

STEP 3

Mindfully Accepting Your Body Image Experiences

In your everyday life, probably lots of things trigger your thoughts, feelings, images, memories, expectations, intentions, and other private experiences concerning what you look like. Some of these inner experiences are distracting, annoying, upsetting, or even painful. But you may take them very seriously and treat them as truths or realities. You may see them as defining who you are as a person. Most likely, you want to get rid of these inner experiences, so you probably react by trying to avoid them or whatever sets them off. You take "corrective actions" to try to change or camouflage how you look, hoping to escape your inner pain.

EXPERIENCES

Consider Joyce's body image experiences: Whenever she thinks about her figure, she gets a sinking, hopeless feeling deep down inside. She is repulsed by the size of her thighs and hips. Whenever her fiancé, Jeff, catches a glimpse of her as she emerges naked from the shower, at first Joyce feels intensely self-conscious. Then, she quickly cloaks her body in a towel and is flooded with embarrassment and makes up an excuse to banish him from the bathroom. Her embarrassment gives way to shame and then becomes anger. She is angry that Jeff saw her body so closely, and even angrier with her body for the betrayal.

Joyce also routinely locks the bedroom door to get dressed privately, so Jeff won't see her body. She becomes terribly frustrated as she tries to find the "right outfit" to conceal the curves of her hips and thighs. The struggle to dress to conceal her body is one version of the emotional roller coaster that Joyce

rides daily, without amusement. From many painful experiences like these, Joyce has concluded she is both ugly and a “hopelessly messed-up” person.

THE PIVOTAL POWER OF NOW: THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER BELONG TO YOU

At the end of Step 2, I explained that the most important causes of body image problems exist in the here and now. Specifically, your body image emotions are driven by your thoughts. The often subtle and unspoken messages you give yourself—your assumptions, perceptions, and interpretations—decisively dictate your feelings about your looks. Your patterns of relating and interacting with yourself produce a negative body image. You create your own conditioning. Although the seeds of body image distress may have been planted in your cultural and interpersonal history, a negative body image exists and grows in the presence of your mind.

Right now, in the here and now, I want to ask you to try something: I want you to think about the aspect of your appearance you like least. Picture it clearly in your mind's eye. Now think these thoughts about this attribute: “It looks awful. Ugly. It's really ugly. I hate it. I really hate it. Everybody hates looking at it. People think I'm ugly. I'm really, really ugly.” After saying these things to yourself, over and over, for one entire minute, check your feelings.

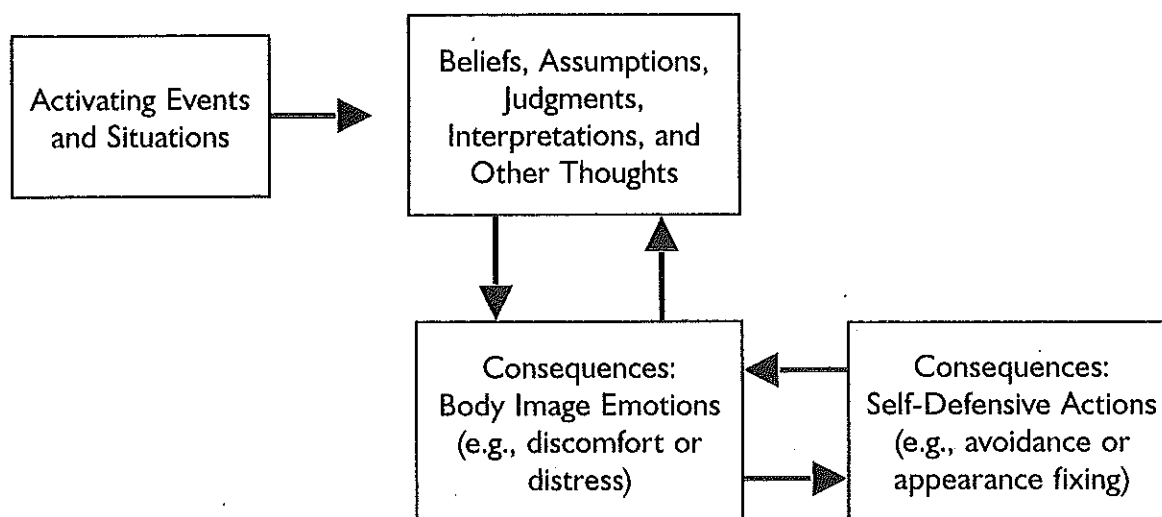
For many people, this little exercise gives rise to extremely unhappy body image feelings. After only one minute of immersing your mind in such self-critical thinking, you start feeling homely and hopeless. Did this one-minute exercise have a familiar ring to it?

Let me further illustrate the pivotal power of human thought by describing an eye-opening experiment conducted by psychologists at Dartmouth University (Kleck and Strenta 1980). The investigators used theatrical makeup to create a facial scar on their research participants before they were to interact face-to-face with a stranger. The stranger worked for the researchers and had been trained to act in a standard neutral way with each subject. What the participants didn't know, however, was the hideous scar had actually been removed before their conversation with the stranger. After the conversation, they were asked questions about how the stranger had related to them.

Compared to the control group, who had not been given a “scar,” the participants who *believed* they had the facial scar “witnessed” more discomfort in the stranger's behavior—such as staring at them or avoiding looking at them at all. They reported experiencing the self-conscious and adverse effects of their facial “flaw,” even though no flaw existed. Obviously, since there was no actual scar, these people created their own reality. Their experiences reflected what they believed about their looks, not the objective facts of the situation.

This fascinating experiment demonstrates a profoundly important truth: The most influential dictators of negative body image emotions are your own ways of judging and thinking about your looks. Many of your thought patterns may have become so automatic and habitual that you're not even conscious of them as they occur. Specific events may trigger these thoughts, but once they start up, the emotional damage follows, which breeds more self-critical ruminations and, in turn, even greater despair. Then, to cope with your self-inflicted distress, you may avoid those people or situations that triggered

Figure 3.1
Body Image Experiences: Here-and-Now Influences



your cascade of negative thoughts and feelings. Or, you may carry out time-consuming rituals in which you try to fix or hide the “flaws” in your appearance. Obviously, these self-protective efforts don’t fix your long-standing body image problems. In fact, they provide only temporary relief and actually perpetuate your problems.

In Step 2, you learned and wrote about historical factors that predisposed you to create negative body image experiences. Figure 3.1 is an informative flow diagram of the here-and-now causes of a negative body image. It shows the vicious cycle of self-defeating thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. When you develop a different mind-set that breaks this cycle, it becomes possible to overcome a negative body image. You can learn to change your experiences—how you think, act, and feel—now and in the future.

The Body Image Workbook will help you do this, so that your old painful patterns give way as you discover new and satisfying ways to experience your body and yourself.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Throughout your work with *The Body Image Workbook*, you will cultivate a new mind-set that greatly differs from how you currently think, feel, and act. This new mind-set is one of *mindfulness* and *acceptance*. Put most simply, mindfulness is a way of directing attention or awareness. It is a way of consciously and purposefully “stepping back” and observing your inner experiences in the here and now. Far from

being new or modern, mindfulness has been a part of Eastern psychological and philosophical (especially Buddhist) perspectives for centuries. Mindfulness is a central facet of many (but not all) approaches to meditation. Becoming mindful certainly doesn't require converting to a particular religious doctrine. It simply means being open to and practicing a novel mind-set.

In recent years, mindfulness has become innovatively integrated into Western approaches to psychotherapy and human growth (e.g., Baer, 2006; Germer, Siegel, and Fulton 2005; Hayes, Follette, and Linehan 2004; Kabat-Zinn 1994; Segal, Williams, and Teasdale 2002). Of course, given the Western commitment to science, mindfulness-based approaches have been subjected to much scientific scrutiny, and they've been found to provide valuable and enhanced benefits in health promotion and the reduction of psychological suffering (e.g., Hayes, Follette, and Linehan 2004; Marra 2005). I believe that a more mindful orientation toward your body image experiences holds great promise for you.

WHAT IS ACCEPTANCE?

Acceptance means seeing things as they really are and seeing them in the present moment. A stomach-ache is a stomachache and it hurts. Feeling anxious or self-conscious or sad or mad are just what they are—your feelings of the moment. Not liking your body in some situation is simply what it is, nothing more and nothing less. Currently, you judge your negative body image experiences. From Step 2 of this program, you've learned how these experiences and your judgments of them came about. In judging, you reach four verdicts:

1. The first verdict equates thoughts and feelings with truth. When you think or feel that you're "ugly" or "fat" or physically "unacceptable," you judge these experiences as a valid indictment of your body and your self-worth. Of course, they are only thoughts and feelings. They are not evidence of any truth. Acceptance means recognizing that your experiences are merely inner events. You can be objectively aware of these events and see them for what they truly are—just inner thoughts and feelings.
2. The second judgmental verdict deems your inner experiences as intolerable. You judge them by concluding, "I can't handle feeling this way" (self-consciousness, shame, or anxiety). Acceptance means being mindfully aware of your emotional discomfort and seeing it as familiar and as just discomfort.
3. From the first two verdicts, the third concludes that you must do something or must not do something so that you might escape or avoid this "intolerable" experience. You tell yourself to avoid a threatening situation, to modify your appearance in some way, and/or do something else to "fix this." Mindful acceptance just witnesses your habitual impulses for self-protective action, but it doesn't require your action. Instead, you objectively observe your impulsive wishes or intentions as internal experiences, as "voices in your head." You notice your inner voices and hear what they are commanding that you do or not do, but you *don't* follow their commands. You simply become aware of them as your experiences.

4. The fourth verdict involves your indictment of yourself as “sick,” “screwed up,” “hopeless,” or “a worthless person” for having the above-described experiences. You don’t accept the experiences and cannot accept yourself if you have them. With the practice of mindful acceptance, you come to see that you give yourself a hard time for having a hard time. You recognize what you are doing—that you add this additional self-loathing layer to your experience. Your indictment of yourself is not evidence of the truth of your negative thoughts. It is only an additional inner voice.

Having emotions, including painful emotions, is characteristically human. Emotions can serve as important, potentially adaptive signals to get our attention to process information about something that’s happening. When we reflexively seek to turn off the emotion instead of becoming more aware of it, a problem occurs. Another problem arises if we engage in self-defensive maneuvers to prevent our experiencing the emotion in the future. Such efforts, called *Experiential Avoidance*, turn us against our own mind and against ourselves. Attempts to deny, disregard, deflect, or defend against discomfort ultimately create profound psychological suffering. The suffering is especially intense if we loathe ourselves for our own humanity.

LEARNING ABOUT MINDFULNESS AND ACCEPTANCE

I suspect that my explanations of mindfulness and acceptance may leave you somewhat puzzled or doubtful. That’s absolutely okay. Just be mindful of your uncertainty and accept it for what it is—your experience of uncertainty. Be aware of your inner reactions. Are you confused? Are you skeptical? Are you thinking, “He’s trying to tell me I’m not really ugly”? Are you thinking, “I wish I could be more mindful and accepting”? You need not do anything about your reactions, except to be aware of them and accept them as your reactions at the moment. But please keep reading. To begin to discover mindfulness, allow yourself to experience three exercises recommended by mindfulness and acceptance experts (i.e., Hayes and Smith 2005; Kabat-Zinn 1990, 1994).

Raisin Your Awareness

If you ever eat raisins (or popcorn or nuts), have you noticed that you just pop some into your mouth, munch them a few times, swallow, and open your mouth to repeat these actions? You may do this mindlessly because you are simultaneously doing something else, like having a conversation, reading, or watching television or a movie. So now, I ask you to get some raisins and do this differently. Spend at least one minute with each step below:

1. Put one raisin in your palm and look at it closely. Notice its wrinkles and crevices and the shapes they form. Notice its color and any slight variations in color.
2. Put a second raisin in your palm next to the first. Notice how they look alike. Notice how they look different.

3. Roll one of the raisins continuously between your thumb and index finger. Notice how what you just saw now feels. Feel the crevices. Feel the softness and the hardness and the stickiness.
4. Put the raisin into your mouth, but don't bite into it. Roll it around, feeling with your tongue what you just felt with your fingers. Notice its texture. As you move it around in your mouth, be aware of how it feels in different places in your mouth.
5. Now, bite down once on the raisin. Notice its taste. Bite down again. Notice its changing texture. Swallow it and stay aware of the sensation of the raisin as it slides down your throat.
6. Place the second raisin in your mouth and chew it very slowly. As you keep chewing, notice as the raisin's consistency becomes mushy and then even mushier. Take note of how this raisin feels in comparison to the first one. Swallow it when you wish.

