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Overcoming Disordered Eating

Information Pack B

In Charge...Mindsets Matter

Module 4

Changing Mindsets

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This is the fourth 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



Introduction

In this module we continue in our efforts to challenge thought patterns through ‘metacognitive awareness’, or taking a ‘helicopter view’. In the previous module we described mindsets and explored how mindsets develop. In this module we will discuss how to begin to change them.

In the previous module we helped you become more aware of your unhelpful attitudes and thoughts about eating, body shape and weight, and their control. Now it is time to begin to address them. To overcome disordered eating, it is also important to tackle the eating disorder mindset. This can be done in two ways: 1) challenging the mindset, and 2) ejecting the mindset (just like ejecting the DVD). Let’s consider challenging the mindset first.

Challenging the Eating Disorder Mindset

Acceptance and Change

One way to influence the eating disorder mindset is utilising the twin notions of acceptance and change. You may be asking yourself: “How could I possibly accept my weight when I’m so unhappy with it the way it is?” Let’s look at an example.

Tom is 170 cm tall. He would love to be 190 cm, like his friend Mark. In his teens, Tom kept hoping he would grow, and he was miserable. Finally he realised that both his father and his uncle were short, and that it was unlikely he would end up tall, and that being miserable didn’t help. So he learned to accept that he would always be short, and learned what clothes looked best on short men.

Perhaps you’re saying: “Well, weight isn’t like height, because you CAN change your weight!” Let’s look at another example:

Cathy has fine, straight hair. She has always wanted to have bushy, curly hair like her favourite singer. Over the years she has spent a fortune on curling irons, perms and hair-thickening products. For a while (sometimes minutes, sometimes weeks) her hair can look bouncy and curly and she feels great, but then it returns to its normal state, so she has to make all the efforts again in order to keep up the appearance of having curly hair (which even her boyfriend believed was natural). So after a few years, she learned to accept that she would only be able to “fake” having curly hair for a rather short period, and at great cost. She decided to have her hair cut in a way that enhances her fine hair, and found that she could accept it and that there were certain benefits, such as being able to wear big earrings.

You can only change your hair and your weight for a short time. People on diets do lose weight – but in the short term. It is easy to believe that you can change your body into the shape/weight you desire, but this is a fallacy. Is your weight/shape really that changeable? If you are overweight or underweight, it is likely that learning to eat healthily will put you back into the healthy weight range, but if you are already in the average/healthy range and eating healthily, it is unlikely that any major weight loss will be sustainable.

Weight loss is temporary, like holding your breath. It takes a superhuman effort to lose weight, and 90-95% of people eventually put the weight back on. More than 60% of people with Anorexia Nervosa end up binge eating! Is it really worth the effort, when you know it can’t last?



It has been suggested that the human body has a weight range that it is genetically predisposed to maintain. This is different for everyone – even people of the same height. The body uses regulatory mechanisms to keep its weight within a natural weight range or “set point”.



Weight is a bit like height and hair, in that all are largely determined by genetics. You know you can't change your height, so you accept it. Can you learn to accept your weight at a higher level than you'd previously aimed for? We realise that there are many women in Westernised societies who would like to lose weight – and many who would like to be taller – and many who are dieting, but in the end they accept their weight, albeit grudgingly. Can you see yourself getting to the point of accepting a weight range that is higher than you used to aim for? Or is your self-esteem totally dependent on your weight being low? You may want to read over Module 1 of this Information Pack (Over-evaluation of Weight and Shape). We will also be addressing low self-esteem in the next two modules.

What kind of body type does your mother have? Your father? Other family members? Thinking about your highest and lowest weights ever (since age 16), where does your weight fall now? What weight were you when you weren't on a diet? What would it take for you to accept that weight, or your current weight?

Using Thought Diaries

One way to address an eating disorder mindset is to challenge it 'head on.' This is also called 'disputation.' To challenge or dispute your eating disorder mindset means that you begin to pull it apart, untangle all the knots, examine the various unhelpful attitudes and negative thoughts you might have and question them. Our attitudes, thoughts, and expectations are often *opinions* we have picked up or learned, rather than facts. Therefore, they can be questioned, and should not be something we just blindly accept if they are giving us problems.

