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Overcoming Disordered Eating

Information Pack B

In Charge ... Mindset Matters

Module 5

Low Self-Esteem

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This is the fifth 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 unhealthily 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 will talk about what low self-esteem is, how it develops, and how it is related to eating disorders. The self-esteem materials in this module have been shortened and adapted for inclusion in this Information Package, which has a focus on eating disorders. For more detailed work on overcoming low self-esteem generally, please refer to the Information Package “Improving Low Self-Esteem” available on the CCI website (www.cci.health.wa.gov.au).

We have discussed how judging your self-worth based on controlling eating, shape, and weight could lead to a vicious cycle which keeps an eating disorder going. Underlying low self-esteem could cause the cycle to be even more vicious, or it could be an obstacle in overcoming the problem. That is why, in order to overcome disordered eating, it is important to have an understanding of low self-esteem and identify what part it might play in your problematic eating and weight control measures.

What is Core Low Self-Esteem?

Most people have low self-esteem in at least one area. They might say: “I’m terrible at maths” or “I can’t hold a tune”. But have you ever been dissatisfied or unhappy with yourself overall? Do you ever think that you are weak, stupid, not good enough, flawed in some way, inferior to other people, useless, worthless, unattractive, ugly, unlovable, a loser, or a failure? Many people feel like that at times, usually when they experience a challenging or stressful situation. But if you think about yourself in these terms often, then you might have a more pervasive problem – core low self-esteem.

Core low self-esteem is having a generally negative overall opinion of oneself, judging or evaluating oneself negatively, and placing a general negative value on oneself as a person.

In essence, people with core low self-esteem usually have deep-seated, basic, negative beliefs about themselves and the kind of person they are. These beliefs are often taken as facts or truths about their identity. Remember what we said in Modules 3 and 4 about a belief not being the same as a fact!

As a result, low self-esteem can have a negative impact on a person’s life. It can affect people’s performance at work or at school. They might consistently achieve less than they are able to because they believe they are less capable than others. They might avoid challenges for fear of not doing well. They might work extremely hard and push themselves to do more because they believe they need to make up for, or cover up, their supposed lack of skill. People with low self-esteem might find it hard to believe any good results they get are due to their own abilities or positive qualities.

In their personal relationships, people with core low self-esteem might become upset or distressed by any criticism or disapproval, bend over backwards to please others, be extremely shy or self-conscious, or even avoid or withdraw from intimacy or social contact. They might also be less likely to stand up for themselves or protect themselves from being bullied, criticised, or abused by their partners or family members.





Early Life Experiences

Beliefs about ourselves are learned as a result of experience, especially our early life experiences. If we have come to believe negative things about ourselves, it is likely that we have encountered a variety of negative experiences that might have contributed to this. We will now talk about what some of these might be.

- **Punishment, Neglect, or Abuse.** People who have been mistreated, punished frequently in an extreme or unpredictable manner, neglected, abandoned, or abused as children or adolescents – or even as adults – can develop a negative view of themselves.
- **Difficulty in Meeting Parents' Standards.** You might have developed negative beliefs about yourself if your parents, carers, and family members frequently made fun of you or put you down. They may have criticised you or focused on your weaknesses or mistakes and rarely acknowledged your positive qualities or successes, perhaps saying things such as “You could have done better” or “That’s not good enough”.
- **Not Fitting In at Home or at School.** Some people may have experienced being the ‘odd one out’ at home or at school. They might have been less good at school than their siblings, or had different interests, talents or skills from others in the family (such as being artistic, musical, sporty; or loving mathematics or science). Others might have made comments about them, bullied them or teased them. As a result, they might come to believe thoughts such as “I’m weird,” “I’m odd,” or “I’m inferior.”
- **Difficulty in Meeting Peer Group Standards.** During childhood and adolescence, our experiences with people around our age can also influence how we see ourselves. This is a time when appearance may be very important to the individual. Together with messages conveyed by the media, an overweight, plump, or ‘well-built’ young person who has not had many positive experiences with their peers can come to believe “I am fat and ugly,” “I’m unattractive,” or “I’m unlikeable”, especially if they are teased or bullied.
- **Your Family's Place in Society.** How we view ourselves is not only influenced by how we are treated as individuals but also how our family or group is viewed and treated by others in society. If your family or the group that you belonged to was seen to be different, less socially acceptable, or was on the receiving end of prejudice, bullying or hostility, these experiences can also influence how you see yourself.
- **An Absence of Positives.** The absence of positive experiences in our lives can also affect our self-esteem. It might be that you did not receive enough attention, praise, encouragement, warmth, or affection. It could be that your basic needs were just adequately met but no more was given.
- **Later Experiences.** People with healthy self-esteem can also find their self-confidence being dented if they encounter negative experiences later in life. A person can come to develop low self-esteem if they have experiences such as being bullied or intimidated at work, being in an abusive relationship, experiencing prolonged financial hardship, continuous stressful life events, traumatic events, or life-altering illnesses or injuries.