How did this compare with your usual experience of eating raisins?

Body Scan

Because your experiences of your body are troubling to you, this second exercise is a really important one. You often live in your body as if it were an "esthetic object"—something that is looked at only from the outside. Now, I encourage you to experience your body mindfully from the inside. Here's how to do that:

1. First, choose a quiet, private, and comfortable place to lie down. Make sure you will not be distracted by the phone, television, bright lighting, or interruptions from friends or family. Once there, lie down on your back and allow your eyes to gently close.
2. Simply become aware of your breathing as you slowly inhale and exhale. Notice your stomach rising and falling with each breath.
3. Then, simply become aware of sensations from your body as a whole. Notice how your body feels. Notice how it feels where it touches your clothing, where it touches the surface beneath you.
4. Focus on the toes of your left foot. Be aware of how they feel. As you pay attention to them, see if you can transfer your experience of breathing to them, as if you are breathing *into* your toes and breathing out *from* your toes. Just imagine the sensations of your breathing moving downward from your nose first to your belly and then to your toes. Just focus on the sensations of this breathing into your toes. Allow yourself to experience this. If you cannot, just be aware that this is not your experience. That's okay. Not having these sensations is your real experience. There's nothing to judge.

5. Slowly move on, transferring the sensations of breathing in and out to another part of your body, followed by another part, and then another, as you move the flow of your breathing and your awareness to specific areas throughout your body.

The aim of the body scan is to mindfully experience in the present whatever occurs. It's not a test. It is a valuable opportunity for you to learn to be mindful and to accept whatever your experiences are, without judging them. I strongly encourage you to give yourself a full or partial body scan for about twenty to thirty minutes a day for at least a couple of weeks. You will see that your capacity for mindfulness will grow. Ultimately, you'll see how this capacity can contribute to your acceptance of your body "on the outside."

Be Mindful of Minutiae

You can cultivate mindfulness as you carry out routine chores and tasks in your daily life. These are the things we most often do mindlessly, because they are so familiar or habitual they are on "automatic" and require no thought. Here are some examples:

- Sitting and standing
- Walking around a room, in random directions
- Climbing and descending stairs
- Taking a shower
- Brushing your teeth
- Sweeping the floor
- Drinking a glass of water
- Petting your cat or dog
- Dressing and undressing
- Cooking
- Eating
- Washing dishes
- Listening to music
- Gardening
- Walking in the rain
- Making love

By doing these activities mindfully, you will stay focused in the present and on your mental and sensory experiences. If your attention drifts elsewhere, don't judge it. This is what minds do. They wander. So just notice it and then bring your attention back to the activity.

These three exercises are just a small sample of ways that you can begin to help yourself create a life of mindfulness and acceptance. Later, in Step 6 of this workbook, you'll learn Body-and-Mind Relaxation exercises that can further enhance your mindful acceptance of your experiences. If you're curious, take a peek at Learning Body-and-Mind Relaxation in that chapter. Moreover, in the Recommended Resources section at the end of this workbook, you will find some terrific books filled with useful insights and exercises for the enhancement of mindfulness and acceptance.

Right now, I want to introduce a very special activity. It enables you to begin to directly apply mindfulness and acceptance to your body image.

MIRROR REFLECTIONS

I once conducted a research survey and asked people, "What do you see when you look in the mirror?" Here are excerpts from some poignant "reflections":

What I see I really hate. I hate my thighs. I hate my butt. My mouth is too big. My hair is too straight. I wish I didn't have to spend so much time on my looks. Tomorrow, I'll start working out. (white woman, age twenty-five)

What I see is a body I regret to call my own. I wasn't fond of it as a child. I really disliked it as a teenager. My adult years have been filled with constant contempt of my ugly fat body. I would trade it in for almost anything else. (white man, age forty-five)

I see a slim, healthy-looking woman, until I look into her eyes. What am I going to do about these bags growing under my eyes? I look pretty good for thirty-two. But what will I see when I'm fifty or sixty? Perish the thought! (white woman, age thirty-two)

I see an average-looking dude. I wish I was bigger. I wish my hair was thicker. I wish I was a couple of inches taller. Why am I kidding myself? I'm less than an average-looking dude. I'd settle for average. (African-American man, age twenty-six)

I see an old fart. How and when did this happen? (white man, age sixty-three)

I see a tall, well-built young man who has a crippling injury of his right hand. If it weren't for my deformity, I'd be the happiest guy in the world. (white man, age nineteen)

I see a gal who looks pretty good. Just don't ask her to take her clothes off. Then you'll get another story. But I'll spare you the ugly details. (Hispanic woman, age forty-one)

I see a woman who looks like a girl. If it weren't for my big nipples I'd have no breasts at all. (white woman, age thirty-one)

I see a fairly attractive young lady who can't stop thinking about the things that keep her from being a very attractive young lady. (white woman, age twenty-eight)

I see a skinny guy with a receding hairline and acne scars. I see a loser!
(Hispanic man, age thirty-one)

What I try to see (but can't) is what I dream about being: Rich! Rich enough to afford plastic surgery on my nose, to have my teeth fixed plus a chin implant, to have my makeup and hair done professionally. Then, there are the fashionable clothes. Dream on! I'm always going to be a plain Jane. (white woman, age thirty-three)

I see a short girl with an hourglass figure, but the sand has all settled on the bottom.
(white woman, age nineteen)

All I see is a guy in a wheelchair with skinny legs. Unfortunately, I know that's all everybody else sees too. (Asian man, age forty-eight)

I see that I need to lose weight. My arms are covered with dark hair that I'm always hiding or bleaching. Why can't I be as pretty as other girls? (white woman, age twenty-two)

When I look in the mirror, I see nothing. That's because I'm too scared to open my eyes. Sorry.
(Pacific Islander woman, age nineteen)

I see zits and fat cheeks. Yuck! (white woman, age nineteen)

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all? It ain't me, babe!
(Hispanic woman, age thirty-eight)

Your Current Mirror Reflections

So what do you see when you look in the mirror? Before learning how to apply mindfulness and acceptance, first answer this question based on your characteristic experience of looking at yourself in the mirror. Spend about five minutes privately viewing your reflection in a full-length mirror. Please do this without being overly clothed. For example, even though it may be a bit uncomfortable, view yourself while wearing only your underclothes, after you've taken a bath or shower. Be mindful of what you are looking at, the thoughts that pass through your head, and the emotions you are aware of. Use the following Self-Discovery Helpsheet to record this experience.

Your Mindful Mirror Reflections

If you are like many people, your experience of looking at your reflection in the mirror is probably biased, judgmental, and mindless. It is biased to the extent that you focus on some aspects of your physical self and not others. A negative body image leads you to focus on "what's wrong" with your looks—what you have the strongest concerns about. These are your body image hot spots. Your bias

Self-Discovery Helpsheet: Reflections in My Mirror

What do you see when you look in the mirror?

What thoughts run through your mind as you view your reflection?

What emotional reactions do you have as you look at your reflection?

also means that you have blind spots, which are the facets of your appearance that you neglect to focus on in the mirror.

Your experience is also likely to be judgmental. You don't merely observe. You evaluate, and you do so critically. Your inner thoughts may use harsh words. You say "fat" or "ugly" or "gross" or other words similar to those of many of the people I quoted earlier in this chapter. Understandably, this can be a very emotional experience that triggers discomfort, disgust, or despair. Maybe you compare what you see with what you wish you saw. Maybe this leads to thoughts about how you could "fix" what you see, by changing your body or concealing certain aspects of your body. Maybe you leave the present to recall past disappointments with your body or jump to the future and make predictions about what might happen because of how you are judging your looks. Maybe these judgments and uncomfortable emotions lead you to want to avoid looking at yourself and cause you to retreat from the mirror.

Finally, the experience is likely to be a mindless one. You are not merely standing back and objectively observing your thoughts and feelings. You are reacting to them. You are in your mind and not "out of your mind." You are not controlling your mind; rather, it is controlling you.

Now it's time to apply mindfulness and acceptance in an exercise of looking at your reflection in the mirror. This is not a silly little assignment. It is a very important opportunity to begin to change how you experience your body. In fact, scientific studies have verified that this exercise can produce meaningful improvements in those with body image problems (e.g., Delinsky and Wilson 2006; Hilbert, Tuschen-Caffier, and Vögele 2002; Key et al. 2002). What makes this "mirror exposure" experience especially significant and helpful is that it actually represents a microcosm of your body image experiences in your daily life. Therefore the exercise is an excellent training ground in developing a new mind-set that you can carry with you everywhere—even beyond the mirror.

I'll guide you step-by-step through Mindful Mirror Reflections. Let's do this in four sessions, each separated by one day. Allow about twenty minutes for each session. After each session, use the Helpsheets for Change that follows to summarize your experiences.

Mindful Mirror Reflections

SESSION 1

- Use a full-length mirror where you have complete privacy and won't be interrupted. Dress as you normally do.
- Stand in front of the mirror and for two minutes look at your reflection from head to toe. Rather than zooming in on hot spots or ignoring blind spots, I want you to look at each area of your body. View your body from the front, side, and back.
- Then, from head to toe describe each aspect or feature of your body. Describe it *out loud*. Describe it as you would to a blind person who wants to know what you look like, or to an artist who is sketching you without seeing you.
- Be objectively descriptive, not evaluative or judgmental. Include descriptions of color, texture, size, shape, symmetry, etc. Do not use subjectively critical or exaggerating words

("ugly face," "gross," "dumpy," "scrawny legs," "bad hair," "beady eyes," "fat ass," and so forth). If you become aware that you expressed a judgment or criticism, pause to look at the feature again and use a more objective, factual term.

- Continue to look at your body from all angles. If there are areas or features you are aware of that you left out, describe them objectively and nonjudgmentally.
- Complete your session by spending a minute silently looking at your total reflection, your body as a whole and not as parts.
- During this session, be aware of any feelings you experience at the moment that you are viewing and describing a particular feature. Just notice your feelings and briefly describe them aloud (e.g., "I am feeling happy" or "I am feeling anxious"). Then simply shift your attention to the next area you will describe objectively.

SESSION 2

- Repeat everything you did in Session 1. This time move from toe to head, instead of from head to toe, and again view your body from the front, side, and back. Be sure to attend to both hot spots and blind spots.
- At the end, spend three minutes silently looking at your body as a whole, not as parts.

SESSIONS 3 AND 4

- In these two sessions, you will do exactly what you did in Sessions 1 and 2, except that you will dress differently. Wear more revealing attire so that you can see more of your own skin. Ideally, you would be wearing only your underwear. If you are too uncomfortable to do so at this point, then wear shorts and a snug, sleeveless top.
- In Session 3, you'll wear less and follow the instructions for Session 1.
- In Session 4, you'll wear less and follow the instructions for Session 2.

Helpsheet for Change: Mindful Mirror Reflections

Describe your experiences of each session. How did it feel? What did you learn?

Session 1: _____

Session 2: _____

Session 3: _____

Session 4: _____

UNDERSTANDING YOUR BODY IMAGE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

In Step 1, you summarized your self-discoveries in your personal Body Image Profile. It highlights how you generally think, feel, and act in regard to your body image. However, each occurrence, or episode, of body image distress has its own unique elements—specific thoughts, emotions, and behaviors—that unfold in reaction to particular situations and events. Changing your body image requires that you examine and understand the specifics of each distressing episode as it takes place. This is possible when you keep a special diary that works like a videotape recording the moment-to-moment expression of your body image.

I will teach you how to successfully monitor your experiences and record them in your Body Image Diary. This will build on your Mindful Mirror Reflections exercises. The primary purpose of self-monitoring and diary-keeping is to facilitate your mindful understanding and acceptance of your body image thoughts and feelings and how they unfold and affect you from day to day. This kind of self-discovery is a helpful catalyst for body image acceptance and is supported by research (Cash and Hrabosky 2003).

Mindful Self-Monitoring

One basic tenet of most psychological therapies is that people can solve their personal problems if they can learn to examine their own minds and actions with objectivity and accuracy. If you no longer want to be controlled by negative emotions, you must be able to step back from your subjective experience and ask yourself the following fundamental questions:

- What am I feeling?
- What just happened to lead me to feel this way?
- What am I saying to myself in this situation?
- How am I reacting (or wanting to react) behaviorally to this experience?