But it may be hard to let go of these opinions, as they may have become firmly held beliefs. When you hold a belief very firmly, you begin to accept it as true. As we mentioned in the previous module, it is extremely important to realise that *a belief is not the same as a fact*.



To challenge or dispute your unhelpful attitudes and thoughts means that you evaluate how accurate they are, examine what evidence you base your thoughts on, and look at any positive aspects you may be ignoring. In this way, you are like a detective or lawyer, trying to get to the facts of how realistic your thoughts and expectations are, and putting things in perspective.

Challenging your thoughts isn't something you should do in your head, as this can get messy and confusing. The best way is to write it down. To help you through the process, we suggest using a Thought Diary. This helps you work through the challenging process step by step, on paper, making everything clearer and more helpful for you.

The following section provides some guidelines on how to complete a Thought Diary. On Page 5 you will see an example of a Thought Diary and on Page 6 is a blank Thought Diary for you to practise on. The Thought Diary will guide you through how to get your unhelpful attitudes and thoughts out on paper.

The Thought Diary will first ask you to **Identify Your Thoughts**. To help you do that, first ask yourself:

- What is the situation I am in?

Then:

- What attitude is in my mind? or
- What am I expecting will happen? or
- How am I criticising myself? How am I putting myself down? or
- What conclusions am I making?





Don't try to challenge all your unhelpful attitudes, biased expectations, negative self-evaluations, and unhelpful conclusions at once. Take them on *one by one*. Write a few down and then choose only one or two (if they are closely connected) to challenge. Here's a hint to help you choose one or two attitudes or thoughts to challenge – choose the ones that are most closely connected to your strongest emotion.

After you have written these down, you'll then need to ask yourself:

- How strongly do I believe this attitude? Rate the strength of your belief between 0 and 100%
- What emotion(s) am I feeling?
- How intense are these emotions? Rate the intensity of your emotion(s) between 0 and 100%

Once you have completed the first section, you are ready to begin to **Challenge Your Thoughts**.

Here are the questions asked in your Thought Diary to challenge these types of unhelpful attitudes and thoughts:

- What is the evidence *for* my attitude or thought?
- What is the evidence *against* my attitude or thought?
- If I am expecting something to happen, how likely is it that it will *actually* happen (Rate 0-100%)?
- What are the advantages of having this attitude or thought?
- What are the disadvantages of having this attitude or thought?
- What neutral and positive things in me or the situation might I not be seeing?
- If I were talking to a friend who had this attitude or thought, what would I say to them?
- How else could I view the situation?



The ultimate aim of doing this Thought Diary is for you to **Develop Balanced and Helpful Thoughts**.

Once you have explored the answers to the above 'challenging' questions in your Thought Diary, ask yourself:

- What would be a more balanced and helpful attitude or thought?

The final step is then to:

- Re-rate how much I now believe the original attitude or thought, and
- Re-rate the intensity of the emotions that I was originally feeling.

If you work through the entire Thought Diary for challenging your unhelpful attitudes and thoughts, it is likely that you will experience a decrease in the strength of your belief in them and a decrease in the intensity of your emotions. Using thought diaries to challenge your eating disorder mindset and develop balanced and helpful attitudes and thoughts will go a long way in helping you overcome eating disorders.

Look through the example on the next page and then work through a blank Thought Diary on Page 6 to challenge an unhelpful attitude or thought. You can use the attitudes and thoughts you might have written down on page 7 of the previous module or those you might have noticed from your food logs. You will need to practice challenging your thoughts many times before the process becomes easier and more automatic.





