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Building Body Acceptance

Module 6

Adjusting Appearance Assumptions

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Introduction

You have now learned strategies to decrease the amount of time spent preoccupied with your appearance, to directly challenge negative predictions, and to decrease unhelpful checking and avoidance behaviours. We hope that you are finding these strategies helpful in improving how you think and feel about your appearance, and how you behave in relation to your appearance on a day-to-day basis. Now that you have some experience in working with strategies to manage your BDD, it is also important to tackle some of the more difficult underlying reasons that you developed this problem in the first place. In this module, we will discuss adjusting the underlying appearance assumptions that gave rise to your BDD.

Helpful vs Unhelpful Assumptions

As we mentioned in Module 2, we all have assumptions, or guidelines, by which we live our lives. Although we aren't specifically taught these, we learn them through our early experiences and from observing other people who influence us in our earlier years. You may not even be aware that you developed these assumptions, but they consistently influence your thoughts and behaviour anyway.

As we've mentioned earlier, some assumptions are helpful and some are not. We all need guidelines for living to help us make sense of the world and to cope with our everyday lives. So having assumptions, in itself, is not a bad thing.

Helpful assumptions are realistic and somewhat flexible. An example of a healthy assumption is, "speeding in a car is dangerous". This is a helpful assumption because there is evidence to suggest that speeding increases the chances of a serious car accident. So holding this assumption can reduce the likelihood of speeding and help ensure our survival!

Helpful assumptions are also flexible and adaptable, and this helps us to adapt our behaviour to different situations. For example, having the assumption that "it is good to try to eat healthy food" is helpful because there is evidence to support the fact that you will have fewer health problems if you eat healthy foods. But there is also flexibility in this assumption so that it takes into account occasions when it may be preferable to eat foods that are less healthy without feeling guilty (e.g., birthdays or Christmas).

Unhelpful assumptions are those that are inflexible and unreasonable. For example, holding the belief "If I don't look perfect, then others will reject me" is unreasonable in the sense that perfection is an unattainable standard, and it is unlikely that others will reject you solely on not looking "perfect". Therefore, this type of unhelpful assumption will only keep you dissatisfied with your appearance and worried about how others will respond to you in social situations.



Identifying My Unhelpful Appearance Assumptions

Let's now take some time to identify what unhelpful assumptions you might have developed regarding your appearance. You might already have an idea of these from the work you have completed in Module 2. If you are still a bit unsure, there are several ways that you can start to identify these assumptions.

Take a moment to record some responses to the following questions:

- Did I experience any negative events in the past that were related to my appearance? What might I have learned from this?
- What standards do I expect myself to meet regarding my appearance?

- Is there something I tell myself I must or should do? Or must never do? If so, why? See if you can turn the “must” in to an “if.. then statement” (e.g., “I must cover my arms... because... if others see the real me, then they will be repulsed”)
- What negative predictions do I repeatedly make about my appearance? (Note: you may want to review your thought diaries from Module 5 for any repeated themes)

Appearance assumptions can be in the form of statements such as:

	Example
“If..., then...”	“If people see the real me, then they will be repulsed” “If I relax my standards, then I will let myself go” “If I can see the problem, then everyone else must be noticing it too” “If people notice how awful I look, then they will be disgusted” “If I ignore this one blemish, then I’ll drop my standards completely” “If I look attractive, then people will value me”
“If I don’t..., then...”	“If I don’t look perfect, then others will reject me” “If I don’t change my appearance, then I will never be happy” “If I don’t look beautiful, then I look awful” “If I don’t cover up, then people will see the real me and be horrified”

Now that you have read this section on identifying your appearance assumptions, have you been able to identify any that are operating in your life? What are some of those appearance assumptions? Take a few moments to write them down.

Adjusting Appearance Assumptions

By now, you might have been able to identify those appearance assumptions that have been guiding your everyday thoughts, feelings and behaviours concerning your appearance. Just as in the previous modules, you can work at challenging your appearance assumptions by asking yourself specific questions, and using one of our worksheets to guide you through this step-by-step. If you have worked through the previous modules, you will probably find that changing these assumptions will be a little easier. After all, you will have already tackled those appearance-related thoughts, feelings and behaviours that had been fuelling your appearance assumptions. By doing this you may have collected some evidence that your appearance assumptions don't hold up in the way you previously thought.

