behaviours:



Take a moment to think about how much you are doing these behaviours and record this below. If you are not certain, you may wish to engage in a mini-survey to work out how often and for how long you engage in these behaviours. For example, you could:

- Ask family or friends to note down each time you ask them about your appearance over a set period
- Place a notepad and pencil next to your mirror and keep a tally of each time you check your appearance and for how long you do this

Behaviour

e.g., Checking the symmetry of my ears
e.g., Asking my partner if my hair looks okay before going out

How Often & How Long

Twice daily, 30 minutes each time
Between five and twelve times daily

If you engage in several of these behaviours, you may wish to select one or two to work on whilst completing this module. Some people prefer to start with reducing those behaviours which are having the most impact on their everyday lives. Others prefer to start on those behaviours that they feel might be easiest to work on first, gradually building their confidence to tackle some of the harder changes later.

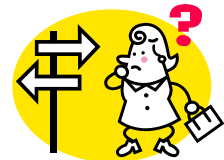
Which one or two checking or reassurance seeking behaviours will you work on first? Record them below:

1. _____
2. _____

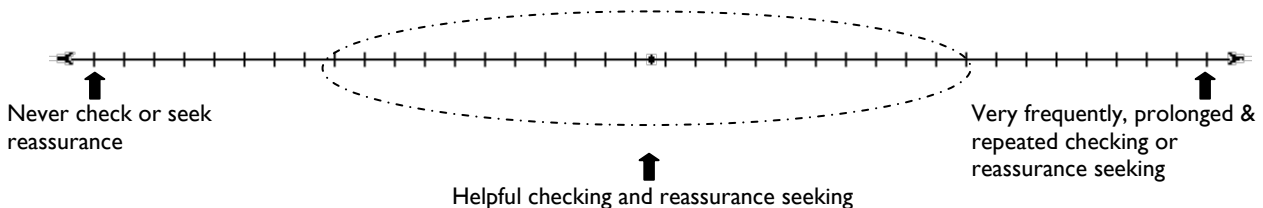
Once you have worked on these for a while, you can then come back and address any remaining behaviours.

Helpful vs. Unhelpful Checking & Reassurance Seeking

As mentioned, most of us will engage in some level of checking or reassurance seeking when it comes to our appearance. So, when do these behaviours become problematic? What is considered too much? Well, it can vary from one behaviour to the next, but in general we have to think about these behaviours as being on a continuum. If our behaviours fall at either of the two extremes of the continuum, we may not be engaging in “healthy” levels of checking and reassurance seeking.



For example, let's think about the behaviour of checking your appearance in the mirror. Someone who never checks their appearance in the mirror may have trouble styling their hair or putting on make-up before going out. However, someone who spends prolonged periods checking and re-checking their appearance in the mirror may be making themselves feel worse by focussing on the most disliked aspects of their appearance. If you are already preoccupied with thoughts about your appearance, high levels of mirror gazing will only maintain this preoccupation, and thus keep BDD going.



The goal of this module is therefore not to move you from one extreme to the other, by asking you to eliminate all checking and reassurance seeking behaviours. The goal is to be able to develop more helpful levels of these behaviours and to decrease the negative consequences often associated with high levels of checking and reassurance seeking.

Note: In the next module, we will address avoidance behaviours that can occur at the other end of this continuum (e.g., for people who never check or seek reassurance e.g., avoid mirrors, never look at photographs of self).

Why Checking Can Be Unreliable and Unfair

Whilst checking and reassurance seeking can become very time consuming when they occur at an unhelpful level, lets also consider some specific problems associated with these checking behaviours.

Unreliable images

You may recall from Module 1 that the term *body image* does not refer to how you actually look. An *image* of something usually refers to a representation of the original thing. You might remember that we discussed how an A4 sized photograph of a giraffe does not mean that giraffes are actually A4 sized! The images we see in mirrors, photographs, videos or other reflective surfaces are therefore a representation of how we look. Unfortunately, these images or representations can be quite unreliable, making repeated time-consuming and often distressing checking behaviours a futile pursuit.



You may have noticed that when you use different mirrors, some will be more flattering than others. You may also have found that if your photo was taken several times at a party, that you have a ‘most’ and ‘least’ favourite photo. You may also find that if you check your reflection with a shiny piece of cutlery, that you not only get a distorted or blurry view, but you will also get a different reflection depending on whether you use a knife, or which side of the spoon you use.

Even with a mirror that you feel is quite accurate and reliable, things may not be as they seem. You will need a partner or friend to try this following exercise to test this out...