My Thought Diary

(example)

Identify Your Thoughts

What situation am I in?	What emotion(s) am I feeling? (Rate the intensity 0-100%)
<i>I see some of my friends sitting together at the cafeteria talking & laughing</i>	<i>Disappointed (85%), nervous (80%), anxious (90%)</i>
What attitude is in my mind? What am I expecting will happen? How am I criticising myself? How am I putting myself down? What conclusions am I making?	How much do I believe this attitude or thought?
<i>Only thin people will be accepted & liked. If I walk up to join them, they will say there is no room for me at the table.</i>	90%

Challenge Your Thoughts

What is the evidence <u>for</u> my attitude or thought?	What is the evidence <u>against</u> my attitude or thought?
<i>All those in that group are thin No real evidence that they will turn me away</i>	<i>One of my friends in that group has a close friend who is quite large - he seems to be accepted in the group. I have hung out with those friends before & they have never turned me away before.</i>
If I am expecting something to happen, how likely is it that it will actually happen (0-100%)?	
40%	
What are the advantages of having this attitude or thought?	What are the disadvantages of having this attitude or thought?
<i>Not sure</i>	<i>I push myself too hard to be thin & get upset with myself when I can't keep to my dietary rules - I'm so sick & tired of dieting & worrying about being thin! I'm scared to be myself & I'm not sure if I have real friends or not.</i>
What neutral and positive things in me or the situation might I not be seeing?	
<i>I'm a nice person & a good friend. I'm a caring person. I have never heard my friends have a go at someone because they are fat.</i>	
If I were talking to a friend who had this attitude or thought, what would I say to them?	
<i>I would tell them not to be too worried about being thin & to not be afraid of who they are (but it's not very easy to do). I would tell them that being thin is probably only a small part in being accepted & that the larger part is about showing your personality.</i>	
How else could I view the situation?	
<i>This attitude is probably something I learned because I was a fat kid in primary school & was laughed at. However, some of my current friends are really nice & have even said to me that I worry too much about being thin. They have said that they enjoy being with me.</i>	

Develop Balanced & Helpful Thoughts

What is a more balanced & helpful attitude or thought?	
<i>My friends probably accept me because I'm a caring person & a good friend</i>	
How much do I believe my original attitude or thought now (0-100%)?	How intense are my original emotions now (0-100%)?
40%	<i>Disappointed (25%), nervous (30%), anxious (35%)</i>



My Thought Diary

Identify Your Thoughts

What situation am I in?	What emotion(s) am I feeling? (Rate the intensity 0-100%)
What attitude is in my mind? What am I expecting will happen? How am I criticising myself? How am I putting myself down? What conclusions am I making?	How much do I believe this attitude or thought?

Challenge Your Thoughts

What is the evidence <u>for</u> my attitude or thought?	What is the evidence <u>against</u> my attitude or thought?
If I am expecting something to happen, how likely is it that it will <i>actually</i> happen (0-100%)?	
What are the advantages of having this attitude or thought?	What are the disadvantages of having this attitude or thought?
What neutral and positive things in me or the situation might I not be seeing?	
If I were talking to a friend who had this attitude or thought, what would I say to them?	
How else could I view the situation?	

Develop Balanced & Helpful Thoughts

What is a more balanced & helpful attitude or thought?	
How much do I believe my original attitude or thought now (0-100%)?	How intense are my original emotions now (0-100%)?



Using Behavioural Experiments

By challenging your unhelpful thoughts as you did in the last section (using a Thought Diary), you will be loosening the hold the eating disorder mindset has on you. You will also be better able to approach situations with an open mind and with more balanced and helpful attitudes. The next step of challenging the eating disorder mindset is to find out how accurate your unhelpful thoughts really are, like a scientist doing an experiment to test out your expectations. Conducting behavioural experiments is also important when you are unsure about, or haven't got much evidence, for and against your unhelpful attitudes.

Here are some steps for you to work through to test out your attitudes and thoughts.

Step 1: Identify your unhelpful thoughts to be tested

As with the Thought Diary, identify what attitude or thought you would like to test out and record how strongly you believe this attitude or thought (between 0 and 100%).

Step 2: Identify predictions

Next you need to identify how you will know if your attitude or thought is true. Ask yourself questions such as, "What will I see if my thought is true?" "What will happen if my attitude or thought is true?"

Step 3: Plan your experiment

This involves planning what you will do to test the accuracy of your predictions. This is setting up the experiment and being specific about what it is you will actually do and how you will gather evidence. You can make observations, gather evidence by surveying people (i.e., questioning people), read up on things to obtain information, stay in a situation or plan to behave in a certain way and see how it pans out.

