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Overcoming Disordered Eating

Information Pack B

In Charge ... Mindset Matters

Module 6

Improving Low Self-Esteem

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This is the sixth 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 the last module we talked about what low self-esteem is, how it develops, and how it is related to eating disorders. We also asked you to identify any unhelpful rules and assumptions you might have. This module follows on from Module 5, and will show you how to address the problem of low self-esteem.

Adjusting the Rules



Rules and assumptions can be changed. You can work at challenging your rules and assumptions for living in a step-by-step way, using a worksheet. On page 4, you will find a worksheet for you to complete. Before doing that, read through the following guidelines and refer to the example on page 3.

1. Identify an unhelpful rule and/or assumption for living that you would like to challenge.
2. Think about how this rule and/or assumption has impacted your life. Ask yourself: How has this rule affected my relationships, work or studies, how I take care of myself or engage in social or leisure activities? Evaluating the effect of unhelpful rules and assumptions is important because you not only want to change and adjust these rules, you also want to change how they affect your life.
3. Ask yourself how you know when this rule is active in your life. How do you feel? What are the things you do and say (to yourself or others)?
4. Ask yourself, “Where did the rule come from?” You need to understand how the rule developed and what might have kept it going. Unhelpful rules and assumptions may have made sense in the past, and you may have adopted them to cope from day-to-day. However, the rule may not still be relevant now. Ask yourself, “Is this rule still necessary? Is it useful?”
5. Next, ask yourself, “In what ways is this rule (and/or assumption) unreasonable?” Unhelpful rules and assumptions are inflexible and rigid. Sometimes when you use them, you don’t recognise that the world around you does not behave that way in general. Also, they may have been made when you were a child. You don’t have to live according to the rules you made in the past.
6. Although unhelpful rules and assumptions are not beneficial in the long term, there might be certain advantages in living according to these rules. It is probably why you still have these rules and assumptions. Make a list of these advantages.
7. What are the disadvantages of living according to this rule/assumption? Are the advantages you identified really genuine? Ask yourself how this rule/assumption might limit your opportunities, prevent you from experiencing fun and pleasure, negatively impact on your relationships, or prevent you from achieving your life goals. Write these down and compare them with the advantages you had identified.
8. Now, think carefully about what might be a more balanced rule – what would be more realistic, flexible, and helpful? Consider using less extreme terms such as “sometimes,” “prefer,” “it would be nice if...” Balanced rules and assumptions might end up being longer than old ones. This is because they are more ‘sophisticated’. If you find this difficult, don’t worry. Give it a try and put it in practice for a week or so. You can always revise your rule as you become more familiar with the process.
9. The final step is to consider what you could do to put your new rule and assumption into practice. Remember that your old rule and assumption has been in operation for some time now. It is important that you have new behaviours so that the new rule can be ‘house-broken’ and settle into your balanced belief system.



Adjusting the Rules

(example)

Rule and/or Assumption I would like to Adjust	
<i>I must do whatever it takes to stay slim, or else I will never have any friends</i>	
What impact has this rule (and/or assumption) had on my life?	
<i>I put myself under a lot of pressure to stay slim. I use extreme measures to get rid of the food I eat & to burn the fat away I'm always thinking & worrying about my weight & body. Sometimes I get so sick of it.</i>	
How do I know this rule is in operation?	
<i>Whenever I eat, I feel guilty I think, "I shouldn't eat this. It will make me fat!" If I happen to have eaten a big meal, I will use laxatives to get rid of the food.</i>	
Where did this rule (and/or assumption) come from?	
<i>My mother always said I was a fat kid & had to lose weight. Kids at school used to call me "fat-face" and "whale." My mother made me go on all sorts of diets.</i>	
In what ways is this rule (and/or assumption) unreasonable?	
<i>When I say to myself, "I must do whatever it takes..." I am being inflexible & unreasonable. It drives me to use extreme measures that might not be healthy. I don't think a lot of people go to such extreme measures to lose weight or stay slim. Nowadays people talk more about eating a balanced diet & staying healthy. I look around & I see a lot of overweight people who have friends.</i>	
Advantages of this Rule	Disadvantages of this Rule
<i>It makes me conscious of my weight and my appearance. A lot of people say that I look very good and have a nice body.</i>	<i>It puts a lot of pressure on me. I am always conscious of my weight and my food intake. I can't be like some of my friends who don't seem to care what they eat. Sometimes it seems like I'm so superficial that I only care about my weight and appearance.</i>
What is an alternative rule (and/or assumption) that is more balanced and flexible?	
<i>I enjoy being slim & wearing nice clothes, however, it is more helpful if I think about trying to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Also, it is unlikely that my friends would only like me if I am very slim So, I can be I can be healthy & slim & have friends</i>	
What can I do to put this rule (and/or assumption) into practice on a daily basis?	
<i>Check out what healthy portions are & eat that amount without using laxatives after. Exercise regularly rather than extremely vigorously. Ask my closest friends what it is that they like about me.</i>	