Stand across the room from a full-length mirror, ensuring you can see both your head and feet in the mirror. You see a full length version of yourself, don't you? Now ask your partner or friend to put a piece of sticky tape at the points that represent the top of your head and the bottom of your feet. Now, using a tape measure, measure the distance between the two pieces of tape. How tall was this image of you? Chances are, you have just seen a mini image of yourself, but rather than saying “that's mini-me” you said “that's me”. That is because your brain converts or distorts the reflection so that you “see” a full-length version of yourself – because that is what you are expecting to see.

Likewise, when you look in the mirror to evaluate your “big nose” for example, you “see” a big nose – because again that is what you are expecting to see. In the last Module, we also discussed how focussing on something intently can amplify the experience, and bring things in to focus that you and others would not normally have noticed. Therefore the combination of *expecting* to see something and then *focussing* on that particular thing, can further distort your body image.

Let's try another exercise to show that our brains are not impartial bystanders, when it comes to how we see things. Look at each word below and say **the colours** of the words out loud (don't read the word itself):

RED BLUE WHITE YELLOW BLUE GREEN

Note: this exercise only works if you are viewing a colour copy of the modules...it doesn't work in black & white!

Did you find this difficult??? This is just another example of how our brains are not unbiased when it comes to processing what they can see right in front of them. What we see gets influenced by what our brains already know or think they know. Just as identifying the colour is being influenced by our brains knowledge of the word, when our brain processes our appearance in the mirror, it is not impartially seeing the reflection in front of it, but is very much influenced by what we *think* we already know about that reflection (i.e., “I have a big nose”). Our brains can be very tricky in this way, often not seeing what is really there in an objective way, but instead seeing what we think we already know.

Unfair comparisons

People with body image problems tend to make “upward” comparisons, which sets an unrealistic or unachievable standard for your appearance. If you make comparisons, do you make them with everyone you pass on the street, or only with those people whom you consider to look better than you? Do you compare your and their entire appearance, or only those parts of your body that you don’t like? Also, are you comparing yourself with images presented in the media? Given people in the media often wear heavy make-up, are given favourable lighting, may be airbrushed to look “perfect”, and represent a very small proportion of the population – how achievable is this? And how fair a comparison is this?



Reducing Unhelpful Checking & Reassurance Seeking

One way to reduce your levels of checking and reassurance seeking is to evaluate just how helpful the current behaviour is, and to consider and test out alternative behaviours. We suggest you use the following 3-Step process and worksheet provided to help you address these behaviours. The worksheet is designed to guide you through the evaluation and planning process step by step, allowing you to see more clearly how helpful your current behaviours are, and to evaluate and plan alternate behaviours.

Step 1- Evaluate how helpful your current behaviour is

To do this, you will need to:

- Identify the behaviour you are going to work on (e.g., studying my pores with a magnifying mirror)

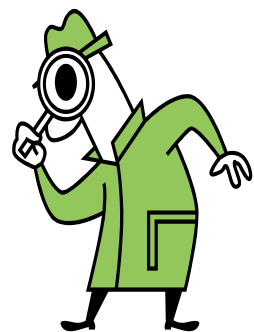
Then, you will need to ask yourself:

- What is the goal of my behaviour?
- Are there any advantages to doing this behaviour the way I currently am?
- Are there any disadvantages to doing this behaviour the way I currently am? Remember to think about how checking can be *unreliable* and *unfair* from page 4 of this Module.
- Does this behaviour really achieve my goal?

Then you will need to assess:

- At this point, how much sense does it make to keep going with this behaviour?
- How much sense does it make to do it as frequently or for as long as I do?
- Do the advantages of this behaviour outweigh the disadvantages?

Completing these questions should give you some ideas about how helpful your current behaviour is and whether it is therefore something you want to keep doing or change. But remember, changing your behaviour doesn’t necessarily mean getting rid of it! Sometimes it might make sense simply to reduce how often or how long you do it.



The next question is therefore an important one.

- Do I need to decrease, postpone or eliminate this behaviour? Why?

Decrease or postpone your behaviour

To postpone your behaviour means to put it off until a clearly defined but later time. To decrease or postpone your behaviour makes sense when your behaviour is something that most other people do, but you are doing it *excessively*, or *too frequently*. For example, you could reduce 20 minutes of mirror checking per day to only using the mirror for a set period of time and for a particular function, such as shaving or putting on make-up. Another example might be only asking my partner once a week how I generally look before going out somewhere special, compared to asking my partner everyday about my wrinkles.