Step 4: Record what happened

Once you have planned your experiment, follow through with what you set out to do in Step 3. Carry out the experiment and record what actually happened. Remember to write down all the details.

Step 5: Reflect on the results

The last step is to reflect on what actually happened and how this compares to what you were predicting in Step 2. Ask yourself: What were the results of the experiment? What did you observe? What evidence and information did you obtain? Were your predictions supported? What did you learn from this?

Step 6: Develop a balanced thought

If the results of your experiment do not support your predictions, which is often the case, that is great! Now think about and develop a balanced attitude or thought that more accurately reflects the evidence you obtained for your experiment. Then, re-rate how much you now believe your original thought.

However, should your predictions 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 you learn from the experience to adjust your 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 often blindly believe our thoughts and expectations even when they are unhelpful to us. We rarely step back to question our predictions or test them out. This is a habit that is important to break.

First read through the example on the next page and then use the worksheet on the Page 9 to help you plan an experiment to test out any unhelpful expectation/thought that is part of an eating disorder mindset.



My Behavioural Experiment

(example)

Thought to be Tested

Write down an unhelpful attitude or thought to be tested. How strongly do you believe in this attitude or thought (0 to 100%)?

Only thin people will be accepted and liked (90%)

Predictions

If this attitude or thought were true, what do you think will happen? How would you know if this attitude or thought were true? How strongly do you believe in your predictions (0 to 100%)?

*Larger-sized people will usually be on their own and have no one with them
There will be no larger-sized person hanging out in a group of friends (80%)*

Experiment Plan

What are the specific things you will do to test your predictions?

Go to a shopping mall and observe the shoppers. Look out for larger-sized people and take note of people they are with. Write down these observations.

Go to a food court or cafeteria and look out for groups of friends hanging out together. Observe whether or not there is any larger-sized person in the group.

What Happened

Describe what actually happened when you carried out the experiment

Most people who were with partners or friends were of average size

Many of the larger women were with other people and looked as if they were having fun

Reflections/Learning Points

Compare your predictions with the outcome of the experiment. Jot down some things you might have observed. Did the experiment support the attitude or thought being tested? How strongly do you believe that thought now that you have carried out the experiment? What did you learn from doing this exercise?

It's not just skinny people who have friends

Larger people also have friends

Balanced Attitude or Thought

As a result of this experiment, what attitude or thought would be more balanced and helpful?

How strongly do you believe your original attitude or thought now (0 to 100%)?

It's not your size that makes people like you or makes you acceptable

Original thought - 30%





My Behavioural Experiment

Thought to be Tested
Write down an unhelpful attitude or thought to be tested. How strongly do you believe in this attitude or thought (0 to 100%)?

Predictions
If this attitude or thought were true, what do you think will happen? How would you know if this attitude or thought were true? How strongly do you believe in your predictions (0 to 100)?

Experiment Plan
What are the specific things you will do to test your predictions?

What Happened
Describe what actually happened when you carried out the experiment

Reflections/Learning Points
Compare your predictions with the outcome of the experiment. Jot down some things you might have observed. Did the experiment support the attitude or thought being tested? How strongly do you believe that thought now that you have carried out the experiment? What did you learn from doing this exercise?

Balanced Attitude or Thought
As a result of this experiment, what attitude or thought would be more balanced and helpful? How strongly do you believe your original attitude or thought now (0 to 100%)?



Ejecting the Eating Disorder Mindset

By now you are probably familiar with what attitudes, expectations, and thoughts are included in your eating disorder mindset. In the previous section, we talked about challenging the eating disorder mindset head on, through using Thought Diaries and Behavioural Experiments. Here's another way of overcoming the Eating Disorder mindset – ejecting the mindset altogether (just like ejecting a DVD).