As you can see, being the subject of abuse, bullying or teasing can make someone feel different and inferior. This sense of not being good enough can result in the development of low self-esteem around a particular issue (such as not being good at sports) or a more pervasive sense of worthlessness, or core low self-esteem.





How the Past Affects the Present: Negative Core Beliefs

We have discussed how different sorts of experiences can influence and shape how we feel about ourselves. Often, these are experiences that have occurred early in our lives. So, if these experiences happened long ago, why is it that we still see ourselves in a negative light today? After all, haven't we had adult experiences that are quite different from the ones we had as children? Yet, we might still hear, in our minds, what our parents or other people had said to us years and years ago. We might hear a message such as: "You could have done better", "You are so stupid", "You're fat and lazy".

We can continue to experience core low self-esteem even when our circumstances are different from those in the past, because of our negative core beliefs. Negative core beliefs are the conclusions about ourselves we arrived at when we were children or adolescents, as a result of the negative experiences we had. For example, a child who was constantly punished and criticised may come to believe "I am worthless," or "I am bad." Young people and children may be unable to explore other explanations for what is happening to them, so the belief makes sense to them. These negative core beliefs are thoughts that are usually deep seated, firmly held, and strongly rooted in our minds. They are evaluations of ourselves and our worth or value as a person. These beliefs say, "This is the kind of bad person I am."

Protecting Ourselves: Rules & Assumptions

When we strongly believe these negative statements about ourselves, it is not surprising that we feel very bad and experience strong negative emotions. While we are experiencing negative situations and coming to these negative conclusions about ourselves, the human survival instinct is also in operation. To ensure our survival and to keep on functioning, we begin to develop rules and assumptions for how to live, which help protect our fragile self-esteem. They aim to guard and defend us from what we consider the "truth" of our negative core beliefs.

We might develop rules such as:

- "I must never make any mistakes."
- "I must never show any emotion in public."
- "I must never go above 55 kg."

We might also develop assumptions such as:

- "If I ask for something I need, I will be put down."
- "No matter what I do, it will never be good enough."
- "If I'm not thin, nobody will find me attractive."

Rules and assumptions can also be combined, for example:

- "I must do everything I can to gain others' approval because if I am criticised in any way, it means I am not acceptable."
- "I won't try anything unless I know that I can do it perfectly, because if I can't, it means I'm a total failure."
- "I must lose 10 kg because if I don't, I'll be fat and I'll never get a boyfriend."



