

Thoughts & Mind

Body Checking

When you keep looking for reassurance

Body checking is the repeated monitoring of appearance, shape, size, weight or particular body areas in an attempt to feel certain or reassured. It can include mirrors and scales, but it can also be much less obvious: touching or pinching the body, comparing photographs, checking how clothes fit, measuring, asking other people for reassurance, studying reflections in windows or repeatedly comparing your body with someone else's.

Key idea: Checking often promises certainty, but the relief is usually brief. The more often the brain checks, the more important the body concern can begin to feel - and the more checking seems necessary.

Why checking can become repetitive

A person may check because they feel anxious about body change, want reassurance after eating, fear that they cannot trust their perception or hope to prevent a feared outcome. Checking can briefly reduce uncertainty. When the anxiety returns, the mind concludes that another check is needed. This creates a reassurance cycle rather than lasting confidence.

Your perception is not a fixed camera

How a body looks to you can change with mood, attention, lighting, clothing, posture, fullness, anxiety and the amount of time spent scrutinising it. Repeatedly focusing on one body area can magnify perceived differences. This is one reason checking can make body image feel less stable rather than more accurate.

Body checking can be external or internal

External checking includes mirrors, photographs, scales, measurements and comparisons. Internal checking can involve repeatedly scanning for fullness, noticing how body parts touch, monitoring the feeling of clothes or mentally calculating whether the body has changed. Both can keep attention locked onto the body.

Checking and avoidance can coexist

Some people repeatedly check; others avoid mirrors, photographs, fitted clothing or being seen. Many move between both. Avoidance may reduce distress temporarily but can also keep feared beliefs untested. Treatment aims for a more neutral, functional relationship with the body rather than forcing constant exposure or demanding positive body image.

The body-checking patterns I notice:

Map the checking cycle

Choose one checking behaviour to understand. The aim is not to judge yourself for doing it, but to see what the behaviour promises and what actually happens afterwards.

1. What triggers the urge?

Examples might include eating, dressing, seeing a photograph, social media, a comment, feeling full, meeting people, showering or noticing a body sensation.

My trigger:

2. What do I check?

Name the behaviour rather than recording a number or measurement.

The checking behaviour:

3. What am I hoping the check will give me?

Certainty, relief, proof, control, reassurance, permission to eat, confirmation that nothing changed, or information about how others might see you?

What I hope to get:

4. What happens after I check?

Notice whether relief lasts, whether you check again, whether your mood changes or whether the eating disorder creates a new question.

What actually happens:

5. What does checking cost me?

Consider time, concentration, confidence, mood, relationships, getting dressed, leaving home, eating, movement and the amount of attention given to appearance.

The cost to me:

Reducing checking without demanding body positivity

You do not have to love every part of your body to reduce checking. A more realistic goal may be body neutrality: allowing the body to exist without repeatedly inspecting, judging or correcting it.

Strategy	How it helps
Notice before changing.	Track when and why checking happens without recording body measurements.
Delay the check.	Create a short gap before acting on the urge; gradually increase it where manageable.
Make mirrors functional.	Use them for practical tasks rather than prolonged scanning or repeated angles.
Reduce comparison cues.	Curate social media and step away from repeated photo or body comparison.
Wear clothes for function and comfort.	Reduces using clothing fit as a repeated measuring tool.
Redirect attention outward.	Reconnect with the activity, conversation, environment or value that checking interrupted.
Follow the recovery plan.	Do not let a difficult body-image moment rewrite meals, snacks or treatment goals.

Reassurance from other people

Questions such as 'Do I look different?', 'Have I changed?' or 'Do I look okay?' may bring a few minutes of relief but can make another person's answer feel necessary for emotional safety. Supporters can acknowledge the distress without repeatedly evaluating the person's body. A response can focus on the feeling and the recovery plan rather than providing appearance reassurance.

Supporting someone with body checking

Avoid commenting on weight, shape or visible changes - including comments intended as compliments. Do not police mirrors or remove belongings without agreement. Instead, help identify triggers, support agreed checking-reduction strategies and encourage activities that reconnect the person with identity, relationships, values and abilities beyond appearance.

What about weighing?

Whether and how weighing is used should depend on the person's treatment and medical needs. In specialist care, weight monitoring may be clinically necessary, but unsupervised repeated weighing can become another reassurance or checking behaviour. Follow individual clinical guidance rather than creating a universal rule.

My plan for reducing one checking behaviour:

When specialist support may help

Seek eating-disorder support when body checking is driving restriction, bingeing, purging, compulsive exercise, severe body-image distress or significant interference with daily life. Eating disorders can be medically serious at any body size, and physical risk should be assessed appropriately.

My interactive Body Checking Plan

Complete this while relatively settled. The aim is not to prove that your body has or has not changed. It is to reduce the amount of power checking has over your attention and behaviour.

NOTICE - What situations or feelings trigger checking?

DELAY - What can help me create a gap before I check?

REDIRECT - Where can I move my attention instead?

SUPPORT - Who can respond without evaluating or reassuring me about my body?

REVIEW - What happened when I checked less or delayed the urge?

A message from Maggie

Body checking can make you feel as though one more look will finally settle the question. Often it does the opposite: the mind finds another angle, another comparison or another reason to check. You do not have to replace checking with loving everything you see. A gentler goal is to let your body be a body - something that carries you through your life rather than a problem that needs constant inspection. Each time you step away from the checking cycle, you create a little more room for the rest of you.

Books, resources & clinical sources

NICE NG69: Eating disorders: recognition and treatment. NHS eating-disorders information. Beat eating-disorders information and support. Fairburn, *Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Eating Disorders*. Waller et al., *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Eating Disorders*. Body-image interventions should be individualised within an appropriate eating-disorder formulation and treatment plan.

This educational resource does not replace medical, nutritional or specialist eating-disorder assessment and treatment.