Adjusting the Rules

Rule and/or assumption I would like to adjust	
What impact has this rule (and/or assumption) had on my life?	
How do I know this rule is in operation?	
Where did this rule (and/or assumption) come from?	
In what ways is this rule (and/or assumption) unreasonable?	
Advantages of this Rule	Disadvantages of this Rule
What is an alternative rule (and/or assumption) that is more balanced and flexible?	
What can I do to put this rule (and/or assumption) into practice on a daily basis?	



Adjusting Your Negative Core Beliefs

In Module 5 you identified some of your core beliefs, and you can now use the steps below to adjust them. Remember to work on only one core belief at a time and take your time to work through the steps. Once you have worked through the process of adjusting one negative core belief, you will then be able to apply the method to others you want to change. Remember that core beliefs can be strong and it may take you a few attempts to adjust them. Don't give up, just take your time. You may want to do this exercise several times, each time with a new core belief. Here are some guidelines for completing the worksheet. There's an example of a completed worksheet on page 7, and a blank form for you to fill out on Page 8.

1. Choose one Negative Core Belief. Choose only ONE to begin working on, even if you've identified more. Write that negative core belief in the top box of the worksheet on page 8. Note how much you believe the negative core belief now, as well as when it's most and least convincing. Note how the negative core belief makes you feel.

2. Develop a Balanced Core Belief. Now it's time to develop an alternative core belief to replace your old negative one. When developing a new core belief, you want to aim for something that is more *positive, balanced, and realistic*. It is important that you do not just squash the negative belief you have been carrying around, but that you also promote a new balanced view of yourself. It is about saying what you are (e.g., "I am competent"), not just what you are not (e.g., "I am not stupid"). What's important is that the new belief is more balanced, weighing up all the information available, including both your strengths and weaknesses.

When developing a new core belief, make sure that you are not judging yourself only on your faults or weaknesses. However, don't paint an overly positive view of yourself (e.g., "I am perfect in everyway"), as this will be unrealistic and it is unlikely that you will believe it. Remember not to discount any new core beliefs on the basis that you don't fulfil these 100% (e.g., "I can't put down that I am competent because sometimes I get things wrong."). No one is capable of such feats of perfection, so instead accept that you are your new view of yourself – not perfect, but "good enough."

Write your new balanced core belief on the worksheet on page 8. Note how much you believe this new core belief at various times (now, when it is most convincing, and when it is least convincing) and how it makes you feel when you reflect on it. In these early stages, you might not believe it a whole lot. That is to be expected, as you have carried the other, negative view of yourself around for some time. To help you be more open to the new balanced view of yourself, let's work through the process further.

3. Examining the Evidence for Old Beliefs. To start to chip away at your old negative core belief, we need to examine the evidence you base this belief on. What evidence do you have for this negative view of yourself? What experiences do you use to justify this negative core belief? Write the evidence down in the column marked "Evidence For" your Old Negative Core Belief, on the worksheet on page 8.



When you have identified the evidence for your negative core belief, it is time to assess how credible and accurate it is. This is like being a lawyer who questions how good or trustworthy the evidence is, whether or not it stands up under scrutiny. This is where you ask yourself: Are there alternative ways of understanding this evidence? Are there other explanations I have not considered? Are there other ways of interpreting or making sense of the evidence, other than condemning who I am as a person? List these new perspectives in the column marked "Alternatives Ways of Looking at the Evidence".

