

STEP 7

Erasing Your Body Image Rituals

Greg suffers from *androgenetic alopecia*. Don't worry, it's not a deadly disease. Greg just has normal male-pattern balding—mostly a receding hairline and some thinning hair on the crown of his head. But it drives him crazy. So what does he do? He counts each hair lost forever as it swirls down his shower's drain. He mousses and meticulously combs the remaining strands over the visible part of his scalp. He scrutinizes his scalp in the mirror from every possible vantage point. He has tried dozens of different brands of shampoo that promise thicker hair. Often when he's out, Greg has the urge to check his hair to see if it looks okay, so he'll search for public restrooms with mirrors or look for reflective surfaces. While driving, he frequently (and dangerously) inspects his hair in the rearview mirror. If Greg isn't satisfied that his hair looks acceptable, which is often the case, he will wear one of his many baseball caps all day long.

Denise is a fashion plate. Whatever she wears, it is always chic and well coordinated. Her hair and makeup are impeccable. Her friends often tell her how great she looks. Most people would assume that Denise derives immense satisfaction from being so attractive. But she doesn't. In fact, she regularly ruminates that she doesn't look "right." Each morning getting ready for the day takes her two hours. When dressing for a social event, she changes clothes three, four, even five times. Each outfit seems to reveal to her something "awful" about her body. Because she worries that her thighs are huge and that her stomach sticks out, Denise must find an outfit that won't betray her "ugly secrets." Often, she'll try on older clothes that are a size smaller than she wears to see if they will magically fit again. She's terrified of gaining any weight, diets constantly, and nervously weighs herself and pinches her tummy (her "fat check") several times a day.

DISCOVERING YOUR APPEARANCE-PREOCCUPIED RITUALS

Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals were introduced in Step 6 and depicted in figure 6.1. In addition to Evasive Actions, they are a second type of self-defeating body image behavior. These rituals are repetitive efforts at body image damage control. When these patterns have been established, people compulsively inspect and check and recheck their appearance and seek remedies to fix whatever they believe might be wrong with their looks. Individuals trapped in such rituals spend inordinate amounts of time and effort to “look right.”

Unlike the self-conscious avoiders of mirrors, people like Greg and Denise practically live in front of their mirrors, fussing over and “fixing” every perceived flaw. Their Private Body Talk constantly nags them about how they look, and they need reassurance, from themselves or others, that they look okay (or better). Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals come in two forms—*Checking* and *Fixing*.

Appearance Checking

Checking Rituals are often preceded by recurrent thoughts that something is wrong with your looks. This preoccupies you and makes you ill at ease. Your Private Body Talk has an answer for its nagging notion that you might not look just right: “Gotta check it out!” So, to quiet your restless mind, you check it out.

Let me offer an analogy. When you're tucked in bed and dozing off to sleep, has the question “I wonder if I locked the door?” ever crossed your mind? You may be 99.9 percent certain that you did. But the question lingers and you can't put it to rest. So, what do you do? Yes, you get out of bed and check whether the door is latched. It is. Now you can't start counting sheep. The worrisome rumination in your mind is called an *obsession*. The checking behavior is a *compulsion*. Because acting on the compulsion quiets the obsession, the pattern is reinforced. The next time the preoccupying thought occurs, the stronger the urge is to act out the checking behavior.

The principal aim of Checking Rituals is to seek and obtain relief from unsettling worries about your appearance. Checking Rituals are sometimes willful, deliberate attempts to avoid worrying. At other times, they are mindlessly automatic reactions, because they've become well-practiced habits.

Some signs of this pattern are listed below. To what extent does each example describe you? Place a check mark next to the descriptions that fit fairly well.

- You have intrusive thoughts that tell you to inspect your appearance. These thoughts are hard to dismiss until you've acted on them.
- If you pass a mirror (or other reflecting surface), you often reflexively check to make sure that your appearance is okay.
- You frequently visit the restroom with the conscious intent of checking your appearance, even though you have no good reason to believe that something is really wrong with your looks.