The goal of completing the *Adjusting My Appearance Assumptions Worksheet* is not to get rid of your appearance assumptions, but rather to adjust them into more realistic and flexible guidelines. Before completing the worksheet, read through the following steps:

1. Identify the appearance assumption you would like to adjust

You may have a number of appearance assumptions that you would like to work on. There is no right or wrong place to start with this. Some people like to tackle the one that is impacting on them the most. Others like to start on the assumption they think will be easiest to challenge, so that they can build up some confidence. Either of these strategies is fine.

2. Ask yourself “Where might this assumption have come from? Why is it still here?”

The purpose of the first question is to think about why you developed this assumption. As mentioned before, these assumptions have often developed out of our past experiences, and are a way of trying to make sense of the world. It is therefore quite possible that the assumptions made sense at the time you developed them. The purpose of the second question is to examine why you are still holding on to this assumption. Ask yourself, “What advantages are there to living by this assumption? What benefits do I obtain? What do these assumptions protect me from now?”

3. Ask yourself “What impact does this assumption have on my life?”

Take a moment to record how holding this assumption has affected your thinking, feelings, and behaviours. How has it impacted on your relationships with others? How has it impacted on your ability to do things that you value, and that give you a sense of enjoyment or satisfaction?



4. Ask yourself “In what ways is this assumption unreasonable, unrealistic or unhelpful?”

- What do the results from your negative prediction experiments tell you in this regard (see Module 5)? Often your negative predictions are linked to your appearance assumptions, so if you found that your negative predictions were inaccurate, what does this tell you about the accuracy of your appearance assumption?
- Are the guidelines you are trying to live by actually achievable? (E.g., if you believe “If I don't look perfect, I look awful” – can you truly look perfect? Even if you can achieve this occasionally, how realistic is it to always look perfect?)
- Is it possible that others are holding a different set of assumptions to yourself? (E.g., if you believe “If people see the real me, then they will be repulsed” – do others make the same assumptions about what is considered repulsive? If not, what other assumptions or guidelines might they be operating under? Can you think of evidence to suggest other people don't hold your assumption? If others don't hold the same assumption as you, what does that tell you?)
- Do the disadvantages of this assumption outweigh the advantages? If there are more advantages than disadvantages, then maybe you don't need to challenge this assumption. If however you decide that the assumption is unhelpful, then let's move on to the next step.

5. Now, think carefully about what might be a more balanced and flexible assumption.

If you heard a small child saying out loud your assumption, what would you say to them? Would you agree, or would you try to help them out? Chances are, you would try to soften the language they were using, and encourage them to think about their assumption in a different and less distressing way.

Ask yourself, how can I change my “If... then...” assumption to give it a less distressing conclusion? For example, instead of the unhelpful assumption “If I can see the problem, then everyone else must be noticing it too”, consider the alternative “If I can see the problem, it is probably because I am focussing on it. Some people might notice, but not everyone will see it”.

Balanced assumptions might end up being lengthier in their wording than your old appearance assumptions. This is because they are more sophisticated and less black-and-white – you are making them realistic, flexible and adaptable. If you find it difficult to think of an alternative assumption that is more balanced, don't worry. Continue with the strategies you have learned in the previous Modules to address your day-to-day appearance-related thoughts, feelings and behaviours. By doing this, more balanced assumptions may become apparent to you over time.

6. Finally, ask yourself “What can I do to put this assumption into practice on a daily basis?”

If you believed your new assumption wholeheartedly, what would you now be doing on a daily basis? Why do you think it might be important to do this? Remember that your old assumption may have been in operation for some time, and has guided how you behave in relation to your appearance. So it is important that you not only have a new assumption, but new behaviours to accompany this assumption so that it can be “road tested” and become part of your new way of operating. Often such new behaviours may be similar to some of the strategies, new behaviours and experiments you have already been doing from Modules 3, 4 and 5.

On the next page is an example of how an *Adjusting Appearance Assumptions Worksheet* can be completed. On the page after that, there is a blank worksheet. After you have a chance to look at the example, try working through a worksheet yourself to adjust one of your old unhelpful appearance assumptions.



