

Thoughts & Mind

Comparison & Body Image

When other people's bodies change how you see yours

Comparison can change how you experience your own body in seconds. You may have felt relatively neutral, then see another person, photograph, social-media post or body change and suddenly begin judging yourself. Eating disorders can make these comparisons feel urgent and meaningful, as though another person's appearance contains information about what your own body should be.

Key idea: Another person's body is not evidence about what your body should look like. Comparison narrows attention, removes context and often asks you to judge yourself using information that was never a fair measurement in the first place.

Why the mind compares

Human beings naturally notice similarities and differences. In an eating disorder, however, comparison can become highly selective. Attention may repeatedly search for bodies, eating habits or appearance features that confirm an existing fear. The mind may ignore age, genetics, health, disability, medication, editing, posing, lighting and the many other factors that make direct comparison unreliable.

Upward and downward comparison

Upward comparison means comparing yourself with someone you perceive as 'better' on a valued characteristic; it can increase inadequacy or pressure. Downward comparison may briefly provide relief by finding someone you perceive as 'worse', but it still keeps worth organised around ranking bodies. Both can maintain the idea that appearance determines value.

Social media changes the comparison environment

Online images may be selected, posed, filtered, edited or shown without context. Algorithms can repeatedly expose someone to similar appearance-focused content, making a narrow body ideal appear more common than it is. Curating your feed is not avoidance of reality; it can be a deliberate way of reducing repeated triggers while recovery develops.

Body image is more than appearance

Body image includes thoughts, feelings, perceptions and behaviours relating to the body. It can fluctuate even when the body itself has not meaningfully changed. Mood, anxiety, fullness, clothing, sensory sensations, mirrors, comments and attention can all influence how someone experiences their body.

The comparison patterns I notice:

Unpack a comparison

Choose one recent comparison. The purpose is not to decide who looks 'better'; it is to understand what your mind did with the comparison.

1. What triggered it?

A person, photograph, social-media post, changing room, comment, event, television programme or another situation?

My trigger:

2. What did my attention focus on?

Notice how the mind zoomed in. Did it select one feature, shape, outfit, behaviour or eating pattern while ignoring everything else?

What I focused on:

3. What meaning did I give the difference?

Examples include 'I should look like that', 'They are more successful', 'My body is wrong' or 'I need to change'. Notice how appearance became linked to worth, safety or belonging.

The meaning I created:

4. What happened next?

Did your mood change? Did you body check, restrict, seek reassurance, withdraw, change clothes or create a new rule?

The effect on me:

5. What is the wider picture?

What context is missing? What do you know about your own needs, values, recovery and life that the comparison did not include?

A wider perspective:

Moving from comparison toward body neutrality

Body neutrality does not require you to love your appearance. It shifts attention away from constant evaluation and toward living in, caring for and using the body. For some people this is more believable and sustainable than demanding positive body-image statements.

Comparison habit	A different direction
Scanning a room for bodies.	Choose an external anchor: conversation, surroundings, purpose or activity.
Comparing photographs.	Remember that images capture a moment, angle and context - not a complete person.
Using another person's eating as a rule.	Return to your own treatment or nutritional guidance; needs are individual.
Checking after comparison.	Delay the mirror, scale, photo or reassurance response.
Following triggering accounts.	Mute, unfollow or diversify content that repeatedly strengthens eating-disorder thinking.
Ranking your worth.	Name qualities, roles, relationships and values that cannot be measured by appearance.

When somebody else's body changes

A friend's weight change, a family member dieting, pregnancy, illness, ageing, medication effects or someone else's recovery can unexpectedly trigger comparison. Their body change belongs to their life and circumstances. It does not create an instruction for yours. You are allowed to protect your recovery from conversations about diets, weight and appearance.

Supporting someone with comparison

Avoid reassuring by ranking bodies - for example, saying the person is thinner, prettier or 'looks better' than someone else. That keeps the same comparison system alive. Instead acknowledge the distress, avoid appearance commentary and help redirect attention to the person's recovery, values and present activity.

ARFID and comparison

People with ARFID may compare how easily others eat, how varied their diet is or how relaxed they appear around food. This can create shame even when body image is not part of the eating difficulty. A more useful comparison is with the person's own starting point, needs and individually meaningful progress.

Body-neutral and comparison-reducing steps I could practise:

When professional support may help

Seek specialist support when comparison and body-image distress are driving restriction, bingeing, purging, compulsive exercise, severe checking or avoidance, or significant interference with life. Eating disorders can be serious at any body size and require appropriate assessment.

My interactive Comparison & Body Image Plan

Use this plan when comparison starts changing how you see yourself. The goal is not to decide that you look better than somebody else; it is to step outside the ranking system.

NOTICE - What people, situations or content trigger comparison?

QUESTION - What meaning am I adding to the difference I noticed?

REDIRECT - Where can I move my attention instead of checking or ranking?

PROTECT - What boundaries around comments, social media or diet talk would help?

RECONNECT - What matters to me beyond appearance?

A message from Maggie

Comparison can make another person's body feel like a mirror held up to your own. Suddenly you are not simply seeing them; you are using them to decide something about yourself. But their body does not contain the answer to what yours should be. Your needs, your history and your recovery belong to you. You do not have to win the comparison. You can step out of it and bring your attention back to the life you are building beyond appearance.

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 work 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.