

Clothes, Sizing and Body Changes in Recovery

A compassionate guide to body image, comfort and identity during eating disorder recovery.

Welcome: your body is not a clothing size

Clothing can become unexpectedly difficult during recovery. A waistband may feel different, a familiar item may no longer fit, or shopping can bring up memories, comparisons and fears. None of these experiences means you are doing recovery incorrectly.

Your body deserves comfort, dignity and appropriate clothing now, not after reaching a particular size or shape. This guide offers options, not rules. Use the parts that help and leave anything that does not.

You do not need to love your appearance to care for your body. Neutrality, comfort and safety are worthwhile starting points.

Why clothes can feel emotionally loaded

Clothes may represent identity, control, belonging, social expectations, money, past experiences or a former stage of life. A label can trigger an unhelpful story about worth even though sizing is inconsistent between shops and garments.

Body changes can also create unfamiliar sensations: fabric touching the skin differently, seams feeling prominent, temperature changes or difficulty predicting fit. These are practical and sensory experiences, not personal failures.

Try separating the event from the meaning attached to it: “These trousers feel tight today” is an observation. “I have failed” is a painful interpretation, not a fact.

Sizing: information, not a verdict

Clothing sizes vary by brand, cut, fabric, age of garment and manufacturing. A number on a label is a purchasing tool; it cannot measure your character, health, progress or value.

If labels are distressing, consider removing them after checking care instructions, asking a trusted person to help with purchases, or choosing garments based on how they feel rather than the stated size.

When shopping, bring more than one option and allow yourself to stop. A garment is meant to fit your body; your body is not required to fit a garment.

Building a comfort-first wardrobe

Choose a few pieces that are comfortable in the present: adjustable waists, soft textures, forgiving cuts, layers, breathable materials and shoes that do not pinch. Your preferences matter more than trends.

Create an easy-access area with reliable clothes for difficult mornings. You might keep one comfortable outfit ready for appointments, work, study or going outside.

You do not have to discard sentimental clothes immediately. If seeing them is upsetting, store them out of sight and decide later, when you feel ready.

Body image, mirrors and checking

Repeatedly checking fit, pinching fabric, taking measurements, comparing photos or seeking reassurance may temporarily lower anxiety but can keep the cycle going. Notice what checking does to your mood and attention.

Experiment with a gentler routine: get dressed, check what is necessary for comfort and appropriateness, then move toward your day. This is an invitation, not a rigid restriction.

When distress rises, name five things around you, place your feet on the floor, adjust uncomfortable clothing and reconnect with what you want to do next. If mirrors are particularly difficult, work with your clinician on an individual approach.

Sensory needs and neurodivergence

For autistic people and others with sensory differences, seams, tags, pressure, temperature and fabric movement can make clothing genuinely painful or overwhelming. Sensory comfort is a legitimate access need.

Consider seamless items, familiar fabrics, soft waistbands, different sock styles, tag removal, layered options and predictable dressing routines. Trying on clothing at a quiet time or at home may reduce overload.

Body image support should never demand that you ignore sensory pain. It can be helpful to describe specific sensations rather than treating every difficulty as a body-image thought.

Shopping and changing rooms

Before shopping, decide what you need rather than what size you expect to buy. Online orders with manageable returns, quieter shopping times or support from someone trusted may help.

In a changing room, ask: Can I sit, bend and breathe comfortably? Does the fabric feel okay? Will I use this item? You are allowed to leave without buying anything.

After a difficult shopping trip, plan something grounding that is not about appearance. It may take several attempts to find clothes that work; this reflects the shopping process, not your worth.

Comments, relationships and boundaries

Comments about appearance, even well-intended ones, can be difficult in recovery. You can ask people not to discuss your body, weight, clothing size or how much you have changed.

Possible words: “I am focusing on how I feel, not how I look. Please do not comment on my body.” Or: “I would rather talk about something else.”

Family and friends can help by supporting access to comfortable clothes, respecting sensory needs, and avoiding comparisons or praise tied to size.

When clothing no longer fits

It is understandable to grieve familiar clothes or a previous sense of identity. Give yourself permission to feel sadness, anger, relief or uncertainty without turning those feelings into a judgement about your body.

If finances are tight, prioritise a few practical essentials. Clothing swaps, second-hand shops, alterations or community support may be useful if they feel safe and manageable.

Changes in fit do not tell the whole story of recovery. Recovery is broader than appearance and may include nourishment, connection, flexibility, rest, health and meaningful daily activities.

Your personal comfort plan

Complete these prompts in a notebook or in the accompanying interactive tool. Which clothes feel safest or easiest right now? Which fabrics or features are difficult? What is one clothing-related situation you would like to make easier?

What would you like a trusted person to understand? What words could you use if someone comments on your appearance? What would help after a difficult shopping experience?

Choose one small next step, such as preparing an outfit, replacing an uncomfortable item, changing where old clothes are stored, or practising a boundary. There is no deadline.

Support and next steps

If clothing or body changes are leading to food restriction, purging, compulsive exercise, self-harm thoughts or significant distress, speak with your eating disorder team, GP or another qualified professional. A personalised treatment plan is more important than any self-help exercise.

If you feel medically unwell, seek urgent medical assessment. In the UK, use NHS 111 for urgent advice, or 999 for a life-threatening emergency.

Recovery does not require constant confidence. It can look like choosing comfort, accepting help, and making room for life beyond clothing labels. Space to Breathe Therapy | Support Hub.