- If concerned about your weight, you frequently weigh yourself to find out if you've gained or lost any small amount. Whenever scales are available, it's hard to resist weighing yourself.
- If concerned about your body weight or shape, you often pinch or squeeze areas of your body to try to determine how fat or thin they are.
- You routinely check out other people's opinions about your looks to seek reassurance that you look fine. Trusted loved ones or friends are typically asked, "Do you think I look okay? Are you sure? Are you really sure?"
- In social situations, you repeatedly check how your appearance compares with what others look like, so that you can feel more certain that your appearance is acceptable.

Now, based on the items in the checklist above, describe your own Checking Rituals. Write these down in the top section of the Self-Discovery Helpsheet: What Are My Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals? that you will find following the section "Appearance Fixing," below. Add any Checking Rituals that you engage in that may not have been mentioned. In describing your personal pattern, be specific.

Appearance Fixing

Fixing Rituals, which usually coexist with Checking Rituals, involve elaborate and meticulous efforts to manage or modify your appearance. You must do a lot of things with a lot of precision to be satisfied that you look okay. Special social situations may demand even more time and perfection in figuring out what to wear. If something doesn't appear (or feel) quite right, you may start your fixing all over again. How frustrating!

Recall that your Appearance Fixing score on the Body Image Coping self-test in Step 1 offers a partial index for this behavior pattern. Here's a more specific checklist of some telltale signs of Appearance-Preoccupied Fixing Rituals. Think about each one and decide how often you become fixated on fixing.

- At home, getting out of the bathroom and getting dressed on time is a rare event.
- Friends or people in your household have remarked on the amount of time you spend on your appearance. Their comments may range from gentle kidding to irritation at having to wait for you to get ready.
- You primp and fuss with your clothes, hair, and/or makeup more than you think you should. Rationally, you know you look fine. Emotionally and behaviorally, you just can't leave well enough alone.
- Different situations demand that you change what you're wearing. Otherwise, you worry that your appearance might be inadequate or inappropriate.

- You purchase clothing or grooming products that you seldom wear or use. When you bought them, you were sure that they were what you needed to enhance your looks. Ultimately, they didn't fully meet your expectations.
- Before going out, you change clothes or redo your hair several times until you're satisfied that you look okay.
- When you see yourself in a mirror or other reflecting surface, you reflexively adjust some aspect of your appearance—like your hair, your tie, or your dress—even though nothing is really amiss.
- You regularly make significant modifications in your appearance—for example, changing hairstyles or hair colors or getting cosmetic makeovers.
- Gaining a couple of pounds or the experience of feeling fat compels you to go on a diet or to exercise more intensely for a few days.

Now, based on your answers above and any other Fixing Rituals you engage in, write these down in the following Self-Discovery Helpsheets for Change: What Are My Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals? For both your Checking and Fixing Rituals, rate how often each behavior occurs.

ERASING RITUALS

Let's be sure we keep things in proper perspective. Managing your physical appearance is definitely a good thing. We bathe, shave, do our hair, and clothe and adorn ourselves in ways that make us feel comfortable and are esthetically pleasing. Only people with problems like severe depression or schizophrenia may completely neglect their physical hygiene and appearance. Later, in Step 8, we'll consider how these activities can represent positive ways in which we relate to our bodies. In contrast, when we are dealing with Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals, we've lost control and are really struggling not to feel bad about ourselves.

Like Evasive Actions, we experience our rituals as what we *must* do to avoid thinking and feeling that something about our looks (and worth as a person) is flawed, wrong, inferior, unacceptable, imperfect, judged negatively by others, and so forth. Because checking and fixing temporarily calm our concerns, we keep doing them, despite the clear or partial realization that they are preoccupying and seem to have a life of their own.

This reminds me of the story about the fellow who regularly went out into his front yard, surveyed the premises with his binoculars, then flapped his arms like a duck, turned in a circle, did a little dance, and spit three times over his left shoulder. A curious neighbor finally approached him to ask him what he was doing. Somewhat nervously, he replied that he was keeping the elephants away. Perplexed, the neighbor said, "But there are no elephants around here." The fellow smiled proudly and said, "I know. What I do really works!"

I hope you can see that Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals also fuel false assumptions—for example, if you don't look perfect all the time, bad things will happen or people won't like you. To change these

Self-Discovery Helpsheet: What Are My Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals?