Now that you have completed this section of the worksheet, what did you make of what you had written? Hopefully this exercise will show you that the evidence you based the old negative view of yourself on is not totally accurate and probably unfair in many ways. Did you find this difficult to do? It can be hard in the beginning, because you have always accepted your negative core beliefs and the evidence for them. However, with practice, and putting on a different perspective (like putting on a pair of spectacles and seeing things differently), you'll soon find that you can do this exercise with ease.



4. Supporting New Beliefs. You have spent time gaining a new perspective on the evidence that you previously used to support a negative view of yourself. Now let's turn to supporting your new balanced view of yourself. To support your new core beliefs, to take them on board, let them sink in and make them believable, you need to do two things. Firstly, you need to gather evidence that is consistent with this new view of yourself, paying attention to evidence from the past/present and looking out for appropriate evidence in the future. Secondly, you need to act on, and experiment with, this new view of yourself. This means that you need to test it, try it on for size, and act in ways that are consistent with the new view of yourself. You need to act as if you believe you are good enough even if you still have some doubts!



Evidence

When we talked about mindsets, we discussed how when you have a belief you tend to pay attention only to things that confirm this old belief. Therefore, to enhance the new, balanced, view of yourself, you will need to start paying attention to evidence from the past and present that confirms this new view. You also need to be ready to pay attention to evidence that arises in the future that confirms this new view. On the worksheet on Page 8, fill in past or present experiences you have had that are consistent with your new balanced core belief. When doing this, pay attention to things that have happened which support this kinder view of yourself. Once you have done this, fill in the kinds of evidence likely to arise in the future, which will confirm your new balanced view. This will act as a reminder of what to be on the look out for, to help you strengthen this kinder view of yourself.

Experiments

The last part of adjusting your negative core beliefs involves behaving as if the new balanced view of yourself is true, even if you might not quite believe it yet. It may not seem very likely now, because you have been carrying around the negative core beliefs for a while. However, you are beginning to loosen their hold on you. Let's loosen it further by changing how you behave and live your life! Ask yourself how someone who believed this kinder view of themselves might act from day to day? How you can test out this new perspective you have of yourself? What could you do to obtain more evidence for your new balanced core belief? What new experiences might support this new perspective you are developing?

In general, creating opportunities for more experiences that will support your new core belief will involve:

- Approaching rather than avoiding things
- Sticking with challenges rather than escaping
- Treating yourself well and doing pleasant things for yourself
- Taking note of achievements and positive qualities
- Being active and engaged in life
- Being assertive



At a more specific level, think about exactly what you could do to 'test-drive' this new view of yourself. Exactly what new behaviours will you need to try out? How will you be behaving differently to before? Once you have some specific ideas about how to experiment with this new core belief, write these down in the "New Behaviour/Experiments" section of the 'Adjusting Negative Core Beliefs' worksheet.

5. Evaluating Your Beliefs. Now that you have been through the step-by-step process for adjusting your negative core beliefs, it is important to reflect on what impact this process has had on you. You can do this by re-rating how much you now believe your old negative core belief and compare it to how much you now believe your new balanced core belief. Complete these ratings at the bottom of the worksheet with the original ratings at the top.



Adjusting Negative Core Beliefs (example)