Eliminate your behaviour

Eliminating your behaviour makes sense when your behaviour does not achieve any helpful outcomes, or is inconsistent with the behaviour of most other people. For example, taking a photograph or video footage of yourself so that you can check your appearance from different angles, or using a magnifying mirror to check your appearance.

If you are not sure whether your behaviour is one that other people engage in, you could ask a trusted friend whether they do the behaviour, and if so how much. You could also ask yourself whether you would feel worried or embarrassed if someone saw you engaged in your behaviour. This could give you some clues as to what you and others might think about how helpful or common the behaviour is. Also, you could simply start by decreasing your behaviour and then later make a decision about eliminating it.

Step 2 - Generate and evaluate a new behavioural goal

Based on your decision to decrease, postpone or eliminate your behaviour, you will need to:

- generate a new behavioural goal, and
- identify what specifically you will do to work towards this goal

In some circumstances, the new goal and specific behaviours attached can be easily identified and attempted straight off. For example, imagine that you had been using callipers to ascertain how loose the skin on your stomach is. Your new behavioural goal might be to “eliminate using the callipers”, as this behaviour is currently maintaining your negative body image. The specific behaviour attached to this goal might then be “I will throw away my callipers and ride out the initial worry I have about not being able to measure”.

However, sometimes reducing or eliminating particular behaviours may be something that you need to do more gradually. For example, if you had been spending several hours closely checking the wrinkles around your eyes in the mirror each day, and your goal was to “only use my mirror for ten minutes in the morning for shaving”, there is a chance that this would be too difficult to do straight away. Instead you could break this goal down into smaller steps, gradually working towards the recommended level of checking.

To make gradual reductions in a particular behaviour we recommend that you use a *Stepladder* to help you: 1) identify your overall goal, and 2) identify the gradual steps needed to work towards your overall goal. Each step on the stepladder can be given a “Distress” rating between 0 and 100, where 0 = this step is not distressing at all, and 100 = this step is highly distressing. Your stepladder might have fewer or more “in between” steps than the example given below, but the idea is to gradually build up to your overall goal in an achievable manner.



For example:

GOAL: <i>only use my mirror for ten minutes in the morning for shaving</i>	DISTRESS (0-100) 95
--	------------------------

STEP		DISTRESS
1	<i>Place a stopwatch next to the mirror. Allow 60 minutes total mirror time each day, checking as usual</i>	30
2	<i>Allow 50 minutes total mirror time each day, maintain 30cms between my face and the mirror</i>	45
3	<i>Allow 40 minutes total mirror time each day, maintain 40cms between my face and the mirror</i>	50
4	<i>Allow 40 minutes total mirror time each day, twenty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes at night, maintain 40cms between my face and the mirror</i>	55
5	<i>Allow 30 minutes of mirror time in the morning only, maintain 40cms between my face and the mirror</i>	60
6	<i>Allow 20 minutes of mirror time in the morning only, maintain 40cms between my face and the mirror, spend half of time engaged in shaving and half in checking</i>	70

Building Body Acceptance

7	<i>Allow 15 minutes of mirror time in the morning only, maintain 40cms between my face and the mirror, spend 10 minutes engaged in shaving and five in checking</i>	80
8	<i>Only use my mirror for ten minutes in the morning for shaving</i>	95

Building Body Acceptance

If you need to break your overall goal down in to smaller steps, here is a blank Stepladder for you to use:

GOAL:	DISTRESS (0-100)
-------	------------------

STEP	DISTRESS
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	
8	

Once you have identified your new behavioural goal and what you will specifically do to work towards this goal, you will need to ask yourself:

- What is the goal of this new behaviour?
- Are there any advantages to doing this behaviour as I have planned?
- Are there any disadvantages to doing this new behaviour as I have planned?
- At this point, how much sense does it make to try out this new behaviour?

By now, you should have a fairly good idea about whether you have developed a helpful new behaviour and hopefully the scales are tipped towards you wanting to have a go at this new behaviour. However, that does not necessarily mean that it will be easy to do it!

We have to expect that you will feel some distress when doing things differently. After all, if these changes were easy – you would probably be doing them already! You will therefore need to consider:

- How will I manage any distress? What will I say to myself? What will I do?

While there are numerous things you could consider here, these are some ideas that other people have reported as being helpful:

- Use your **attention training skills and the postponement exercise from Module 3** to bring your attention back to the present, rather than allowing your mind to continue judging your appearance
- Remind yourself “this feeling will pass, it doesn’t go on forever”
- Remember that if you check or seek reassurance, it may relieve some worry or uncertainty in the short term, but in the long term it can keep it going (i.e., *the Reassurance Cycle*)
- View this as good practice in learning to tolerate and accept some uncertainty about how you look
- Use relaxation exercises to manage tension you may feel
- Plan something fun or enjoyable as a reward for taking a difficult step.