List your Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals below, and rate how often you engage in each:
1 = not more than once or twice a week; 2 = about once or twice per day; 3 = several times per day.

Ritual Frequency

My Checking Rituals

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Ritual Frequency

My Fixing Rituals

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

habitual patterns, you can either prevent yourself from initiating them or interrupt them once you've begun the ritual. I call this solution *Erasing It*. It derives from *exposure and response (or ritual) prevention*, a well-known and effective behavior therapy procedure. Several successful strategies exist for Erasing It. I'll describe each and illustrate its helpful use.

Obstructing Your Rituals

Most Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals occur whenever the "right" opportunity arises. Given certain triggers, or Activators in your ABC Sequence, you carry out the behavior before you know it. Therefore, you may need to obstruct its opportunity to occur. You block its path.

- Think about one Appearance-Preoccupied Ritual for which you need certain "tools" or conditions to carry out the ritual. For example, you require a mirror for rituals in which you repeatedly scrutinize your looks. Compulsive weighing would be impossible without scales. How could you make trouble for your ritual by altering the environment? Developing this strategy is a challenge to your creativity. So be creative!
- This obstructive technique for change is usually a short-term, stopgap approach. You don't want to avoid one thing in order to avoid another. It can be helpful, especially at first, but note that you'll want to use additional strategies to remove most rituals.

Allow me to illustrate this point: Lois felt compelled to weigh herself almost every time she ate anything. She was ill at ease until she confirmed that she had not put on several pounds. So Lois applied masking tape to the weight-displaying window of her scale. She obstructed her ritual's path. In this way, she weakened her compulsion to weigh herself. She combined this technique with the By Appointment Only strategy (discussed below), weighing herself only on Saturdays, when she changed the tape. Lois's innovative strategy helped her to change her preoccupying mental tape, as well.

Delaying Your Rituals

Another method for Erasing It is really simple. You learn to wait a while before commencing your ritual. This works quite well for Checking Rituals.

- Appearance checking is usually preceded by an inner urge to check. For example, you may have a gnawing feeling that you "need" to weigh yourself, inspect your hair or makeup, or seek reassurance about your looks. Your urge is typically narrated by your Private Body Talk that asks "What if?" and conjures up distressing scenarios. "What if I've gained weight and I look fat?" "What if my hair is out of place and looks really messy?" "What if my makeup is wearing thin and my big pores are showing?" "What if my husband thinks this outfit looks dumb on me and he's ashamed to be seen with me?" Just be mindfully aware of these urges and mental what-ifs. Accept that they occur and let your consciousness move away and focus on other things.

- Checking Rituals serve several self-protective purposes: They interrupt your preoccupied thoughts and your feelings of discomfort. Moreover, they offer a clear answer to your what-if? question. When you learn that you look fine, you feel relief. And, if something was slightly amiss, fixing it brings relief. So, you'll want to detach the thoughts from the ritual. You are aware that you want engage in the checking behavior. You remind yourself that it isn't required that you do so.
- By postponing your checking even for a short time, you sap the power of your anxious urge. Instead of succumbing to the urge and letting it immediately dictate your actions, you become the decision maker. You take control of deciding when (or whether) to check on your looks. This usurps the urge that instigates your ritual, as well as the ritual itself. So, for example, you decide "I'll delay checking for ten (or fifteen or thirty) minutes."
- Waiting it out will be uncomfortable for a while, so you'll need to accept the discomfort and create mindful experiences to soothe yourself during your wait.

You can learn from the following success story: Roger is a sales representative for a pharmaceutical firm. He's on the road a lot, calling on doctors and clinics. During the course of a typical day, he checked his appearance often. Every time he stopped at a traffic light, he inspected his hair and face in the rearview mirror. At his office, he checked his appearance once or twice an hour, using a mirror he kept in his desk drawer or the one in the men's room.

When Roger decided to delay his rituals, he put off checking his reflection in the rearview mirror until he reached his destination. Whenever he had the urge to check his appearance at the office, he deferred checking for twenty minutes. At first the waiting troubled him—what if he looked awful all that time? However, he just mindfully observed and accepted his worried thoughts. Next, he spent a few moments doing slow, diaphragmatic breathing and listening to his encouraging New Inner Voice. Then, he more easily shifted his attention to his work. Eventually, Roger kept his urge to check in check.