Asking and answering these questions reflects a powerful process called *mindful self-monitoring*. Self-monitoring is analogous to eavesdropping on yourself. You become consciously attuned to specific aspects of your own ongoing experience. You observe precisely what is going on. When body image feelings occur, you identify what emotions you're having. You pinpoint what's happened in the situation that has triggered these emotions. You listen objectively to the thoughts and perceptions that are running through your mind. You also monitor how you behave in reaction to these thoughts and emotions.

Mindful self-monitoring is a skill, and skills can only develop through practice. Most people with a negative body image focus only on being upset and on blaming their appearance for their unhappiness. They just feel what they feel and do what they do. They react reflexively and never step back to dissect their experience objectively.

Plenty of people respond to the notion of self-monitoring by claiming they already do it and it doesn't help. They say, "I'm always analyzing my looks. I'm always focusing on how crummy I feel about

my body." Being intensely aware of your appearance or deeply immersed in emotion is not self-monitoring—it's actually part of the problem you want to change.

To change, you must develop a more objective view of your experiences. If you've loathed your looks for many years, it's difficult to separate the self-hatred from whatever it is about your appearance that you hate. Besides, if you've persuaded yourself that your body is the problem, then your body image miseries will seem justified. You argue, "My awful looks make me feel awful." In time, you'll see that you're wrong, so bear with me. With time and practice, you can become open, observant, and objective enough to monitor reality and change your self-hating or negative body image experiences.

EPISODES

Some people insist that they don't have episodes of body image distress. When the concept is explained to them, all they see is that "life is one big, nonstop episode." Allow me to explain what I mean by an episode. Although you may "always" dislike your nose, your weight, your pear shape, or any other physical attribute, you aren't constantly thinking about it, nor are you continually upset about it. Like a sleeping dragon, your discontent is sometimes dormant; other times it breathes fire and belches smoke. Something happens to rouse your dissatisfaction. Then, as you dwell on that something, your emotions are aroused and become especially negative and intense. These particularly troublesome times that enter your consciousness are what I mean by *body image episodes*.

Learning Your Body Image ABCs

You probably have experienced some episodes that repeat themselves like a broken record. If that is the case, take some time to recollect several recent episodes of body image distress, particularly ones that you expect to recur. You will identify three elements of each episode and record them in your Body Image Diary. The following three elements make up the *ABC Sequence*. They are derived from figure 3.1, depicting your here-and-now body image experiences:

1. **A** stands for the **Activators**. What events activated or triggered your feelings about your looks? In your diary, you'll write down a brief, specific description of the situation and occurrences that immediately preceded your distress.
2. **B** stands for your **Beliefs**—your thoughts about and interpretations of the activating events *that were going through your mind at the time*. *Replay the tape—the mental conversation you were having with yourself*. How were you viewing the situation? What were you saying to yourself about the events? Recalling your thoughts out of their actual context can be difficult. Remind yourself by filling in the blank: "I was thinking _____," or "I was probably thinking _____."
3. **C** stands for the **Consequences** of your thoughts and beliefs. How did you react emotionally? How did you react behaviorally?

In your Body Image Diary, you will describe the Consequences in terms of the *TIDE* of the episode. *TIDE* is an acronym to help you analyze the four essential aspects of consequences that occur:

1. **T** stands for the Type of emotion you felt in the situation. Self-consciousness? Anxiety? Anger? Depression? Shame? Disgust? Envy? Embarrassment? A mixture of emotions? Identify the feeling or feelings that you had.
2. **I** stands for the Intensity of your emotions. Rate their strength at their peak, from 0 for "not at all intense" to 10 for "extremely intense."
3. **D** stands for the episode's Duration. How long did your distress last? About how many minutes or hours did it take before you felt noticeably better?
4. **E** represents the Effects of the episode on your behavior. Your actions at this point are often reflexive efforts to cope with or defend yourself against your unwanted emotions. Did you try to get out of the situation? Did you become sullen and withdraw? Did you attempt to fix or conceal the part of your physical self that you were bothered about? Did you take your feelings out on others? Did you take them out on yourself?

The more types of emotions you feel with greater intensity for a longer duration and with more behavioral effects, the more powerful the episode—like being caught up in a turbulent *TIDE*.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR BODY IMAGE DIARY

A personal Body Image Diary is an essential tool for learning to deal with your body image difficulties and to accept your looks. The Helpsheet for Change at the end of this chapter shows the format for monitoring, dissecting, and recording the ABC Sequences of your negative body image episodes. Just write out the format of the diary in a personal notebook. (This may be more convenient than photocopying the Helpsheet and having lots of unbound sheets of paper to keep up with.)

Retrospective Self-Monitoring

Because your negative body image emotions may interfere with learning to self-monitor, let's start off by monitoring experiences from your recent past. Soon you'll be able to use your new ability right in the middle of an upsetting body image episode. So, now, I'll ask you to do three things:

1. First, to see how to record an episode in the Body Image Diary, examine the two sample diary entries that precede the blank Body Image Diary page that you will use as the format to record your own body image experiences.
2. Then, go back to Step 1 and review your answers to the Body Image Distress Test and the Body Image Thoughts Test. This will remind you of your Activators and your Beliefs that produce your own troublesome Consequences.

3. To become skilled in identifying your body image ABCs, complete your Body Image Diary for five or more recent, past episodes. For each, mentally recreate the experience. Close your eyes and picture the situation. Replay your mental tape of the episode—the triggering events and your thoughts, emotions, and actions.

After analyzing the ABC Sequence and Emotional TIDE of past episodes, you'll be ready for current, up-to-date self-monitoring.

Here-and-Now Self-Monitoring

For at least four or five days, monitor any episode as it occurs. Apply what you've learned about mindfulness and acceptance in this Step. Just observe the ABCs as they unfold. Be aware of the situational events that activate your inner experiences. Don't try to change the episode. Just let it flow and observe your experiences without judging them. Listen to the thoughts you have as if they were the dialogue from a movie you are watching. Attend to your emotions. What are they? How strong are they? What do you do or want to do in reaction to these thoughts and feelings?

Afterward, as soon as possible, make a Body Image Diary entry.

FINAL WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Acquiring a mindful and accepting perspective on your body image experiences doesn't magically happen overnight. You should integrate what you've learned in this chapter into your life. Please repeat and practice the various exercises so that they can become a part of you. Keep using your Body Image Diary each day so that you can become more and more mindful, not only of how these experiences flow but also of how they are changing.

To conclude Step 3, I want to share with you a Buddhist saying that captures the essence of this Step:

*The secret of health for both mind and body is
Not to mourn for the past, not to worry about the future,
And not to anticipate troubles,
But to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly.*

I also wish to share the titles of some very useful books that will enlighten and help you create a life (and body image) of mindfulness and acceptance. For these titles, please refer to the Recommended Resources section of this book. For additional resources for the material covered in Step 3, look in the Mindfulness and Acceptance listings. And I encourage you to go online to learn more about these and other resources.

Helpsheet for Change: Sample Body Image Diary for Carole

Date: *July 20*

ABC Sequence of My Body Image Experiences

Activators (Triggering events and situations): *Attended a pool party where I had to wear a swimsuit and eat lunch in front of others—especially guys.*

Beliefs (Thoughts and interpretations about my appearance and myself):
I kept thinking I looked fat and flabby compared to the other girls there. I wished I could be invisible. I wondered what guys were thinking about how I looked. I thought they were "totally grossed out." I thought if they saw me eat anything they'd really notice I was fat. I kept thinking that I had to lose weight soon.

Consequences (Emotional TIDE):

Types of emotions: *Anxiety, self-consciousness, and despair; angry with myself.*

Intensity of emotions (0 to 10): *9*

Duration of the episode: *For the entire time I was there (4 hours)*

Effects of the episode on my behavior: *I got quiet and didn't talk much with anybody except Sharon, my best friend. I didn't eat anything (but did drink too much wine). I didn't go in the pool. Just kept a towel around me most of the time. I made Sharon leave with me before the party was over.*

Helpsheet for Change: Sample Body Image Diary for Larry

Date: *February 4*

ABC Sequence of My Body Image Experiences

Activators (Triggering events and situations): *Making out in bed with my girlfriend, Jessica.*

Beliefs (Thoughts and interpretations about my appearance and myself):
As usual, very distracted by thoughts about how my body isn't muscular enough. Kept thinking she was wishing I was better built and was secretly turned off. I was worried that she might touch me in places that are skinny or bony. Kept thinking about how to get out of this situation.

Consequences (Emotional TIDE):

Types of emotions: *Anxiety, shame, and self-consciousness; felt guilty for disappointing her.*

Intensity of emotions (0 to 10): *5*

Duration of the episode: *15 minutes*

Effects of the episode on my behavior: *I was fidgety and quickly lost my interest in having sex so I stopped. I "fibbed"—told Jessica I had a sore back from working out. Left the room to go check e-mails and tried not to think about this.*

Helpsheet for Change: Sample Body Image Diary for _____

Date: _____

ABC Sequence of My Body Image Experiences

Activators (Triggering events and situations):

Beliefs (Thoughts and interpretations about my appearance and myself):

Consequences (Emotional TIDE):

Types of emotions: _____

Intensity of emotions (0 to 10): _____

Duration of the episode: _____

Effects of the episode on my behavior:

STEP 4

Seeing Beneath the Surface of Your Private Body Talk

Are you talking to yourself again? Of course you are! We all talk to ourselves in the privacy of our own minds. This is called an *internal dialogue*, or mental conversation. Your silent dialogues consist of thoughts that reflect your perceptions and interpretations of actual or potential events in your life. These mental conversations also include *self-statements*—thoughts and inferences or conclusions about yourself. Your emotions flow from how you talk to yourself about yourself. Step 3 should have helped you become increasingly attuned to your internal conversations.

Your inner discourse often happens without you realizing that you're talking to yourself. These mental processes are so ingrained that they occur automatically. They are not intentional, conscious thought. This habitual, automatic-pilot mode of thought just happens and, in a sense, is mindless—because you aren't aware of or thinking about your thinking.

Among the obvious liabilities of mindlessness is the fact that you don't know your own mind. You don't see the crucial connections between your silent assumptions, thoughts, and interpretations and how you feel and act. Usually you notice only the emotions that these dialogues generate. So, you end up having to deal with all of these feelings, especially if they are negative and intense. Rarely do you reverse your mental tape and listen closely and objectively to the inner conversations that led you astray. But that's exactly what must be done.

THE VOICES WITHIN: YOUR PRIVATE BODY TALK

To overcome your body image difficulties, you must first become mindfully aware of your inner conversations, especially those that deal with your physical appearance. I call these internal dialogues your *Private*

Body Talk. Fortunately, you're already in training. For a while, since you finished Step 3, you've been monitoring and keeping a diary of the ABC Sequence of your body image experiences—the Activators, Beliefs, and Consequences of those experiences. You've begun to observe and accept your thoughts and feelings as they are, rather than treating them as ultimate truths or something you must avoid. What happens during the B stage will influence your emotional responses to the activating events. It will also affect how you try to defend yourself against your uncomfortable emotions. Of course, B is the part of your mind where your Private Body Talk takes place—where biased, irrational, and self-defeating conversations occur.

Let me illustrate how crucial different styles of Private Body Talk can be: Kerri and Sherri are identical twins. One day, they're together in the dressing room at a health club. After working out, both are in a pretty good mood. Before leaving, each looks at herself in the mirror for a few moments. Afterward, Kerri leaves feeling bummed out and down on herself. Sherri, on the other hand, walks away feeling particularly upbeat and confident about herself. Given that these two women look exactly alike, we must wonder what happened here.

What happened was the Private Body Talk that each twin had with herself while looking at her reflection in the mirror. Kerri's Private Body Talk said "Oh God, I look so ugly. I absolutely detest the way I look. I'm fat. If I don't lose ten pounds, nobody will ever be attracted to me. I hate my face. Look at my stupid fleshy cheeks. Everybody who knows me thinks I'm repulsive." No wonder Kerri walked away from the mirror (and her Private Body Talk) feeling miserable and wishing she could crawl into a hole and hide.