As with a DVD that keeps getting stuck in the DVD player, sometimes you have to be forceful and eject the mindset because it, too, keeps getting stuck. There are times when you need to force yourself to do the right thing and force yourself to stop behaving in ways that are unhelpful to you. Remember, the eating disorder mindset can distort and negatively influence how you see things, which is not helpful to you – it keeps the disordered eating going. You have to remind yourself that there are alternatives, other mindsets/DVDs that are healthier for you, and what you need to do is to replace that old unhelpful thinking with healthier messages. It's like choosing to play a new, more positive DVD.

Ejecting the eating disorder mindset means that you choose to reject - or eject - its attitudes, expectations, and thoughts. Remember, the more you practice ejecting the eating disorder mindset, the easier it will be to do – and the easier it will be to play a new DVD with its healthy, balanced messages. Firstly, though, you need to be aware when the old DVD is playing.



Trigger Situations

Continuing with the DVD example, a DVD might be showing the menu when you put it in a DVD player. However, in certain circumstances, the DVD might begin to play the feature film without warning. Likewise, you might find yourself suddenly more preoccupied with thoughts about body shape and weight and control when, for example, you are with your friends, out on a date, or at the gym. You might observe that you become very self-critical when you have put on a little weight, or experience anxiety when people tell you that you are looking well (which you interpret as looking “fat”). These examples can be considered trigger situations, and it is important that you begin to identify them so that you can prepare yourself and develop alternative, healthier ways of behaving.

Follow these steps to identify and begin dealing with trigger situations:

1. Be aware of trigger situations and when the eating disorder mindset ‘clicks’ in place.
2. Think about how you would behave and think if you did not have the eating disorder mindset in place. What healthy and helpful behaviours would you carry out? What balanced and helpful attitudes and thoughts can you say to yourself?
3. Then, behave and think AS IF you do not have the eating disorder mindset in place. Use all the helpful strategies that have been described in the previous modules. When you have carried out this third step, you are already ejecting the disorder mindset.



Use the table on the following page to make a note of your trigger situations and the healthy and helpful ways you can respond.



Trigger situations for my mindset/DVD	Healthy behaviours	Balanced, healthy thoughts
<i>My auntie telling me I look well</i>	<i>Don't restrict! Use a Thought Diary</i>	<i>She means well, it doesn't mean I'm fat</i>

Early Warning Signs that the Mindset/DVD is has 'Clicked' In



When does the eating disorder mindset take hold? How do you know when the DVD has started to play? It is important to recognise early warning signs, such dissatisfaction with your body if your favourite jeans are tight. What are some of your early warning signs?

Early warning signs of my mindset/DVD	Healthy behaviours	Balanced, healthy thoughts
<i>I feel like restricting because my friend asked me out to dinner</i>	<i>Eat my afternoon snack anyway so that I won't be too hungry in the evening</i>	<i>If I restrict, I'm more likely to binge. I can eat at a restaurant and not gain weight</i>

What is especially important in all of this is your willingness to tackle and question the mindset. You may have been operating for years under its rules, without questioning its validity. It may have a strong hold on the way you experience the world and yourself. By challenging its messages and deciding to eject the mindset/DVD, you are taking a huge step towards developing a healthier, more balanced way of seeing the world and yourself.

This will all take time, but it's worth it. Freeing yourself from the constrictions of the eating disorder mindset will enable you to experience life without those preoccupations. If you think low self-esteem is also part of this mindset you may want to join us in the next module.





Module Summary

- The mindset is made up of unhelpful styles of thinking. These messages in turn contribute to maintaining the eating disorder.
- Challenging the mindset involves acceptance and change, and changing one's belief system. These unhelpful attitudes and thoughts can be challenged by using thought diaries to dispute them, and behavioural experiments to test out how accurate they really are.
- Ejecting the eating disorder mindset, or eating disorder DVD, requires recognising triggers that tend turn it on and early warning signs that it has begun playing. It also requires replacing it with a healthier mindset/DVD.

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 5 (Low Self-Esteem), we'll look at how self-esteem can influence or contribute to disordered eating.



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
- Fairburn, C. G., Cooper, Z., & Shafran, R. (2003) Cognitive behaviour therapy for eating disorders: a “transdiagnostic” theory and treatment. *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 41, pp 509-528

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