Old Negative Core Belief I would like to Adjust <i>I am worthless</i>	
Rate how much I believe it (0-100%): Now: 80% When it is most convincing: 95% When it is least convincing: 50%	Emotions <i>Depressed, Sad, Hopeless</i>
New Balanced Core Belief I would like to Adopt <i>I have some weaknesses like everyone does but I am good at many things</i>	
Rate how much I believe it (0-100%): Now: 30% When it is most convincing: 60% When it is least convincing: 5%	Emotions <i>Ok, Calm, Accepting</i>
Old Negative Core Belief	
Evidence For <i>I am anxious all the time There are other people better than me People have treated me badly so I must have deserved it I make mistakes at work I can't seem to lose weight</i>	Alternative Ways of Looking at the Evidence <i>Feeling unconfident is a symptom of anxiety - it doesn't mean I can't do things well There will always be some people who are better than me. Lots of those people have more experience than me. It doesn't make me worthless. I can always improve further. Maybe the people who treated me badly were to blame, not me Everyone makes mistakes. I shouldn't use that as a reason to keep beating myself up and telling myself I'm worthless I'm at a healthy weight now</i>
New Balanced Core Belief	
Evidence For New Balanced Core Belief (from the past/present) <i>I do a lot for my family. I juggle work and home commitments well. I am able to do things that others can't do. I have had positive feedback about my work. People acknowledge I do a good job. I have been told I have a good body</i>	Evidence For New Balanced Core Belief (what to look out for in the future) <i>People telling me I'm a good parent. Completing tasks at work and home. Fulfilling commitments I have made. Handling difficult challenges. Positive feedback, being told I look good</i>
New Behaviour/Experiments (things I can do to support or gain more evidence for my New Balanced Core Belief): <i>Less preparation for presentations and meetings. Less time spent on housework before people come over. Try not to do everything perfectly at work and home, aim for 80% or "good enough" with some tasks. Ask for help with something at least once a week. Admit to not knowing something regularly. Express my opinion even when I am not 100% sure of the correct answer. Spend time weekly doing pleasant activities just for myself. Treat myself kindly, rather than filling my week with striving to achieve. Ask my friends how they think I'm doing. Relax about my weight - eat healthily and stop comparing myself with people thinner than me.</i>	
Rate how much I believe the following now (0-100%)	
Old Negative Core Belief: 30%	New Balanced Core Belief: 70%



Adjusting Negative Core Beliefs

Old Negative Core Belief I would like to Adjust	
Rate how much I believe it (0-100%): Now: When it is most convincing: When it is least convincing:	Emotions
New Balanced Core Belief I would like to Adopt	
Rate how much I believe it (0-100%): Now: When it is most convincing: When it is least convincing:	Emotions
Old Negative Core Belief	
<i>Evidence For</i>	<i>Alternative Ways of Looking at the Evidence</i>
New Balanced Core Belief	
<i>Evidence For New Balanced Core Belief (from the past/present)</i>	<i>Evidence For New Balanced Core Belief (what to look out for in the future)</i>
New Behaviour/Experiments (things I can do to support or gain more evidence for my New Balanced Core Belief):	
Rate how much I believe the following now (0-100%)	
Old Negative Core Belief:	New Balanced Core Belief:

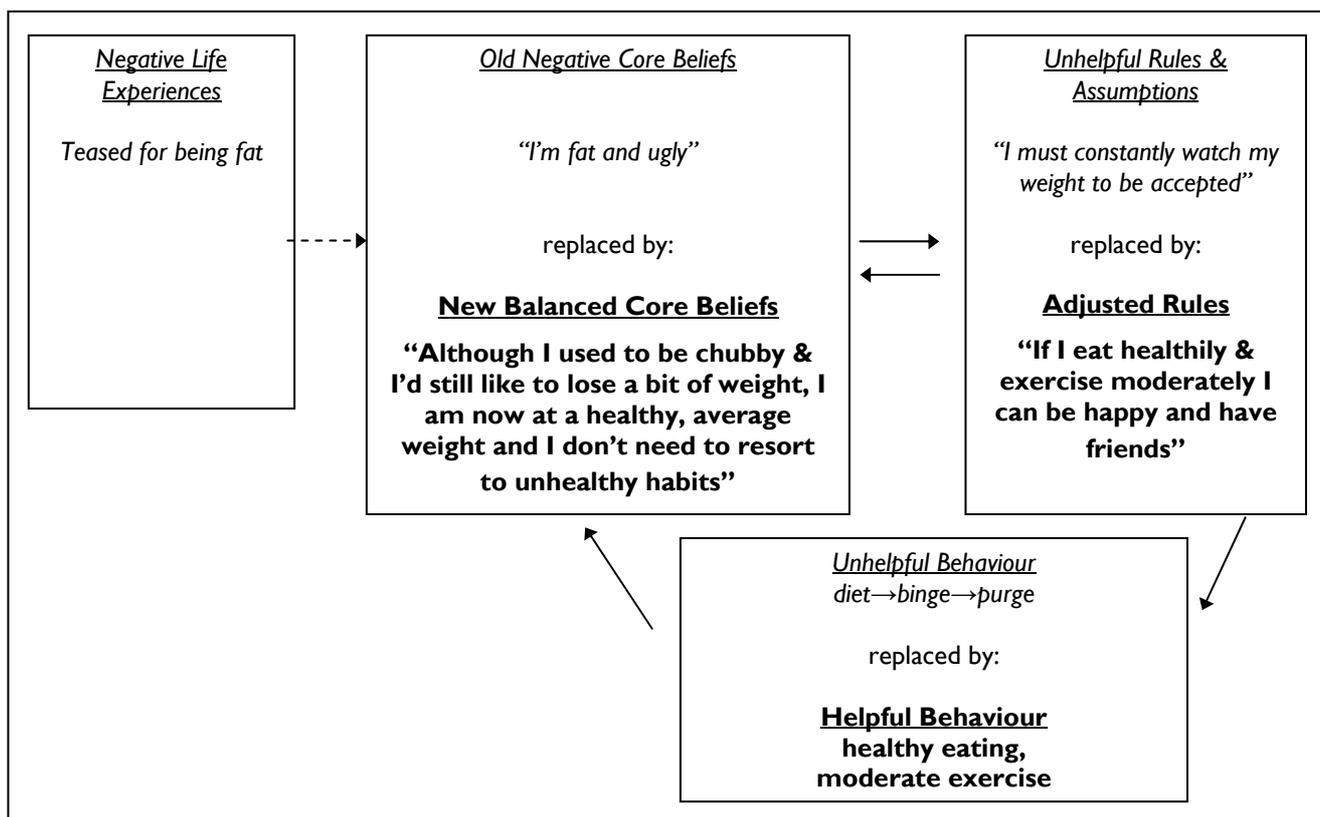


An Ongoing Process

It is important to remember that changing your rules, assumptions and negative core beliefs is difficult, and may take time and practice. It will involve revisiting the steps in this module a number of times, reflecting on what you have written, and perhaps adding more things. It will involve continually re-training your attention in everyday life so that you take note of all the future evidence that will support your new belief. It will take challenging your old thoughts. It will also involve behaving differently and using experiments to help add more experiences and evidence for your new rules and beliefs. (See Module 4 for how to use Thought Diaries and Behavioural Experiments.)

This is an ongoing process. Remember, you have carried these old rules and beliefs around for many years, so it will take some time to adjust them and embrace your new rules and beliefs. However, you will find that if you continue to apply these strategies over time, your conviction in your old rules for living and negative core beliefs will decrease and your conviction in your new rules and beliefs will rise. As a result, you will develop a more positive sense of self-worth and more positive self-esteem.

The following diagram illustrates what can happen when we adjust our unhelpful rules and assumptions and old negative core beliefs: we develop a more balanced view of ourselves and our weight and shape.



All of this is relevant to overcoming your disordered eating. When you have more balanced assumptions, rules and core beliefs, you get a better perspective on eating, weight, shape and your ability to control these. They become part of your life and part of the way you evaluate yourself, not the whole focus of your self-worth.

Join us in the next module to look at how you can maintain the gains you have made and prevent sliding back into old unhealthy habits.



Module Summary

- Low self-esteem involves old negative core beliefs about oneself.
- People often develop rules and assumptions to protect their fragile self-esteem, but these actually keep the negative core beliefs alive.
- It is possible to develop more balanced core beliefs and more helpful rules and assumptions.
- Having realistic, balanced assumptions, rules and core beliefs means you have a better perspective on eating, weight, shape and your ability to control these.
- All this results in a more healthy self-esteem.

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 7 (Maintaining Changes and Relapse Prevention) we'll look at how to maintain positive behavioural and cognitive changes.



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

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

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- Fennell, M (2006) *Overcoming low self-esteem: A self course (3 volumes)* London: Robinson.

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