In spite of the fact that they are identical twins, Sherri's Private Body Talk was hardly identical: Her Private Body Talk went like this, "Gee, I look kind of nice today. I really like this new lip gloss. It makes me want to smile, which shows my nice teeth. This blue shirt accentuates the blue in my eyes. I love blue. I'd like to lose a few pounds, but my life won't end if I don't. Besides, my body really feels energized from my workout today and I feel great."

Whose Private Body Talk sounds more like yours? Like Kerri, do you torture yourself with a stream of malicious remarks and dire predictions? How derogatory are the dialogues that you've recorded in your diary? To change your self-demeaning Private Body Talk, you must ask another important question: "Why do I do this to myself? Why do I carry on such self-disparaging dialogues in the first place?"

I'll tell you why. To do that, let's go back to the twins and ask this question: Why did Sherri have an inner conversation that gave her confidence and cheerfulness, while Kerri's Private Body Talk had nothing nice to say and made her miserable? You might guess that their parents or peers may have interacted more favorably with Sherri than with her sister. Perhaps some people somehow preferred her and praised her looks more. Maybe it stemmed from when she was six years old and their daddy nicknamed her "my little chipmunk." Maybe she had a more bothersome bout with teen acne than Sherri did. Maybe Kerri used to have a boyfriend who badgered her to shed weight because he "liked the cheerleader look."

Maybe, maybe, maybe ... you could go on forever guessing about the differences in the twins' personal histories that forged different Private Body Talk. You'd probably be right in some of your speculations. It's true that disturbing events can have a lasting effect on your body image and how you think about yourself. I suspect that you wrote about some of these personal experiences in Step 2 of the workbook. Such unfortunate events may have taught you something—something that fed upon itself and remains with you still. This "something" drives your negative Private Body Talk and causes you body image distress. Now, I'll explain exactly what this "something" is and I'll tell you what you can do about it.

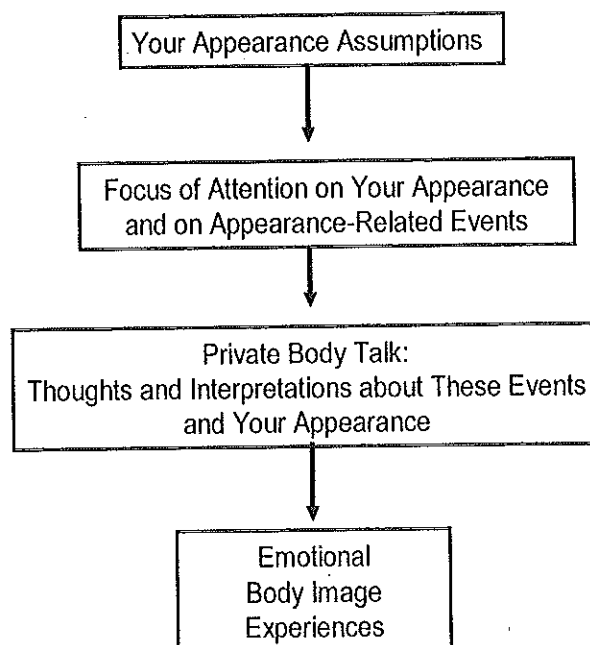
SILENT ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT YOUR APPEARANCE

Whether due to traumatic insults ("Hey, Elephant Girl" or "Look at Bony Boy"), family messages ("Look how pretty your sister is" or "Your complexion looks terrible" or "You're pudgy and need to go on a diet"), or cultural socialization ("Thin is in and feminine" and "Real men have massive muscles"), you've learned certain basic beliefs or assumptions about the meaning of your looks in your life. These core assumptions, which psychologists call *schemas*, determine how you interpret reality. They operate like templates or guides that influence what you pay attention to, how you think about the events in your life, and how you think about yourself. Your schemas are so much a part of you that you've ceased being aware of them; they are "self-evident truths" that you mindlessly take for granted.

Like everyone, you have various schemas that guide your thoughts about all kinds of things, such as love and relationships, success and failure, and the meaning of gender or race. You also have assumptions that direct how you think about your own physical characteristics. I call these self-schemas *Appearance Assumptions*. Appearance Assumptions are your core beliefs about the relevance and influence of your looks in your life. They concern the extent to which you define yourself and your self-worth on the basis of what you look like. You probably never stop to question their accuracy. Most likely, you ignore or reject any possible evidence that your Appearance Assumptions might be off base. Appearance Assumptions are your body image "rulers"—in both senses of this word. They are the dictators of your Private Body Talk, and they are the yardsticks by which you measure your physical acceptability.

Take a look at the following diagram (figure 4.1). It shows how Appearance Assumptions eventually lead to the emotions you feel that relate to your appearance.

Figure 4.1
From Assumptions to Emotions

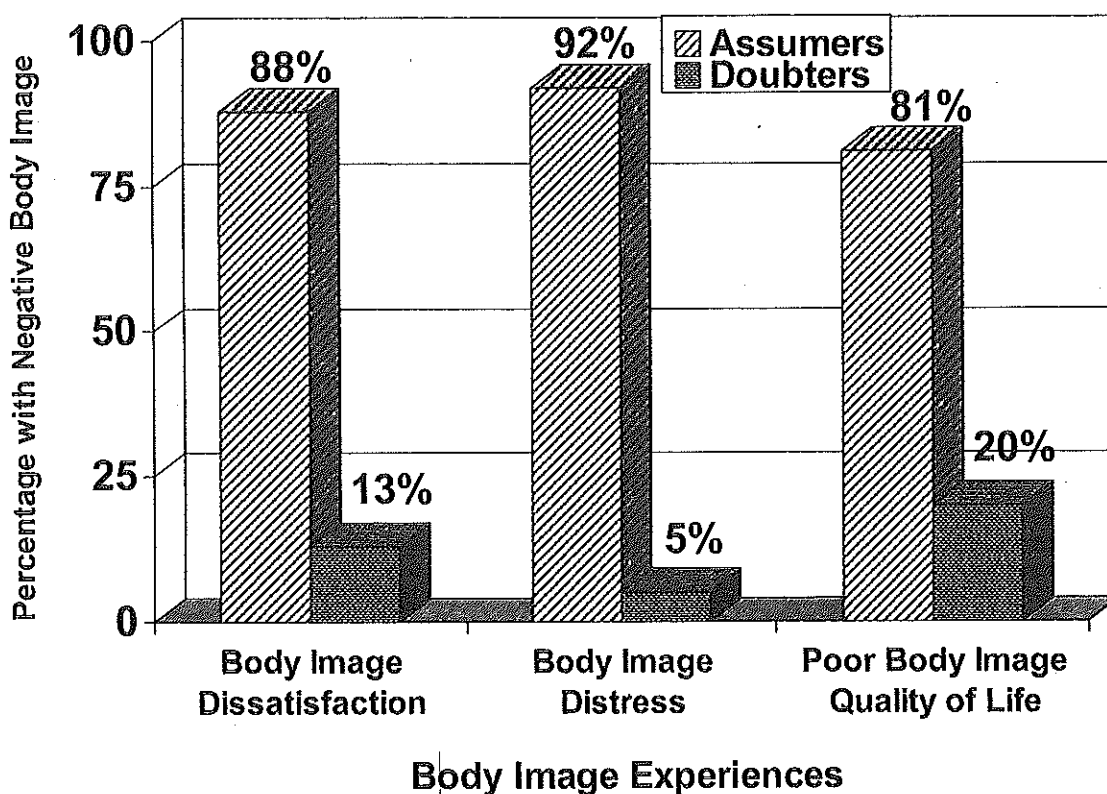


In Step 1 of the workbook, one of the self-tests you took, the Appearance Importance Test, provided an index of your Appearance Assumptions—your investment in your looks for self-worth. Go back to your Body Image Profile and see what your results were for this self-test. If you scored in the Risky or Problem Zones, then Step 4 has plenty of help to offer you.

HOW APPEARANCE ASSUMPTIONS DICTATE YOUR DISCONTENT

My computer stores research data from hundreds of people who answered the same body image self-tests that you took in Step 1. I divided these people into two groups. The first group are “Assumers”—those who agreed with most Appearance Assumptions from the Appearance Importance Test. The second group, “Doubters,” disagreed with most assumptions. I compared Assumers and Doubters to find out what percentage of each group revealed body image difficulties on the three of the other self-tests. The results in figure 4.2 are quite striking. Here’s what they reveal.

Figure 4.2
How Do Appearance Assumptions Affect Your Body Image?



On each self-test, the vast majority of Assumers clearly had more problematic body image experiences than the Doubters did. They were much more dissatisfied with most aspects of their appearance. They more often felt body image distress across a range of everyday situations. They experienced a much poorer body image quality of life, with more adverse consequences to their social and psychological well-being. Appearance Assumption Doubters seldom had a negative body image. They had a more positive, accepting view of their appearance, had episodes of body image distress infrequently, and felt that their body image contributed favorably to the quality of their lives.

Assumers' Private Body Talk always seems to disrupt their peace of mind, while Doubters are more clearheaded about their looks. Step 4 will enable you become a Doubter instead of an Assumer.

TEN TAXING APPEARANCE ASSUMPTIONS

There are numerous Appearance Assumptions that can influence your body image experiences. However, let's focus on ten particularly potent beliefs. These are listed in the Self-Discovery Helpsheets below. Before reading any further, please complete this Helpsheet.

Self-Discovery Helpsheet: Ten Appearance Assumptions

Read each statement below and check those that you honestly believe to be true or mostly true.

- ☐ 1. Physically attractive people have it all.
- ☐ 2. My worth as a person depends on how I look.
- ☐ 3. I should always do whatever I can to look my best.
- ☐ 4. The first thing that people will notice about me is what's wrong with my appearance.
- ☐ 5. If people knew how I really look, they would probably like me less.
- ☐ 6. By managing my physical appearance, I can control my social and emotional life.
- ☐ 7. My appearance is responsible for much of what has happened to me in my life.
- ☐ 8. If I could look just as I wish, my life would be much happier.
- ☐ 9. My culture's messages make it impossible for me to be satisfied with my appearance.
- ☐ 10. The only way I could ever accept my looks would be to change my looks.

Conversing with Your Assumptions: Your New Inner Voice

Self-esteem comes from the ability to experience yourself honestly and accurately. There are two psychological forces that may lead you to play mind games in which you hold a distorted view of yourself and your body image. These forces prevent you from making worthwhile changes. The first is *self-deception*. Because honest self-awareness can make you uncomfortable with your shortcomings, you may deceive yourself to achieve a false sense of self-acceptance. For example, you may gloss over or deny how demeaning your Private Body Talk is because you'd prefer not to think of yourself as so viciously self-critical.

A second force that may lead you to play mind games is based on a *need for self-consistency*. You've decided that your view of yourself is the absolute truth, so you can see only things that consistently confirm these self-perceptions, however unflattering. For example, you may have convinced yourself that your nasty inner conversations about your looks are the only valid view that could possibly exist. You insist that you should have a negative body image. If this is so, then, obviously, your self-deception and your need for self-consistency will interfere with your being able to change what you need to change to be happier with your appearance and yourself.

Cognitive therapy can help you develop honest and accepting self-awareness. This approach teaches you how to find, listen to, and nurture that aspect of yourself that I call your New Inner Voice. This voice speaks in ways that are mindful, understanding, tolerant, fair, realistic, logical, and assured. This New Inner Voice doesn't care where you are on anybody's scale of physical attractiveness. It cares about and accepts you! It doesn't sound a bit like the old critical voice of your upsetting Private Body Talk.

Impeaching your long-standing Appearance Assumptions isn't easy. The first words of your New Inner Voice will simply question the validity and value of your assumptions, purposefully challenging their authority over your thoughts and emotions. Each assumption paints a picture, and your New Inner Voice will ask, "What's wrong with this picture?" Each is an arguable assumption, containing a bit of truth and a lot of falsehood. Tackling the ten Appearance Assumptions, one at a time, will make you more aware of the falsehoods and leave you with a more reasonable mind-set. After reading about these assumptions, you will use a Helpsheet for Change to create a New Inner Voice that speaks to each assumption.

Assumption 1: Physically Attractive People Have It All

Society's preoccupation with and marketing of physical attractiveness reinforces the assumption that being good-looking pays bigger benefits than it actually does. The undeniable truth is that being good-looking is sometimes advantageous. However, as the French author Stendhal asserted in his famous essay on love in 1822, "Beauty is only the promise of happiness." Nonetheless, for many reasons, attractiveness doesn't keep most of its promises. There are also plenty of reasons why being average-looking or less doesn't close off opportunities for happiness. To help you challenge Appearance Assumption 1, I want to take a few pages here to explain to you why looks aren't everything. These are not reasons that I made up; these are facts established by scientific research on the psychology of physical appearance (Cash 1990; Feingold 1992; Jackson 1992).