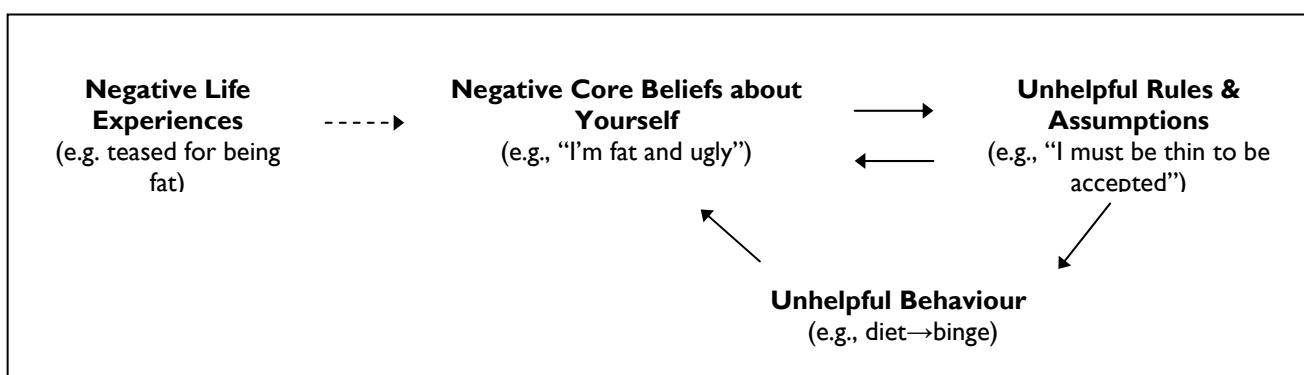
How Rules & Assumptions Guide Behaviour

The result of having these rules and assumptions is that they guide your behaviour. What you do on a day-to-day basis is largely determined by what rules for living you have. Depending on your rules, you might try hard to do everything perfectly, avoid getting too close to people, restrict your food intake, exercise vigorously to get thin, do what it takes to please people, avoid doing anything too challenging, avoid doing things you've never done before ...and the list can go on. Can you see how having such rules and assumptions for living might help you protect your self-esteem? What happens if one of your rules for living is "I must never get above 65 kg"? The effect is that this rule will guide your behaviour, making you become very careful about what you eat, checking your weight perhaps several times daily and restricting your food intake so that your weight stays artificially low. This means that you can feel OK about yourself and your self-esteem is protected.

But you can only feel fairly good about yourself if you are able to live up to the standards you have set for yourself. For example, if you are able to maintain your body shape and weight always, you will feel okay about yourself. As long as you never make any mistakes, always gain your friends' approval, always get extremely good results at school or university, you can maintain an adequate level of self-esteem. However, there is a disadvantage to having these rules and assumptions. You can run yourself ragged by trying to live up to all the rules, putting yourself under a lot of pressure in order to maintain your self-esteem and avoid feeling bad about yourself. In the long run, it is impossible to live this way, and when your rules get broken, you end up feeling terrible about yourself.



However, even when things might seem to be going well on the surface, the negative core beliefs are still there. They are still there because they have been kept in place by your rules and assumptions and your behaviour. This is why these rules and assumptions and your behaviour cannot really be considered to be helpful – they serve to keep the negative core beliefs alive, as it were. Your rules prevent you from having the opportunity to learn that you are okay just as you are. The following diagram illustrates what has been discussed so far.



Identifying My Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

Let's now begin to identify what unhelpful rules and assumptions you might have developed to live by.

When identifying your rules and assumptions, ask yourself:

- What do I expect of myself when I am at work or school?
- What standards do I expect myself to meet? What would I accept and not accept?
- What do I expect of myself when I am socialising?
- What do I expect of myself regarding weight, shape and eating?



Rules and assumptions for living can be in the form of statements such as:

"I must/should/have to always ... or else ... ,"	e.g., "I must always be the best at everything", or "I always have to watch what I eat."
"I must/should never ... ,"	e.g., "I must never show any sign of weakness or back away from a challenge", or "I should never eat any carbohydrates."
"If ... , then ... ,"	e.g., "If I let people know the real me, they will think I'm a total loser", or "If I eat carbs, I'll get fat ."
"If I don't ... , then ... ,"	e.g., "If I don't work as hard as I possibly can, then I will not gain recognition from my boss", or "If I don't do whatever it takes to stay slim, I will never have any friends."

What sorts of rules and assumptions for living might you have? Take a few minutes to jot these down.
(Note: Some rules and mottos can be helpful, but we want you to focus on those that are unhelpful and keep you locked into a pattern of low self-esteem and disturbed eating and weight control habits.)

Identifying My Negative Core Beliefs

Remember, your negative core beliefs reflect the negative, broad, and generalised judgements you have made about yourself, based on some negative experiences you might have had during your earlier years. If you are not yet clear as to what your negative core beliefs are, you need to first pin them down and identify them, before you can start changing them. Below are various clues and information you can use to identify your negative core beliefs. Go through each of them, and see if you can discover the specific negative core beliefs that ring true for you.

Negative Life Experiences

Did these negative experiences lead you to think there was something wrong with you in some way? What negative core beliefs do you have about yourself? Jot down any that come to mind.

