



COMPARISON, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE “IDEAL” BODY

A compassionate guide to questioning appearance ideals, recognising unhelpful comparisons and protecting your relationship with food and your body.

SPACE TO BREATHE THERAPY | EATING DISORDERS LIBRARY

This guide complements the interactive booklet. It is educational and is not a diagnostic tool or a substitute for individual clinical advice.

CHAPTER 01

The comparison trap

Why comparison feels convincing

Humans naturally compare themselves with others. Online, however, we are often comparing our everyday bodies with carefully selected moments, poses, lighting and edited images. Repetition can make an unrealistic appearance standard feel normal. Feeling inadequate after scrolling does not mean the images are truthful or that your body needs to change.

What it can sound like

Comparison may appear as “Everyone else looks comfortable”, “I should look like that” or “I need to fix myself before I can go out”. These are thoughts, not facts. You can notice a thought without treating it as an instruction.

A kinder reframe

Try: “I am seeing a selected image, not a complete life.” “Bodies vary, including my own.” “My worth does not need to be measured against a photograph.”

CHAPTER 02

How social media shapes the ideal

The image is not the whole story

Filters, editing, lighting, posing, professional styling and selective posting can change what a body looks like. Even unedited images represent a single moment. Algorithms may repeatedly recommend similar appearance-focused posts, narrowing what you see.

When wellness becomes pressure

Advice framed as fitness, discipline, clean eating or self-improvement can sometimes promote rigid rules, guilt and fear around food. A message can be harmful even when it avoids mentioning weight.

Advertising and influence

Some posts are commercial. Before accepting a message, ask: What is being sold? Who benefits if I feel dissatisfied? Is this information from a qualified professional?

When comparison affects eating

Signs worth noticing

You might find yourself checking your reflection repeatedly, avoiding photographs, comparing meals, changing what you eat after scrolling, feeling guilty after food, or withdrawing from activities. These patterns deserve compassion and attention, not blame.

Eating disorders are not a look

Eating disorders can affect people at any body size, age, gender or background. Someone can be struggling seriously without appearing unwell. Appearance alone cannot determine whether someone needs help.

A gentle response

If a post makes eating feel unsafe or your body feel unacceptable, step away from it. Return to a supportive routine and speak with someone you trust. You do not need to wait for your difficulties to become more visible before seeking help.

Body image and feeling different

Body image is an experience

Body image includes how you think about, feel in and relate to your body. It can change with stress, mood, sensory experiences, illness, hormones and social context. It does not always match how your body actually looks.

Body neutrality

You do not have to love every part of your appearance to care for yourself. Body neutrality offers another approach: “My body deserves food, rest, respect and care even when I feel uncomfortable in it.”

A moment of grounding

Notice your feet against the floor, the support of the chair and the temperature around you. Name three things you can see that have nothing to do with appearance. Grounding is not a way to force a feeling away; it can give you room to choose your next step.

Neurodivergence, ARFID and online messages

Different experiences of food

Autistic people and people with ADHD may experience sensory sensitivities, differences in interoception, executive-function challenges or intense social comparison. ARFID may involve sensory aversion, fear of adverse consequences or limited interest in eating, rather than a desire to change body shape.

Why simple advice may not fit

Advice to “just listen to hunger”, try unfamiliar foods or ignore discomfort may not be accessible or safe for everyone. Support should be individual, practical and sensitive to sensory needs.

What can help

Clear and predictable routines, non-judgemental support, accessible communication and professional advice tailored to the individual can be more useful than rigid online food rules.

Create a safer feed

Notice the impact

After using an app, ask yourself: Do I feel more anxious, ashamed, driven to check my body or tempted to change my eating? Your response matters more than whether an account seems popular or positive.

Choose what you see

Mute, unfollow, block or select “not interested” on accounts that intensify comparison. Follow a wider range of interests, bodies, hobbies and voices. Turn off notifications and create device-free moments if useful.

A realistic boundary

Try one manageable experiment: move an app off your home screen, avoid appearance-focused scrolling around meals, or take a short break from a triggering account. Notice what changes without judging yourself.

Supporting someone else

Start with care, not appearance

Choose a private, calm moment. You might say: “I have noticed that social media seems to leave you feeling upset about yourself. How has it been for you?” Listen without debating how they look.

What to avoid

Avoid commenting on weight, comparing bodies, praising restriction, giving unsolicited food advice or telling someone to simply stop looking online. These responses can increase shame.

Offer practical support

Ask what would help: sitting together after a difficult post, planning a conversation with a GP, changing a shared social-media environment or finding a qualified eating-disorder professional.

Help, safety and next steps

When to seek support

If comparison is affecting eating, daily functioning, mood, relationships or your ability to participate in life, speak to a GP or eating-disorder service. You deserve support regardless of your weight or diagnosis.

Urgent concerns

Fainting, chest pain, severe weakness, dehydration, confusion or a rapidly deteriorating physical state need urgent medical assessment. In the UK, call 999 for an immediate emergency or NHS 111 for urgent advice. If you feel at risk of harming yourself, seek immediate support.

UK support

Beat provides eating-disorder information and support: beateatingdisorders.org.uk. For emotional crisis support, Samaritans can be contacted free on 116 123. Neither replaces urgent medical assessment.

Your next step

Write down one account you could mute, one person you could speak with and one kind action you could take today. Small steps count.