- Fact 1: *Beauty is as beauty does.* It's true. Actions do speak more loudly than looks. Friendliness, warmth, intelligence, honesty, a sense of humor, and social sensitivity are highly valued human traits, regardless of what you look like. Think about people who are important in your life. Are they all perfect 10s on the appearance scale? I'll bet their looks aren't that crucial to how you feel about them.
- Fact 2: *First impressions don't always last.* Our initial reactions to someone's appearance are not frozen forever in our minds. We come to see good people as increasingly good-looking. Have you ever met a person whose appearance wasn't so appealing, but as your relationship evolved, that person's looks seemed more and more interesting and attractive? On the other hand, have you ever noticed how the halo of physical attractiveness can fade over time? In 1903, playwright George Bernard Shaw aptly observed, "Beauty is all very well at first sight, but who ever looks at it when it has been in the house three days?"
- Fact 3: *Birds of a feather do flock together.* We are often attracted to people who are similar to us in certain ways. For example, we seek out those with shared interests, ethnic heritage, religious or political values, and educational background. This is sometimes true of physical appearance as well. Many times, best friends, dates, and mates are comparable in physical attractiveness. This pairing off based on similarity of attractiveness has the fortunate result that nobody gets left out.
- Fact 4: *Beauty can backfire by implying egotism.* Appearance Assumption 1 ignores the "ugly faces of beauty." Paradoxically, the assumed advantages of physical attractiveness can cause disadvantages. If we believe that good-looking people are desirable and reap social benefits, we may also think that they are well aware of their good looks and their privileged status. So we infer that they must be self-absorbed and opportunistic. Then, we may assume they are less responsible or trustworthy as friends, romantic partners, or parents. This negative (and false) stereotype of attractive people can complicate or cancel the benefits of their looks.
- Fact 5: *Beauty can backfire because of sexism.* Another factor that undermines the power of attractiveness is sexism. Pretty women are sometimes presumed to possess "feminine" personality traits, such as passivity and emotionality. Handsome guys are sometimes thought to have "masculine" characteristics, such as a dominant personality and a low "emotional IQ." Although these stereotypes are untrue, such sexist biases about physical attractiveness erode some of its positive power.
- Fact 6: *Beauty breeds envy and jealousy.* The eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon once said that "beauty is an outward gift which is seldom despised, except by those to whom it has been refused." Have you ever heard anyone exclaim, "They are so good-looking (or thin, or well built). I hate them"? When we compare ourselves to people who have the looks we idealize, we usually end up feeling worse about our own appearance and then we dislike these good-looking people for "making" us feel unattractive. My own

research has concluded that people who are highly invested in being physically attractive are more likely to distrust and disparage good-looking people of their own sex.

- Fact 7: *Beauty can transform people into sex objects.* In a well-known popular song, Rod Stewart posed the question “Do ya think I’m sexy?” Although most of us want our romantic partners to find us sexy, few of us enjoy being seen solely as a sex object by everyone we encounter. Good-looking people, especially women, are often subjected to unwelcome sexual comments about their bodies. These remarks are frequently demeaning and harassing. Would you really want to be seen as only a sexy body or a pretty face?
- Fact 8: *Beauty can foster self-doubt.* Fact 7, above, gives rise to another problem for attractive people: They may think that people are nice to them only because they are attractive. Allow me to explain this by repeating a conversation I once had with my longtime friend, Nancy, who is strikingly lovely. One day, I complimented her, telling her how beautiful I thought she was. To my surprise, she became very upset and said, “I thought you liked me for who I am. Now, I’ll never be sure that it’s not just because of what I happen to look like.” Nancy’s point poses important questions. Wouldn’t you rather know that people like you because you’re a splendid person and not merely because you’re nice to look at? Wouldn’t you rather feel that you deserve the recognition you get than have to wonder if somebody’s being nice to you just because he or she is enchanted with your looks?
- Fact 9: *Beauty is a weak foundation for self-esteem.* The more people invest in a “beauty bank,” the more vulnerable their self-worth becomes. So, contrary to Appearance Assumption 1, good-looking people don’t have it all, if “it all” rests on being attractive. Time and life events alter one’s appearance—for better or worse. A foundation for self-worth built on beauty is a shaky foundation indeed.
- Fact 10: *Looks don’t matter to everybody.* The nineteenth-century poet Robert Southey wrote, “How little do they see what is, who frame their hasty judgments upon that which seems.” We all know “nearsighted” people who judge others solely on appearances. Fortunately, however, there are many people who aren’t swayed by whether we’re fat or skinny, “dressed to the nines” or wearing our comfy but “sloppy” clothes. They don’t expect us to look perfect. They see us and appreciate us for who we are. We should all try to become more like these terrific appearance-blind individuals. They make our world a more just and accepting place.

Changing a negative body image requires that you seriously question Assumption 1 and keep your looks in perspective. Your New Inner Voice will remind you that beauty is a mixed bag that contains many false promises. In the absence of a positive body image and solid self-esteem, good looks aren’t worth much. Relinquishing stereotypes and pursuits of physical perfection will free you to embrace many opportunities for appreciating yourself.

Assumption 2: My Worth as a Person Depends on How I Look

This important assumption is really at the root of the body image problems of many people. It asserts that your physical appearance is the only or the most crucial aspect of everything that you are. You believe that you are defined by your looks more than by all the assets of your personality, your actions, or your experiences. This belief can lead you to minimize your many fine qualities that have nothing to do with your looks. It can lead you to spend huge amounts of time thinking about or worrying about what you see when you look in the mirror, as well as countless hours trying to create or enhance the looks that you deem essential to your self-worth or social worth. This is a dictatorial assumption that you must challenge! How?

- Mindfully take inventory of all the other aspects of yourself that represent who you are. What are the qualities you possess that you really are happy about? What are your attributes that people who know you value? For example, are you funny? Are you kind, considerate, and emotionally open to others? Are you a good listener? Are you quite knowledgeable about certain topics? What do you like about yourself?
- You need to start hearing your New Inner Voice say, "Instead of what I look like, it's really my caring attitude, infectious sense of humor, devotion to family, competence at my job, conversational skills, ethics and morality, dependability, and so on, that reflect my special worth." In other words, you need to begin to recognize that your looks are less important in defining you than many other attributes of yours.

Assumption 3: I Should Always Do Whatever I Can to Look My Best

The words "should" and "always" imply that looking your best is your duty and that by not looking your best you have failed. Ask yourself the following questions about this assumption:

First of all, why have you saddled yourself with this obligation? What do you expect will happen if you can look your best on all occasions? What might happen if you can't? Looking your best is extremely subjective, so how will you know you've performed your duty? Who can possibly look his or her best all the time? Because we can always imagine ways we might look better, this assumption sets you up for failure by requiring the impossible. Do you require other people to have the best imaginable appearance at all times? Would you be so harshly judgmental if a friend wore less than perfectly flattering clothing, had a hair out of place, or got a zit? I hope not. Nor do I hope that you would tolerate such a demanding expectation from a friend. So why should you demand this of yourself? It's nice to feel that you look nice; it's not nice to feel that you *always* have to.

Your New Inner Voice will speak out against perfectionism: "I enjoy liking how I look, but I could loosen up some. I don't have to look perfect all the time. When I look less than my best, nobody ever commands me to look better—nobody but me! I'm the one pressuring myself. I'm the one giving myself grief! I need to do whatever I can to accept my looks. It's okay to look acceptable, rather than look exceptional."

Assumption 4: The First Thing That People Will Notice About Me Is What's Wrong with My Appearance

Again, this is only a partial truth. Heads will turn if you have spiked orange hair, a large pierced nose ring, or a likeness of Bugs Bunny tattooed on your forehead. But then, you probably want others to take notice. What about having physical characteristics that are not of your choosing? Here's what you must realize in questioning Assumption 4:

- If you're obese or have a pronounced physical disfigurement, few folks will fail to notice. That's the reality of human nature. We all notice what people look like. But, so what? Just because others are aware of this doesn't mean that they'll despise or mistreat you, or that your life is ruined. Your own actions are up to you. Your personality—your friendliness, good humor, kindness, conversational skills, and so forth—is much more influential than whatever might be “wrong” with your looks.
- Assumption 4 is false about most people most of the time. What is true is that you are the one observing what you don't like about your appearance. Other people usually couldn't care less. They've got other things to think about. Of course, if they, too, have a negative body image, they're probably busy being self-conscious and worrying that you will notice their physical imperfections.
- Your New Inner Voice will help you keep things in perspective. It will be saying, “So what if people notice that I'm short, or heavy, or balding, or have a facial scar, or whatever? What difference does that really make? Life goes on! I'm a pretty likable person. People tell me they like me because I'm ...”

Assumption 5: If People Knew How I Really Look, They Would Probably Like Me Less

Assumption 5 is akin to Assumption 4, as both reflect your belief that people are judgmental about your looks. For Assumption 5, however, you believe that others would judge you harshly “if they only knew.” This assumption breeds shame. Believing it will force you into hiding—to conceal those aspects of your physical self that you think other people find repulsive. You worry about what you assume to be the hidden or “naked truth.” The problem with this assumption is that it becomes an untested truth. Disproving Assumption 5 requires that you test it. Hiding only makes you feel worse.

A client of mine, a college student named Harriet, did this program. She had always been ashamed of her “thick legs” and was convinced that anyone who saw them would stare at them in disgust. So she always wore long pants. Finally, one hot day when the program was ending, she conjured up the courage to bring her legs out of hiding and wear shorts to school. She saw me walking across the campus and approached me. “Look, I'm wearing shorts!” Harriet exclaimed. “So far, nobody's run away in horror. I can't believe I avoided doing this for so long.”

- Try this indirect test: Ask yourself how often you stopped liking someone upon discovering some imperfection in his or her appearance. How often have you said or thought something like "I didn't know that Matthew has an appendectomy scar. I'll be sure to avoid him from now on"? Or, "Now that I've seen Sharon without her makeup on, I have no more use for her"? Or, "Becky's breasts are smaller than I first thought they were, so that's the end of our relationship"?
- In Step 6, I'll help you come out of hiding and test this assumption directly, as Harriet did. Once we test the assumption, we typically find that we have been mistaken all along. People accept us, flaws and all. And that feels so much better, and so much more real, than hiding. Your New Inner Voice will help you keep matters in perspective. You are the one who is uncomfortable with your physical feature. It's your own shame, not somebody else's judgment. If people knew how you really look, their opinions would not, in fact, change. Everyone else would be more accepting of you than you are.
- Your New Inner Voice will coax you out of hiding. Listen to it. It will say something like "I worried that I'd be rejected and hurt if people knew how I really look ... that if they saw what I don't like about my body, they'd be revolted and I'd feel bad. But all my worrying makes me feel bad. Would I really feel that much worse if I stopped concealing what I look like? Is it possible that I'm making this into a bigger issue than it really is?"

Assumption 6: By Managing My Physical Appearance, I Can Control My Social and Emotional Life

You have tremendous control over your looks. Consider all the available tools for managing your appearance—clothing, cosmetics, jewelry, hairstyling, hair-coloring, a healthy diet, regular exercise, and sensible skin care. Good grooming can certainly enhance your looks and make you feel attractive. The hazard, however, comes from relying excessively on these tools and believing that they are necessities instead of niceties.

- In arguing with Assumption 6, you must start to see that you cannot effectively manage your self-esteem and your life by asking your appearance to do all the work. Just as a carpenter cannot construct a house with only a hammer, you cannot build a happy life using only your looks.
- Appearance management works only if it improves your body image. Stylish clothes are useless if you don't like how you look in them. Moreover, as you saw for Assumption 5, if all the clothes do is cover parts of your body that you dislike, they aren't really helping your body image. Depending on clothing for damage control only reinforces your belief that your unadorned body is objectionable.
- Review your own experiences for evidence that contradicts Assumption 6. If all your appearance-managing efforts to control your social and emotional life are so effective,

- then why do you still have a negative body image? We can reword Assumption 6 and make it truer; for example, "By changing my body image, I can better control my social and emotional life."
- What will your New Inner Voice say to help you modify this faulty assumption? It will say, "Spending too much effort trying to 'fix' my looks is misdirected effort. Constant repairs on my appearance are only a temporary Band-Aid. I'm still unhappy with my looks. I want to feel better permanently. So, I need to focus on changing my mind instead of my looks. That's a change that will give me more control over my life."