Adjusting My Appearance Assumptions

(Example)

<p>Assumption I would like to adjust</p> <p><i>If I don't look perfect, I look awful</i></p>
<p>Where might this assumption have come from? Why is it still here?</p> <p><i>I was teased about my looks during high school. When I started wearing lots of make-up and spending more time on my appearance the teasing stopped. I guess that even now I am still worried that if I don't look perfect, I will look awful and feel like I did during high school</i></p>
<p>What impact does this assumption have on my life?</p> <p><i>I'm always thinking and worrying about my appearance I spend hours applying make-up and doing my hair before leaving the house If I don't feel like I've got it perfect, I simply don't go out, so I miss out on a lot. I haven't had any boyfriends because I worry about what they will think of me</i></p>
<p>In what ways is this assumption unreasonable, unrealistic or unhelpful?</p> <p><i>When I say to myself that I have to look "perfect" - I am setting a pretty unachievable standard. Even if I could look perfect sometimes, I can't maintain it all the time. I don't feel that others look awful if they don't look "perfect" Thinking this way is making me miserable, so I don't see how it can be helpful</i></p>
<p>What is an alternative assumption that is more balanced and flexible?</p> <p><i>If I don't look perfect, then this isn't the end of the world. I probably still look OK. Most people have some days that they look better than others.</i></p>
<p>What can I do to put this assumption into practice on a daily basis?</p> <p><i>I can leave the house even if I don't feel I look perfect I can remind myself that I probably look OK At times I can purposely make myself look imperfect before leaving the house (e.g., no make- up at all) to really road test my new assumption!!! I will use my attention strategies and thought diaries to reduce any negative thoughts that continue to pop into my head about my appearance Accept social invitations and actively plan social events Take up a social team sport I have always wanted to play Be open to dating opportunities</i></p>

Adjusting My Appearance Assumptions

<p>Assumption I would like to adjust</p>
<p>Where might this assumption have come from? Why is it still here?</p>
<p>What impact does this assumption have on my life?</p>
<p>In what ways is this assumption unreasonable, unrealistic or unhelpful?</p>
<p>What is an alternative assumption that is more balanced and flexible?</p>
<p>What can I do to put this assumption into practice on a daily basis?</p>

Following Through

Now that you have worked through the worksheet, be sure to keep a copy of this new assumption somewhere easily accessible. After all, those old appearance assumptions are likely to pop up from time to time, as they can take a while to wear out. Until your new assumption becomes 'worn in', you may need to keep explicitly reminding yourself of it.

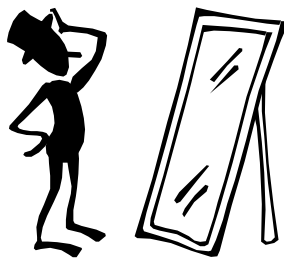
Importantly, keep putting your new assumption into practice by carrying out those daily actions you have planned. Although it might seem difficult to you now, it will get easier as you keep doing them, and eventually it will become the new way of living your life.

Remember that the goal is not to rid yourself of helpful appearance assumptions (e.g., "if I brush my teeth daily, they will look and feel good"), but rather to adjust those unrealistic, unhelpful and outdated assumptions about your appearance.



Module Summary

- We all have assumptions or guidelines by which we live our lives. Although we may not be aware of them, they consistently influence our thoughts and behaviours.
- Helpful assumptions are those that are realistic and somewhat flexible. They are designed to help us function and to keep us safe.
- Unhelpful assumptions are those that are inflexible and unreasonable.
- Although we may develop appearance-related assumptions to try to protect ourselves or to make sense of the world, if they are inflexible or unreasonable they can keep our BDD going.
- To adjust any appearance assumptions you have identified, you can:
 - Consider where the assumptions came from and why they might still be here
 - Identify the current impacts of the assumption
 - Consider the ways that the assumption might be unreasonable, unrealistic or unhelpful
 - Develop a new balanced and flexible assumption
 - Think of new ways of behaving that would put the new assumption into practice.



Coming up next ...

In the next module, you will develop a self-management plan for you to keep going with everything that you have learnt throughout these modules.

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). 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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“BUILDING BODY ACCEPTANCE”

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