Negative Self-Evaluations

The negative self-evaluations that we discussed in the last couple of modules will provide clues regarding your negative core beliefs. Think about the sorts of criticisms you made about yourself in your Thought Diaries. What are the common themes, labels, words, or names you use to describe yourself? What things make you critical of yourself? Jot down any that come to mind.



Identifying My Positive Qualities

Before we move on to the task of adjusting old negative core beliefs and unhelpful rules and assumptions, it will be helpful to take a look at your positive qualities, to remind yourself of your strengths and good points.

Make a list of the positive aspects of yourself, including all your good characteristics, strengths, talents, and achievements, and record them on the worksheet provided on Page 8. You might also want to record them in a special book or journal dedicated to this task of focusing on your positive qualities. Here are some important tips for getting started:

Set aside time to commit to the task and carry it out. Don't do it on the run, or while you are doing other things, or fit it in around other activities. Instead, give it the due attention and time it deserves.

Write your positive qualities down on the worksheet provided or in your special journal, rather than just making a mental note or writing something on the back of a napkin or scrap of paper. In this way, the positive qualities won't get lost.

Write as many positive things about yourself as you can think of...there is no limit. Exhaust all avenues and brainstorm as many ideas as possible. If you run out of steam, take a break. Come back to it over the course of a few days, until you have a substantial list of your positives.

Get help if you feel comfortable to do so. Enlist the help of a trusted friend or family member – someone whom you know would be supportive of you doing this. Two heads are better than one and an outsider might have a different perspective of you, than you do of yourself. Who knows what pleasant things you might discover about yourself with their help?

Watch out for self-critical thoughts or discounting your positives as "small" or "no big deal" or "not worth writing." You tend to remember detailed negative things about yourself, therefore we must do the same with the positives – it is only fair!

Finally, don't just do this exercise for the sake of it, and then put it in the back of a drawer, never to be seen again. It is important that you re-read the things you write down, reading them over and over with care and consideration. Reflect on what you have written. Frequently take notice of, pay attention to, and acknowledge your positive qualities. That's why you may want to dedicate a journal for this task, or keep your worksheet in a special place where you can re-read it frequently

Now, let's get you started writing down all your positive qualities. Use the worksheet provided on the next page to help you start writing down all the positive aspects of yourself. Remember to include everything no matter how small, insignificant, modest, or unimportant you think they are! If you get stuck, the worksheet has some questions that can help you jog your memory.

When you have a sense of your positive qualities you will need to keep reminding yourself that you DO have strengths. You may want to jot some of these in a notebook, or on a small card to put in your wallet, to remind yourself of your positive qualities when you feel low.

Having laid the groundwork by identifying your unhelpful rules and assumptions and your negative core beliefs, and then by recognising your positive qualities, you will be ready to move on to the next module where we will offer you strategies for change and for developing more healthy beliefs about yourself. You can then join us in the next module to start the process of improving your low self-esteem!



My Positive Qualities Record

To help you make a list of your positive qualities, ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I like about who I am?
- What characteristics do I have that are positive?
- What are some of my achievements?
- What are some challenges I have overcome?
- What are some skills or talents that I have?
- What do others say they like about me?
- What are some attributes I like in others that I also have in common with?
- If someone shared my identical characteristics, what would I admire in them?
- How might someone who cared about me describe me?
- What do I think are bad qualities that do I not have?



*Remember to include everything no matter how small, insignificant, modest, or unimportant you think they are

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Module Summary

- Low self-esteem is having a generally negative overall opinion of oneself, judging or evaluating oneself negatively, and placing a general negative value on oneself as a person.
- Early life experiences such as neglect, abuse or teasing can result in the development of negative core beliefs about oneself, leading to core low self-esteem.
- People often develop rules and assumptions to protect this fragile self-esteem.
- These rules and assumptions are unhelpful, however, as they lead to behaviours which in turn reinforce the negative core beliefs.
- Recognising your positive qualities is a helpful first step to take before taking on the task of changing your negative core beliefs and your unhelpful rules and assumptions.

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 6 (Improving Low Self-Esteem) we'll help you address and overcome the problem of low self-esteem.



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
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- Fennell, M (1999) *Overcoming low self-esteem.: A self help guide using cognitive behavioral techniques* London: Robinson (PN)
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