Assumption 7: My Appearance Is Responsible for Much of What Has Happened to Me in My Life

Yes, your appearance has affected some things in your life. At times it paid off, and at times it was a detriment. Nevertheless, most things that have happened in your life had absolutely nothing to do with your looks. Most were either the product of your personality, intelligence, decisions, and actions, or were simply the result of chance or another person's actions.

- History demonstrates that attractiveness is not a prerequisite for success in most endeavors of life other than certain media, performance, or modeling roles. Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Mikhail Gorbachev, Henry Kissinger, and former New York mayors Ed Koch and Rudy Giuliani wouldn't exactly qualify as handsome hunks. Golda Meir, Eleanor Roosevelt, Margaret Thatcher, and Mother Teresa would be unlikely winners of a beauty contest. What widely respected leaders from world history, the arts, or literature can you think of who were not, in your opinion, good-looking? Of course, if you choose your heroes or heroines only from movies or other parts of the media culture based on their physical attractiveness, you are not selecting fairly. Most people we've personally known who have meaningfully touched our lives aren't necessarily great-looking. Can you think of individuals whom you have loved or admired for reasons that had nothing to do with their looks? This is not a rhetorical question. I really want you to think about it.
- Your New Inner Voice argues against Assumption 7 by realizing and saying, "My appearance may have influenced some things in my life, but ultimately, I'm responsible for my life. I can make choices about how I deal with any effects that my looks have. Though my history has already been written, my present and my future are up to me, not to my appearance."

Assumption 8: If I Could Look Just as I Wish, My Life Would Be Much Happier

The trouble with Assumption 8 is its implication: Unless I can look the way I want to (that is, taller, thinner, more muscular, less wrinkled, or with a straighter nose), there's no way I can be happy. What makes you unhappy is not your physical appearance. It's your wish that sells you short and robs you of self-acceptance. Challenge this assumption in these ways:

- Remember this scientifically established truth: Physically attractive people are not necessarily happier than less attractive people. Good-looking individuals have their body image wish lists too.
- Have you ever had experiences in which the more desperately you wanted something, the less you appreciated what you had? To justify your wishing for "the new" you have to berate "the old." Your burning desires destroy your ability to enjoy what you have. Wishing magnifies your discontent, which you believe can be resolved only by getting what you wish.
- Your New Inner Voice can put you in touch with reality. It reminds you that your goal is to achieve a better body image, not to have a different body. Listen to your New Inner Voice say, "I realize that my appearance doesn't really prevent me from being happy. I do know this: I make myself unhappy trying to look like my idealized image. I cause myself despair by beating myself up for my wishes not coming true. Once I learn to accept my looks, my life will be much happier. That's up to me, not my body."

Assumption 9: My Culture's Messages Make It Impossible for Me to Be Satisfied with My Appearance

With this assumption, you make yourself into a victim. Poor me! So you've come to feel powerless? Then, what's the use in trying to change your negative body image? Okay, it's certainly true that the cultural media convey powerful and unhelpful images and messages about physical appearance. They try to convince you there are only two ways that you can be happy and succeed in life. Either you must be born with good looks or you must buy all the products and services needed to manufacture physical perfection. Let's take a closer look at Assumption 9:

- Genius isn't required to recognize how extreme and distorted these messages are. If they were all-controlling, no one would have a positive body image. And some people do like their looks despite these unhelpful forces. That's because they know that personal fulfillment does not require physical perfection. Do you know what is certain to be much worse than not being a perfect 10? It's worrying about not being a perfect 10.
- The media and the huge "appearance industry" certainly make it difficult to accept your body, but difficult isn't the same as impossible. They are indeed a brainwashing force to be reckoned with, but they are not aiming a loaded gun at you and commanding you

to “believe and do everything we say, or else!” What you believe and what you do is entirely up to you. Think about it.

- So what do you do? A character in the movie *Network* proclaimed the media’s injustices by yelling from a rooftop to the passive public below, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not gonna take it anymore!” You don’t have to take it anymore either. Should you trash your television and cease reading magazines or watching music videos? Should you boycott all appearance-altering products and services? Probably not. Our society could certainly use improvements, but the best place to start is within yourself. Your own Private Body Talk does not have to echo the media’s appearance-preoccupied voices. You don’t have to be a victim. Body-accepting individuals have learned how to see these cultural messages as distorted and irrelevant and to tune them out.
- Your New Inner Voice will be assertive and will empower you not to take it anymore. It will say, “I’m tired of expecting myself to look like all these perfect bodies in the media. Seeing them isn’t believing them. I’m not them and I don’t have to look like them. I’m going to work hard to accept myself. The media don’t make it impossible for me to accept my looks. I do.”

Assumption 10: The Only Way I Could Ever Accept My Looks Would Be to Change My Looks

This is one very self-defeating assumption! It drives people to try just about anything to alter or “correct” their appearance. My new clients often want me to help them lose weight or refer them to a cosmetic surgeon. They believe that only then would they have a positive body image. When I suggest that we should first work on body image and then decide about weight loss or surgery, they look at me with disappointment and disbelief. They think I don’t understand what they need so that they can be happy.

- I understand the basis and power of Appearance Assumption 10. If something is broken, fix it. So, you go on a diet again, work out a lot, buy new clothes, get a different hair-style, use the expensive wrinkle product, or have cosmetic surgery. Maybe you’ve done some of these things, and some even felt pretty good—for a while. But if all the fixes still haven’t repaired how you feel about your looks, ask yourself the obvious question: “What’s really broken?” What’s not working here is your body image, and that’s what needs fixing.
- Research I described earlier in this workbook confirms that you can improve your body image without altering your body. Here’s the corrected version of Assumption 10: “The only way I could ever like my looks would be to change my body image.”
- Tackle Assumption 10 head on! Your New Inner Voice urges you to shift your emphasis: Say to yourself, “I’ve spent too much of my life trying to change my looks. What I need to do is focus on the real problem and real solutions. Fixing my appearance feels good

at the moment, but it doesn't last. I just keep looking for more ways to be better-looking. The best way that I can like my body is to work directly on my body image. That's really the problem I need to fix."

YOUR NEW INNER VOICE SPEAKS OUT

Establishing reasonable doubt of faulty Appearance Assumptions requires more than a casual commitment to stop thinking those things. Change comes only from actively doing something to create a new attitude. A New Inner Voice will create a new attitude. This strong voice will speak realistically about appearance, in language that enables you to take responsibility for how you think and feel, no matter what you look like. It is a voice of tolerance and reason. A New Inner Voice will understand that your body image affects the quality of your life more than your body's actual appearance does.

Cultivating your own New Inner Voice is crucial to developing a more favorable body image. It's okay that right now this voice may be only a whisper in your mind. You can give it the words it needs to speak more clearly and forcefully. And then you can listen to it and hear it. Here's how: The following ten Helpsheets for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions, will help you to develop and nurture your New Inner Voice. Use your own words to talk to yourself about each arguable assumption listed. Read over the arguments against each assumption that I've discussed above. Think hard about other possible arguments. Don't expect to believe everything you write. Write down what you want to believe—what sounds healthier, more rational, and more accepting of yourself.

On the Helpsheet for each Appearance Assumption, begin by (1) noting how the assumption influences what you pay attention to, (2) what automatic thoughts run through your mind, and then (3) how you feel. Finally (4) write out your arguments against each Appearance Assumption, even those you didn't check earlier in your Self-Discovery Helpsheet as statements you find true or mostly true. After putting your words into writing, read them out loud to yourself.

Next, try to find ways to express your New Inner Voice to other people, including those who know about and support your efforts to develop a more positive body image. If we convey these new, desired beliefs to others, the beliefs are more likely to become our own. At first, your New Inner Voice may seem foreign to you—like somebody else talking. That's okay; that's understandable. Each day, take a few minutes to reread your words aloud. Soon this voice will begin to sound familiar and the wisdom of your New Inner Voice will become self-evident.

Helpsheet for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions

I. When I assume that “physically attractive people have it all,”

Then I focus on:

And I think:

And I feel:

My New Inner Voice argues with this Appearance Assumption:

[illegible]

Helpsheet for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions

2. When I assume that "my worth as a person depends on how I look,"

Then I focus on:

And I think:

And I feel:

My New Inner Voice argues with this Appearance Assumption:

Helpsheet for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions

3. When I assume that "I should always do whatever I can to look my best,"

Then I focus on:

And I think:

And I feel:

My New Inner Voice argues with this Appearance Assumption:

Helpsheet for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions

4. When I assume that "the first thing that people will notice about me is what's wrong with my appearance,"

Then I focus on:

And I think:

And I feel:

My New Inner Voice argues with this Appearance Assumption:

Helpsheet for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions

5. When I assume that "if people knew how I really look, they would probably like me less,"

Then I focus on:

And I think:

And I feel:

My New Inner Voice argues with this Appearance Assumption:

Helpsheet for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions

6. When I assume that "by managing my physical appearance, I can control my social and emotional life,"

Then I focus on:

And I think:

And I feel:

My New Inner Voice argues with this Appearance Assumption:

Helpsheet for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions

7. When I assume that "my appearance is responsible for much of what has happened to me in my life,"

Then I focus on:

And I think:

And I feel:

My New Inner Voice argues with this Appearance Assumption:

Helpsheet for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions

8. When I assume that "if I could look as I wish, my life would be much happier,"

Then I focus on:

And I think:

And I feel:

My New Inner Voice argues with this Appearance Assumption:

Helpsheet for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions

9. When I assume that "my culture's messages make it impossible for me to be satisfied with my appearance,"

Then I focus on:

And I think:

And I feel:

My New Inner Voice argues with this Appearance Assumption:

Helpsheet for Change: Arguing with My Appearance Assumptions

10. When I assume that "the only way I could ever accept my looks would be to change my looks,"

Then I focus on:

And I think:

And I feel:

My New Inner Voice argues with this Appearance Assumption:

FINAL WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

A lot of people decide to change something in their lives—something they know they really need to change. Maybe it's their job, or a relationship, or where they live, or a bad habit. They've even told their friends or loved ones that they need to make a change. They know they want to be happier, and they see the direction they need to take. They start on a new path, taking the right steps. They're actually getting there. At about this point in the road, they wish they had already reached their destination. "Are we there yet?"

Impatience during a transition from a bad place to a good place is a normal human reaction. We've all felt this way. It just means that we really want to be in a better place, and that's good. Just be mindful of your experiences of impatience. You need not judge yourself or this program because of this feeling. Accept that your progress may not be as rapid as you'd wish it to be. Use your impatience to be where you want to be. Step 5 is coming up and it will offer even more opportunities to strengthen your New Inner Voice. When you reach the end of this workbook you'll be fluent in this new language. And you will have reached your destination.

STEP 5

Mindfully Modifying Your Mental Mistakes

Camille is not only convinced that she's physically unattractive, she's also convinced her looks are wrecking her life. She is certain that everyone she knows thinks she's ugly and that, unless she can do something to fix her physical flaws, she's doomed to a life of rejection and unhappiness. She blames her looks for all of her past problems.

Camille spends a considerable amount of her mental energy comparing herself with other women who look the way she wishes she could look. She often talks herself out of doing fun things because she expects she will be self-conscious about her appearance and for that reason unable to enjoy herself. Whenever she's stressed about work or social concerns, her body image worsens.

If you were to look at Camille, you might notice that she has some freckles, and if you looked very closely, you might see that her nose isn't perfectly straight. You might also guess that she is slightly overweight. But you wouldn't really care about these characteristics, because they are just an incidental part of who she is. To Camille, on the other hand, they are practically everything.

Do you, like Camille, disturb your mind and life with your negative view of your own looks? Long ago, in the first century AD, the philosopher Epictetus wisely asserted, "What disturbs people's minds is not events but their judgments on events." The essence of his wisdom is that our emotions depend upon our point of view as we try to make sense of our experiences.