Step 3 – Test it out!!!

If you have worked through steps 1 and 2, it is likely that you will be ready to engage in your new behaviour. Now it is time to DO IT!! Then...

If you were able to do what you had planned, ask yourself:

What did you find out about yourself? What did you find out about your original and new behaviours?

If you were not able to do what you had planned, do not be concerned. It may be that you set too hard a task to achieve immediately, or that your motivation decreased a little (or a lot!) once you were confronted with the anxiety and distress that often goes with breaking the *Reassurance Cycle*.

Therefore, if you had trouble completing any step, we recommend that you:

- 1) Go back to Steps 1 and 2 and re-evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of your original and new behaviours? On balance, does it make sense to go ahead with the new behaviour? Try to focus on the disadvantages of the old behaviour and advantages of the new behaviour.

OR

- 2) Break your new behavioural goal from Step 2 down in to more manageable steps using the *Stepladder*.



Also, don't forget that it is normal to feel some distress while trying out these new behaviours and that changing your behaviour is a bit like riding a bike – it takes encouragement and often lots of repetition before it becomes less worrisome and starts to feel more natural. On the next page is an example of how to complete the *Reducing Checking & Reassurance Seeking Worksheet* for someone who had been excessively mirror checking. Then, there is a blank worksheet for you to try out on your own checking or reassurance seeking behaviour.

Reducing Checking & Reassurance Seeking – Example

Step 1: Evaluate how helpful your current behaviour is

Behaviour: <i>Checking my pores for 30 minutes every morning using a magnifying mirror</i>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Advantages of this behaviour</p> <p>What is the goal of my behaviour? Are there any advantages to doing this behaviour the way I currently am?</p> <p><i>I want to work out whether my pores are blocked or getting bigger</i></p> <p><i>If I catch it early I can do something about it before other people notice</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Disadvantages of this behaviour</p> <p>Are there any disadvantages to doing this behaviour the way I currently am? Does this behaviour really achieve my goal?</p> <p><i>Checking every day has made it hard to work out if my pores are actually getting bigger</i></p> <p><i>Using a magnifying mirror alerts me to normally unnoticed imperfections - which isn't nice</i></p> <p><i>I touch my skin to check the pores on my nose from different angles, which could promote clogged pores</i></p>
<p>At this point, how much sense does it make to keep going with this behaviour? How much sense does it make to do it as frequently or for as long as I do? Do the advantages of this behaviour outweigh the disadvantages?</p> <p><i>Daily checking makes it hard to tell if anything has really changed and I don't actually "catch" anything early because I always think something is wrong. Using the magnifying mirror also makes me feel terrible.</i></p>	
<p>Do I need to decrease, postpone or eliminate this behaviour? Why?</p> <p><i>I need to eliminate using the magnifying mirror as I don't think other people do this, it is not helping me notice any changes, and is making me feel bad.</i></p>	

Step 2: Generate and evaluate a new behavioural goal

New behavioural goal: <i>Only using a regular mirror to put on make-up in the morning</i>	
<p>What specifically will I do? Will I do it straight away or gradually?</p> <p><i>I will use a regular mirror to put on my make-up in the morning and not look up close. I will give myself 10 minutes and set an alarm to remind me to stop. I think I can start this straight away, so will give it a try.</i></p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Advantages of this new behaviour</p> <p>What is the goal of this new behaviour? Are there any advantages to doing this behaviour as I have planned?</p> <p><i>By standing back from the mirror and not using a magnifier I will be seeing more of what other people see when they look at me</i></p> <p><i>I won't make myself feel so bad about these imperfections that needed a magnifying mirror to be seen</i></p> <p><i>I won't be late for work as often and will have more time in the morning</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Disadvantages of this new behaviour</p> <p>Are there any disadvantages to doing this new behaviour as I have planned?</p> <p><i>I will still worry about whether my pores are too large and will want to check</i></p> <p><i>Telling myself not to check will probably leave me feeling uncomfortable for a while afterwards</i></p>
<p>At this point, how much sense does it make to try out this new behaviour?</p> <p><i>I can see there are plenty of reasons to try it out and my boss will be pleased if I am on time for work</i></p>	
<p>How will I manage any distress I experience? What will I say to myself? What will I do?</p> <p><i>I will remind myself that I am still going to look at myself in the mirror while applying my make-up. If there is something that would be obvious to others, I will probably see it then.</i></p> <p><i>I will also use my meditation and postponement exercises to deal with any judgmental thoughts or worries that arise.</i></p>	

Step 3: Test it out!!!