Restricting Your Rituals

Fixing Rituals can be exasperating for others. Each fixing episode usually continues until you are either momentarily content with its results or you run out of time. An alternative to allowing your ritual to run its course is to place specific limits on it. Here are three ways to weaken your rituals by placing specific limits on them:

PLAYING BEAT THE CLOCK

Here's how you could tackle a Fixing Ritual in which you take too long readying your appearance to face the world.

- First establish how long your Fixing Ritual usually takes.

- Then make a fair estimate of how much time would be reasonable for you to take if you didn't get so compulsively caught up in it. For example, suppose your morning grooming regimen takes two hours. You know that if you were a bit more organized and less picky, you should be able to get ready in one hour. At first, set your initial goal generously—say, to be ready in one hour and fifty minutes.
- Set your alarm clock or kitchen timer to this limit and play Beat the Clock.
- After a few days of success, lower the limit—say to one hour and forty minutes—and play Beat the Clock for several more days.
- Continue in this fashion, shaving off ten minutes each time you change your limit, until you've reached the reasonable amount of time to groom that is your goal.
- Reward your progress by using the time saved to do something enjoyable. Then you'll appreciate the change even more.

Kyra liked her hair, but she insisted that it always had to look perfect. Her hair was the "saving grace" she relied on to make up for the physical features she disliked. Dreading a bad hair day, each morning Kyra would style and restyle her hair for about an hour, until her ride for work arrived. For two weeks, she played Beat the Clock by setting her timer for gradually shorter intervals—forty-five minutes, then thirty, and finally a reasonable twenty minutes. Her goal was to be finished with her hair, out of the bathroom, and enjoying her cranberry juice before the timer alarm went off. By making a challenging game of it, Kyra eliminated her morning preoccupation with her hair, which looks just as attractive as it did back in the days of one-hour fixing sessions. Now if she has a bad hair day, she sticks to her new abbreviated schedule anyway. She knows that the world won't come to an end.

RATIONALLY RATIONING RITUALS

This next method sets a limit on the number of times you engage in a ritual within a certain period. How does this work?

- Suppose that whenever you go out to dinner with a friend or loved one, your requests for reassurance that you look fine begin to sound like a broken record. The more you ask, the more insecure you feel, especially if you start to sense your companion's annoyance. So, you set a quota and allow yourself only two reassurance requests during an entire evening.
- You can use your allocation whenever you wish, but having used up your ration, your requests are over.
- Over time the goal is to set your ration progressively lower until it reaches zero.

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

Here's the third method for restricting your rituals:

- An intense urge to practice a ritual usually dictates when your rituals will take place. So instead, put those rituals on a schedule. In effect, you make an appointment with yourself to carry out your ritual.
- Like any appointment, the one for your ritual should begin and end on time.
- Because you're permitted to have the ritual by appointment only, it cannot occur at unscheduled times. If you miss your appointment, you must wait for the ritual's next scheduled occasion.

Here's an example of an effective use of this strategy: Since adolescence, Ivan's face has been prone to blackheads. Many times a day, he would get out his magnifying mirror and peruse his pores in search of blackheads and blemishes, squeezing and picking at them. Not only did these search-and-destroy missions take a lot of time, they took their toll on his complexion as well. To gain control, Ivan scheduled an appointment for his ritual, allowing it to take place only during ten-minute visits to the mirror at 7 A.M. and 7 P.M. Thus, he restricted his ritual's duration and frequency. Much to his dermatologist's relief, Ivan eventually reduced his unhealthy practice to once a week.

Resisting by Rebellion

This last strategy for Erasing It can be rather difficult, yet sometimes it is the most successful. You rebel against your ritual by resisting it cold turkey. You face the temptation and exercise restraint: You ride out your urge without performing the ritual. Controlling a ritual, despite the conditions being ripe for its occurrence, can greatly increase your self-confidence.