In Step 4, you learned how your Appearance Assumptions lay out the basic road maps for your Private Body Talk. Your thoughts about your looks then travel these well-worn paths. Your Appearance Assumptions are joined by another force that directs your Private Body Talk—*Cognitive Distortions*. These are specific mental mistakes that steer your inner conversations along crooked paths that send you in the wrong direction and down dead ends where it's difficult to turn around. Appearance Assumptions set the stage for the general focus of your attention and thoughts in relation to your looks. Cognitive Distortions are the specific mental manifestations or contents of your thoughts. Appearance Assumptions

pave the way for faulty, error-prone Private Body Talk, and your Cognitive Distortions manufacture the mental mistakes.

DISCOVERING YOUR BODY IMAGE DISTORTIONS

Cognitive therapists teach their clients how to recognize and eradicate mental mistakes from their inner conversations. Step 5 teaches you how to become your own cognitive therapist. This Step will enable you to develop a more reasonable, rational, and accepting Private Body Talk. As a result, negative feelings about your appearance will be less likely to occur and less disruptive to your daily life.

As a clinician and a researcher, I've found that people with a negative body image tend to make the same mental mistakes. The following Self-Discovery Helpsheets contains a self-test that will enable you to learn about your own patterns of thought. First, complete this Helpsheet, being totally mindful and honest about how you typically think. Afterward, I'll define the eight common Body Image Distortions for you and teach you how to address these in your own body image experiences.

Self-Discovery Helpsheet: Thinking About Your Thinking

This questionnaire asks you to become aware of your own mental conversations, especially mental conversations about your physical appearance. Each question below presents a hypothetical situation and a mental conversation that some people might have in that situation. Please imagine yourself in each situation. Read the thought pattern that is described. Then decide how characteristic that thought pattern would be of your mental conversations.

	Mostly Like Me	Mostly Not Like Me
1. Imagine that you weighed a few more pounds than your ideal weight. Would you think, "Until I lose these few pounds, I look really fat"?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Imagine that on a particular day, you develop a few acne zits on your face. Would you think, "These zits make me look ugly"?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Imagine that on a certain day your hair doesn't look "right." Would you think, "I look awful today"?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Imagine that you leave for work or school one morning feeling that you don't look quite as good as you usually do. Would you think, "I really look terrible today"?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Imagine you see yourself and a group of friends and acquaintances in a photo- graph. Would you compare yourself with whomever looks best in the picture?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- | | Mostly
Like Me | Mostly
Not
Like Me |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 6. Imagine that you're trying on new swimsuits you've seen in newspaper ads. Would you think, "This suit doesn't look nearly as good on me as it does on the model in the ad"? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Imagine that you're watching TV and on the commercials there are attractive people of your gender. Would you compare your looks to theirs and then think that you really don't look very good? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Imagine that you go to the gym or to the beach or pool. There are some "perfect bodies" there. Would you compare your body to theirs and think that these people make you look bad? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Imagine that you're with friends who are discussing what certain other friends look like. Would you privately begin to think about what's "wrong" with your physical appearance? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Imagine that you're getting ready to go out and you're looking at your appearance in the mirror. Would you ignore looking at or thinking about your best features? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. Imagine someone comments favorably on your appearance. Would you then have thoughts about aspects of your appearance that you think would never be complimented? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. Imagine that you're looking at your nude body in the mirror. Would you focus on your "flaws" more than you would your physical assets? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. Imagine that you're single and go out on a blind date. You both seem to have a pretty good time. Your date says, "I'll call you in a couple of days," but never does. Would you think, "My looks probably messed things up"? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. Imagine that you're out with people you don't know very well. You notice that some of these people are very friendly with others but not with you. Would you think that the reason they weren't attentive to you had something to do with your appearance? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. Imagine that you're single, go to a party, and meet someone you find attractive. This person leaves with another nice-looking person at the end of the night. Would you think, "My looks probably weren't good enough"? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16. You are thinking about some of the disappointments in your life. Would you wonder if things would have turned out better if you had looked different? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17. When you think about the aspects of your appearance with which you're dissatisfied, do you think that most people also dislike those aspects of your looks? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

	Mostly Like Me	Mostly Not Like Me
18. Imagine that you're exercising in an aerobics class. Would you be convinced that those people who are watching you are doing so because they're noticing some flaw in your body as you exercise?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Imagine that you're wearing a new outfit and no one comments on it. Would you assume that people think the outfit doesn't look good on you?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Imagine that your lover shows little interest in making love with you for a few weeks. Would you think that the reason is that your partner thinks you're physically unappealing in some way?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Think about those aspects of your appearance that you've wished were different. Do you ever think that your future will be less satisfying because of how you look?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Imagine that you're single and down on your luck with dating. Would you think, "As I long as I look as I do, nobody will ever fall in love with me"?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Imagine that you've moved to a different area and are interested in meeting new friends. Would you have thoughts that your physical appearance could lead people to reject you as a possible friend?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. Imagine that you're invited to a party on the beach. Would you think that because of something about your appearance you probably won't fit in or enjoy participating?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. Imagine that you're shopping for some new clothes. Do you talk yourself out of trying certain attractive styles or colors because they might call attention to parts of your body you don't like?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. Imagine that you're single and are dating someone you really like. Would you think that there are some "undesirable" parts of your body that you should hide from your partner?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
27. Imagine that you want to work out at the gym. Would you think that you need to look more fit before you can go to the gym to work out in front of others?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28. Imagine that some neighbors drop by unexpectedly and you have not yet worked on your appearance for the day. Would you think, "I can't answer the door and let them see me like this"?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29. Imagine that you're stressed out one day. Would you be more likely to have negative thoughts about your looks?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- | | Mostly
Like Me | Mostly
Not
Like Me |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 30. Imagine you feel that something is not quite right about your looks, and you ask a friend for feedback. Your friend reassures you that you look fine. Would you dismiss the reassurances because you know that how you feel must be the real truth? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 31. Imagine that you had a large meal and feel overly full. Would feeling full make you think that you're fat? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 32. Imagine that you have a new haircut and aren't particularly happy about how it looks. Would you then have critical thoughts about other aspects of your appearance, as well? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

For each type of distortion, how many items (from 0 to 4) did you endorse in the Mostly Like Me column?

- Beauty-or-Beast Distortion (items 1-4) _____
- Unfair-to-Compare Distortion (items 5-8) _____
- The Magnifying Glass Distortion (items 9-12) _____
- The Blame Game Distortion (items 13-16) _____
- Mind Misreading Distortion (items 17-20) _____
- Misfortune Telling Distortion (items 21-24) _____
- Beauty Bound Distortion (items 25-28) _____
- Moody Mirror Distortion (items 29-32) _____

EIGHT UGLY ERRORS IN YOUR PRIVATE BODY TALK

Before you read about each body image error or distortion, be sure you have scored your self-test at the end of the Helpsheet. Remember, each distortion score can range from 0 to 4, with higher scores reflecting the fact that the particular type of distortion is more characteristic of your patterns of thought.

Distortion 1: Beauty-or-Beast

The Beauty-or-Beast Distortion occurs when you think about your appearance in extremes. This is called *dichotomous thinking*. Many people think about their weight in this way: "Either I'm at a perfect weight or I'm fat." A person fearful of becoming fat puts on a few pounds and concludes, "I'm such a blimp." Or, someone concerned with being too thin loses a few pounds and proclaims, "I'm just a skeleton." In a similar but less extremely polarized version of Beauty-or-Beast thinking, you consider a physical feature as either "okay, I guess" or "ugly." When being neutral, your Private Body Talk is typically quieter, because you may think along these lines: "My looks are nothing to notice; they're hardly worth thinking about."

The undistorted truth is that reality is never a matter of either-or. Reality exists on a continuum. In between black and white there are many shades of gray. As you can see, Beauty-or-Beast thinking leads you to disregard the shades of gray, and to make exaggerated conclusions about your looks.

Distortion 2: Unfair-to-Compare

The Unfair-to-Compare Distortion involves pitting your appearance against some unrealistic or extreme standard. When you compare yourself with these standards, you make yourself the loser. Magazines, newspapers, movies, television, music videos, and the Internet hit you so heavily with society's "ideal" images that you cannot escape being aware of them. Mere awareness isn't the problem, however. When you personally absorb these images, that is, when you accept society's standards as your own, you become vulnerable to the society's unreal ideals—comparing provokes despairing!

Gauging your physical worth by unrealistic ideals can cause you to fixate on your inadequacies. You focus on what you don't look like and on what you don't like about your looks. You engage in wishful thinking: "I wish I had thicker hair." "I wish I were really thin." "I wish I had a bigger chest." Your Private Body Talk will also be loaded with what I call "too" thinking. "I'm too short (or too fat or too this or too that)."

Thumbing through certain magazines, seeing some ads on television, and watching certain videos may lead you to mentally compare your appearance with how the models look. Unless you're also air-brushed or digitized to perfection (and perhaps even if you are), chances are you'll conclude that you don't measure up to the models.

This Unfair-to-Compare Distortion may take you beyond the media and mental images of perfection. You may also compare your appearance with that of real people you encounter in everyday life. However, your comparison is skewed—made only with people you judge to have the physical qualities that you wish you had. Obviously, your thoughts are biased against you from the very start. You play the

comparison game, but with the rules you choose, you always lose. If you always compare yourself to a taller standard, you can only come up short.

The Unfair-to-Compare Distortion is unfair in another respect. Rarely do people pick just any physical characteristic for comparison. It's typically the one you like least, the one that bothers you most. In this way, you add insult to insecurity and make your insecurity that much worse.

Which Appearance Assumptions that you discovered in Step 4 instigate this distorted Private Body Talk? Assumption 1, "Physically attractive people have it all," heralds good-looking people as winners, so you make them a standard for self-evaluation. Assumption 8 maintains that "if I could look just as I wish, my life would be much happier." This underlying belief keeps you reviewing your ideals to see if you should be happy yet. Similarly, if Assumption 3 commands you always to look your best, you'll compare your looks to some notion of best and find ways you've not met the lofty expectation. Finally, there's Assumption 9, which complains, "My culture's messages make it impossible for me to be satisfied with my appearance." But then, you empower these media images by comparing yourself to them.

The ruminations on this mental mistake are terribly self-critical and use words like "should," "must," and "ought"; for example, "I should have a clearer complexion" or "I ought to have a smaller waist."

Furthermore, when your comparisons are with actual people, not only do you have negative feelings toward your body, but you may also experience envy and jealousy toward the people with whom you compare yourself. If you think, "They make me look bad," you become intimidated. You may try to avoid them, or gossip about them, or retaliate by giving them unwarranted grief. After all, if you could take them down a notch or two, you might be able to feel more adequate yourself. Obviously, the Unfair-to-Compare Distortion becomes unfair to everyone.

Distortion 3: The Magnifying Glass

The Magnifying Glass Distortion represents what psychologists call *selective attention*. You focus on an aspect of your appearance that you dislike and then exaggerate it—as if you're putting your body under a magnifying glass. You commit this mental error when you cannot contemplate your looks without zooming in on this one disliked feature. All you see is one huge flaw. You equate your entire appearance with your "squinty eyes," "chipmunk cheeks," "knobby knees," or "bulging butt." Your Private Body Talk is defective because all it talks about are defects. Your inner dialogues repeat themselves like a broken record. You're tired of hearing it, but you still keep playing it.

The Magnifying Glass Distortion entails underemphasis as well as overemphasis. It involves a blind mind—as you ignore or minimize your positive physical qualities. The Magnifying Glass mistake prevents you from appreciating the very features that others find most attractive about you. For example, in his Private Body Talk, a man with a handsome face says, "Oh, sure, my face is fine, but who the hell cares? Just look at this flabby mess of a body!"

One reason that some people commit this distortion is a fear of being seen as vain. They may be afraid that being pleased with their own looks would necessarily mean that they are conceited. So, if they ever catch themselves having a positive perception of their looks, their Private Body Talk zaps them with guilt and orders them to change the subject. Most often, however, this distortion derives from the bad habit of focusing on what is seen as a body image threat.

Distortion 4: The Blame Game

The Blame Game Distortion happens when you incorrectly conclude that some disliked physical attribute is directly responsible for certain disappointments and difficulties that you experience. This psychological phenomenon is called *scapegoating*. You need to blame something for your troubles, and because you already see your appearance as offensive to you, it's the convenient target.

Distorted Blame Game thinking goes like this: "If I didn't look so _____, then something (bad) wouldn't have happened." If you don't get the job or the date or the social courtesy you wanted, you readily point the finger of blame at your appearance. Your Private Body Talk alleges that your looks have stolen something you had hoped for. Your appearance stands accused, without a shred of solid evidence.