Was I able to do what I had planned?
"Yes"
<p style="text-align: center;">What did I find out about myself? What did I find out about my original and new behaviours?</p> <p><i>In the first week I leant in to the mirror a couple of times without realising what I was doing. I guess it was quite a habit. It was hard at first, but I know now I can ride out the anxiety of not checking.</i></p>

“No”

I may need to:

1. Go back to Steps 1 and 2 to re-evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of my original and new behaviours.
- OR
2. Break my new goal from Step 2 down in to more manageable steps using the *Stepladder*

Reducing Checking & Reassurance Seeking Worksheet

Step 1: Evaluate how helpful your current behaviour is

Behaviour:	
<p style="text-align: center;">Advantages of this behaviour</p> <p>What is the goal of my behaviour? Are there any advantages to doing this behaviour the way I currently am?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Disadvantages of this behaviour</p> <p>Are there any disadvantages to doing this behaviour the way I currently am? Does this behaviour really achieve my goal?</p>
<p>At this point, how much sense does it make to keep going with this behaviour? How much sense does it make to do it as frequently or for as long as I do? Do the advantages of this behaviour outweigh the disadvantages?</p>	
<p>Do I need to decrease, postpone or eliminate this behaviour? Why?</p>	

Step 2: Generate and evaluate a new behavioural goal

New behavioural goal:	
What specifically will I do? Will I do it straight away or gradually?	
<p style="text-align: center;">Advantages of this new behaviour</p> <p>What is the goal of this new behaviour? Are there any advantages to doing this behaviour as I have planned?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Disadvantages of this new behaviour</p> <p>Are there any disadvantages to doing this new behaviour as I have planned?</p>
<p>At this point, how much sense does it make to try out this new behaviour?</p>	
<p>How will I manage any distress I experience? What will I say to myself? What will I do?</p>	

Step 3: Test it out!!!

Was I able to do what I had planned?
“Yes”
What did I find out about myself? What did I find out about my original and new behaviours?
“No”
<p>I may need to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Go back to Steps 1 and 2 to re-evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of my original and new behaviours. <li style="text-align: center;">OR 2. Break my new goal from Step 2 down in to more manageable steps using the <i>Stepladder</i>

The Last Word on Mirrors...

Given mirror checking is very common in BDD, and given we are not looking to move you from one extreme to another (i.e., excessive mirror use to banning all mirrors), we thought a few guidelines about how to use mirrors may be helpful.

When setting behavioural goals regarding your mirror use, keep the following guidelines in mind:

- Let any mirror use be for a specific and appropriate purpose (e.g., make-up application, shaving, assessing if your overall outfit matches, seeing if you have food in your teeth, etc). No lengthy periods in front of the mirror, instead use the mirror for the purpose intended and then walk away.
- Use mirrors at an appropriate distance, rather than up close. Try to be as far away as is reasonable given the purpose you are using it for.
- Try to view your whole face or whole body in a non-judgemental way, as if you were looking at someone else. Try not to zoom in on specific areas of concern with a critical eye.
- Don't use magnifying mirrors.
- Don't check your appearance in other reflective surfaces that can be misleading (e.g., windows, the toaster, etc).

Module Summary

- Most of us will engage in checking and reassurance seeking behaviours with regards to our appearance. We do this to reduce any questions or worries we have about how we look, to increase our sense of control and certainty about our appearance, and to reassure ourselves that we look okay or that the problem is real.
- In the short term, checking and reassurance seeking may provide a sense of relief. However, in the long term, those same doubts and concerns can continue to pop back into your mind, and the need to check and seek reassurance will therefore continue in a vicious Reassurance Cycle.
- Checking and reassurance seeking behaviours fall on a continuum, where too much or too little can be unhelpful to you.
- Checking behaviours may contribute to the development of an unreliable body image, or maintain an unfair or even unachievable standard for you.
- One way to overcome excessive levels of checking and reassurance seeking is to evaluate and test out new behaviours that involve reducing, postponing or eliminating the current checking and reassurance seeking.
- It is normal to feel some distress while trying out new behaviours and decreasing your checking and reassurance seeking. If you are finding things tough, use a Stepladder to break down your new behaviour goal in to smaller and more manageable steps.



Coming up next ...

In the next module, you will learn to challenge negative predictions, and to reduce any avoidance or safety behaviours you are engaging in.

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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