- You may want to try this approach first on weaker rituals. For stronger ones, you'll probably graduate to this approach after successfully delaying, restricting, or obstructing your behavior pattern.
- With mindful acceptance, Body-and-Mind Relaxation, and corrective thinking as your allies, you force yourself to remain in the situation where you experience the urge without performing your ritual—the longer the better.
- Often a gradual approach is most helpful. Schedule your rebellions for progressively longer periods. In this way, you build up your resistance.
- In other instances, it may be effective for you to remain in the situation until the urge to perform your appearance-preoccupied pattern has subsided. You mindfully observe the urge and its weakening.

- If you try this total rebellion against the ritual and don't succeed, give yourself the credit you deserve for trying. Never give yourself a hard time for having a hard time!

Take inspiration from Jessica, who learned how to resist two self-defeating patterns: Whenever she was on a date, Jessica spent almost as much time in the restroom checking and fixing her appearance as she spent with her companion. She would end up stuck to the mirror the way a magnet sticks to a refrigerator, brushing her hair, freshening her makeup, and adjusting her clothes.

But once Jessica made up her mind to end her appearance checking and fixing, she planned her resistance well. On several occasions when she was at a restaurant, she allowed herself to visit the restroom only to use the toilet, not to primp. When washing her hands, she made a point of looking down at the sink instead of up at the mirror. For her next step, Jessica required that, on each visit, she look at herself in the mirror—but not fix anything. She progressed to longer and longer periods between “check-ups.” Relying on her mindfulness and coping skills to get her through her initial discomfort, Jessica was finally able to break her pattern of checking and fixing.

BUILDING YOUR LADDER OF SUCCESS FOR ERASING IT

Now it's your turn to take the first steps toward weakening your Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals. Erasing It requires you to do some creative planning to devise a strategy appropriate for yourself. Once you've settled on a strategy, execute it frequently to erase your old pattern.

- Go back to the Self-Discovery Helpsheets: What Are My Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals? earlier in this chapter, where you listed your Checking and Fixing Rituals. Read through your list and evaluate how confident you are that you could refrain from the behavior if you were in the situation where it normally occurs. Just as you did in Step 6 when you were preparing to change your Evasive Actions, assign each entry on your list a self-efficacy rating from 0 to 100. This indicates how confident you are that you will be able to refrain from each Checking or Fixing Ritual.
- Arrange these rituals in order of self-efficacy on the following Helpsheets for Change: My Ladder of Success for Erasing It, going from the highest rating at the bottom to the lowest rating at the top.

Helpsheet for Change: My Plan for Erasing It

My appearance-preoccupied Checking and Fixing Ritual: _____

Step-by-Step Plan for Facing It

Prepare: Exactly what will I do?

Act: When? Where? For how long?

Cope: What uncomfortable thoughts and feelings do I expect? How will I accept and cope with them?

Enjoy: How will I reward my efforts?

What were my results of Facing It?

Preparing and Executing Your Plans for Erasing It

- Start with the ritual at the bottom—the easiest one to eliminate. Write out your plan for Erasing It, using the Helpsheets for Change: My Plan for Erasing It. You'll want to make several copies of this Helpsheet to use for each ritual, or you can use your own notebook to write out your plan in this format.
- PACE yourself, just as you do when Facing It to manage your Evasive Actions. As you plan, anticipate and specify each step—Prepare, Act, Cope, and Enjoy. Visualize yourself carrying out your plan, coping effectively with any troubling thoughts or feelings, and affirming and enjoying your accomplishment.
- You've made and rehearsed your plan for Erasing It. Now go for it!
- One rung at a time, just keep climbing your ladder. When you've made headway with several Checking or Fixing Rituals, go ahead and begin Step 8 of this workbook. Continue to follow through on your Erasing It plans.

FINAL WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

The behavioral changes you make by doing the work of Steps 6 and 7 represent important strides in your journey toward body acceptance. They enable you to shed your old self-defeating habits that are fruitless efforts to protect yourself from uncomfortable inner experiences. As you continue to work on these changes, I want you to face forward and imagine your life free from Evasive Actions and Appearance-Preoccupied Rituals. Close your eyes and take about fifteen minutes to picture this new life clearly and in detail. Mindfully immerse yourself in this vision. How is your life different? How does it feel to be rid of these behaviors? How do you feel about yourself?