We know that a person's looks sometimes can affect life events. Being 6'8" will benefit an individual in the basketball tryouts relative to someone who is 5'7". The pretty blonde might be shown favoritism in her bid to get a public relations job. It is unfortunately true that obese individuals and those with disfiguring conditions are sometimes treated unfairly in our society. In the Blame Game, however, even in the absence of evidence, people scapegoat their appearance for any problems that may arise. After a social disappointment, it's natural to try to figure out why things happened as they did. It's clearly wrong, however, to jump to the automatic conclusion that your appearance is responsible for your disappointment.

Why are you so accusatory of your looks? Well, in Step 4, did you endorse Appearance Assumption 7—the basic belief that your appearance is responsible for much of what has happened in your life? If so, then you probably play the Blame Game often. This assumption falsely establishes a criminal record for your appearance and predisposes you to scapegoat your looks in your Private Body Talk.

In the self-test for this distortion, I asked you to imagine going to a party and meeting someone you find attractive. This happened to Terri, who was upset when the "dreamboat" left the party with another woman. Terri's Private Body Talk blamed her own appearance: "It was my flat boobs and dumb curly hair. Who'd be interested in me? I look like a stalk of broccoli!" She concluded, "It's my body's fault that he left with someone besides me. My looks aren't good enough." What Terri did not know at the time was that her "heartthrob" had left the party with his sister.

Distortion 5: Mind Misreading

Mind Misreading leads people to reason that "if I think I look bad, others must think I look bad too. They see me exactly as I see myself." The truth is other people may have entirely different ideas. Psychologists call this faulty mental process *projection*, because we project our own beliefs or thoughts into the minds of others.

In the example above, Terri also committed Mind Misreading by inferring that the fellow at the party had thought she was goofy-looking. That was her own evaluation of her appearance, which she projected into his mind. Mind Misreading and Blame Game Distortions often go hand in hand. To blame your looks for how people react (or don't react) to you, you have to presume what those people must be thinking.

Appearance Assumption 2 may propel this distortion. If you assume that your worth is defined by your looks, you place undue importance on what others may think about your appearance. If you also buy into Assumption 4, that the first thing people will notice about you is what's wrong with your appearance, you're ready to misread their minds at a moment's notice. If you're worried about your weight for example, your Mind Misreading says, "They see how overweight I am and think I'm a fat slob."

Distortion 6: Misfortune Telling

The Blame Game and Mind Misreading involve inferences about past and current events. The Misfortune Telling Distortion pertains to your predictions about how your appearance will affect your future. You predict that your physical shortcomings will have dreadful effects on your life. This may influence your expectations in short-term situations (i.e., "People at the gym will stare at me and snicker") or in the long-term (i.e., "With my looks, I'll never be taken seriously in my workplace"). Misfortune Telling uses extreme words such as "never" or "always" when you anticipate how your looks will be a detriment. For instance, you may think, "With my homely face, I'll always be unloved" or "I look so old and wrinkled that I'll never get promoted." Such sweeping expectations encompass what everybody will think about you and how they will act toward you. Face it—life and people are much less predictable than this.

What Appearance Assumptions fuel Misfortune Telling? Assumption 8 says that "if I could look just as I wish, my life would be much happier." So, the converse of Assumption 8 leads to the Misfortune Telling Distortion that unless you look exactly as you wish, your life will *never* be happy. And, of course, an implication of Assumption 7, which states that your appearance has adversely affected your past, is that your looks will surely mess up your future, too. Misfortune Telling permeates your Private Body Talk with gloomy, pessimistic predictions.

Distortion 7: Beauty Bound

The Beauty Bound Distortion is reflected in Private Body Talk that says you cannot do certain things because of your looks. This distortion imprisons you. When you limit your activities and aspirations because of your negative body image, you become its prisoner. Typical Beauty Bound thinking begins with the words "I can't." You forbid yourself to go places, do things, or be with certain people because you think you don't look good enough. You tell yourself you can't wear particular styles or colors of clothing. You deny yourself certain social or recreational activities. Your "I can't" thinking usually takes the form of "I look too _____ to do that." Sometimes, the prohibitions are temporary: "Until I get a tan, I can't go to the beach" or "Until I lose ten pounds, I can't go dancing." Other times, the Beauty Bound prohibitions are permanent: "With my hairy arms, I'll never be able to wear short-sleeved shirts" or "With my ugly body, I should never have sex."

Notice how the various Body Image Distortions often team up to create your troubles. Beauty Bound seldom operates alone. For example, a woman who decides "I can't go to the office picnic because my hair looks weird" is restricting her activities (Beauty Bound thinking) because she tells herself that people will snub her because of her looks (Misfortune Telling). A man whose Beauty Bound thinking

dictates "I'm too fat, so I can't eat in front of other people" is also Mind Misreading when he concludes that others will judge him as a fat man who always overindulges with food.

Beauty Bound beliefs are fueled by several Appearance Assumptions. Return to Step 4 and reread Assumptions 5, 6, 8, and 9. Can you see how each of these assumptions can lead you to constrain your freedom of choice in living a fuller life?

Distortion 8: Moody Mirror

The Moody Mirror Distortion reflects what psychologists call *emotional reasoning*—reasoning based purely on feeling. You start with a strong emotion that you need to justify. You end up with a faulty conclusion that justifies and may even strengthen the emotion.

The Moody Mirror mistake has three variations. In its first form, your initial emotion is a negative feeling about your looks. You notice it and you ask yourself, "Why do I feel so unattractive?" Then, with very little thought, you readily answer the question, "It's because I am so unattractive." This version of the Moody Mirror Distortion follows the not-so-brilliant logic that "because I feel ugly, I must be ugly."

Here's an analogy: Imagine that you and a friend are on a leisurely walk through the park. All is serene—that is, until your friend wonders aloud if any snakes might be lurking about. Not being especially enamored of such creatures, you notice your heart is galloping. You also notice plenty of places where these reptiles might be hiding. There are logs where they could lie in wait for you. There are low-hanging branches from which they could launch an aerial assault. "This park is viper city," you conclude. "There must be hundreds slithering about. Let's get out of here!" Your fear leads you to decide that snakes must be there somewhere—despite having absolutely no evidence of them! You reasoned from your fear, inferring facts that may not be true from your feelings.

Can you apply this analogy to the Moody Mirror Distortion? Your Private Body Talk is an emotional dialogue that confuses feelings with facts: "No wonder I feel so ugly, just look at me! Look how ugly and _____ (fat, or short, or beer-bellied, or bald, or pale skinned ...) I am!"

A second but related form that the Moody Mirror Distortion can take occurs when feelings of unattractiveness about one physical characteristic spill over to other features. Operating on the faulty principle of guilt by association, your Private Body Talk searches for guilty parties. As it zeros in on some unacceptable attribute, you feel unattractive and dissatisfied. Then you ask yourself emotionally loaded questions: "Just how ugly am I?" or "What else is wrong with my looks?" In answering, your mind is like a bug zapper that zaps anything coming its way. You annihilate one physical feature after another, feeling uglier each time. And the uglier you feel, the more you notice or create any imperfection in order to justify your feelings.

In the third manifestation of the Moody Mirror, you start with negative feelings about something unrelated to your looks—for example, being stressed out or in a bad mood. Then, the wildfire of your bad mood spreads and ignites your body image experiences. How can this happen? Your brain stores various Private Body Talk "tapes" that it plays and replays, producing predictable emotions. These tapes remain on pause until something switches them on. Negative emotions can set off these dormant dialogues, especially those tinged with a similar emotion, such as shame or anxiety. So your nasty mood seeks a ready target, and you unfairly malign your appearance. The Moody Mirror just looks for trouble—and really stirs it up.

THE UNDISTORTED TRUTH ABOUT DISTORTED THOUGHTS

Research confirms that people's Body Image Distortions have a strong bearing on the nature of their body image experiences. Allow me to share the results of two studies in which we measured hundreds of individuals' body image distortions using a scientific test similar to the one you took in the Thinking About Your Thinking Helpsheets. In the first study (Jakatdar, Cash, and Engle 2006), we discovered that people who had more distorted Private Body Talk had more body image dissatisfaction and distress, more investment in their appearance for self-worth, and more detrimental consequences on their body image quality of life.

In the second study (Rudiger et al. 2007), our research participants completed an extensive body image survey and then monitored their body image experiences for ten days, recording these each day in an online questionnaire. We found that those with more distorted Private Body Talk in the initial survey had many more negative body image experiences over the ensuing ten days.

Clearly, from these results, we see that these distorted thought patterns are a crucial aspect of having body image difficulties. But the findings also confirm the converse conclusion, with very positive implications. To the extent that your Private Body Talk does *not* reflect these mental mistakes, you will have a more favorable, satisfying body image in your everyday life. So let's start to work on changing your distorted Private Body Talk, no matter how problematic it is.

CORRECTIVE THINKING: START TALKING BACK

By confronting your Appearance Assumptions in Step 4, you've already begun to create a New Inner Voice. Now this voice will speak to your Body Image Distortions, so that you can change the unfair and self-defeating ways you think about your looks.

Cognitive therapists have developed highly effective strategies for changing the way you think about your experiences. These strategies are called *cognitive restructuring* or *corrective thinking*. Because corrective thinking can be difficult to learn in the midst of a distressing episode, you'll develop your corrective thinking ahead of time. Then, with a little practice, you'll be ready to apply what you've learned to alter your Private Body Talk in your daily life.

On the following pages, we'll take aim at each of the eight Body Image Distortions, one at a time. I'll give you plenty of examples to show you exactly how to talk back to your distorted Private Body Talk.

Here's what you need to do:

- First, go back in this chapter to your Thinking About Your Thinking self-test. If your score was anywhere between 1 and 4 for a particular distortion, read the specific items you found to be characteristic of your own thought patterns.
- Next, as detailed in the exercises below, read about disputing each distortion that is characteristic of how you think.

- If your score for that distortion was between 2 and 4, it's one you'll really want to work on. Underline or take note of anything in the exercises that hits home or seems potentially valuable. Afterward, it will be your turn to take aim, with the aid of the Helpsheet at the end of the section on each specific distortion.
- Based on your review of your self-test answers, pick a familiar scenario that causes you the most problems and reflects this particular Body Image Distortion. On the Helpsheet, write down the typical Activators of your body image distress. Write down the words of your Private Body Talk that commit this mental mistake. Include your beliefs, self-statements, and interpretations that reflect the distortion.
- Finally, talk back! Based on the discussion and examples of how to dispute the distortion, compose the narrative of your corrective thinking that will take issue with your distortion.

Please understand that this isn't osmosis therapy, in which you decide that just absorbing my words will be as helpful as finding your own voice. Because your New Inner Voice must talk back with your chosen words, you need to spend the small amount of time required to put your words on paper. In doing so, you are mindfully discovering, dissecting, and disputing the personal inner causes of your body image difficulties.

Correcting Your Beauty-or-Beast Distortions

Remember, Beauty-or-Beast thinking is either-or thinking: "Either I'm attractive or I'm homely." "Either I lose ten pounds or I'm fat." "Some people have it and some don't; I don't." Here are some ways to dispute such dichotomous, black-or-white ways of thinking:

- Force yourself to see things on a continuum. See the shades of gray. Remind yourself that not being a 10 on a 10-point scale of attractiveness doesn't necessarily make you a 1. Say to yourself, "Okay, so I'm not totally perfect; but I'm not totally imperfect either. I have features that enhance my appearance." Then, remind yourself of these physical assets.
- Ponder how you think about other people's looks. "Do I judge others with only two extreme categories? Or do I see them on a continuum?" If the latter, ask yourself, "Why should I view other people more fairly than I see myself?"
- Eliminate the loaded language of your thoughts by being more objective. Replace "I have a horsey face" with "I have a long nose." "I have potholes for my complexion" is, more objectively, "My complexion isn't smooth." Replace "I'm a damned scarecrow" with "I have a thin physique." "Hippo hips" becomes "rounded hips." "I'm a chrome dome" should be "I have hair loss."
- Ask yourself, "Honestly, what is the evidence, other than my own harsh judgments, that I'm seen as extremely homely?" Ask, "What is the evidence to the contrary?" Think about compliments you receive. Think about those occasions in which you felt pleased about some facet of your appearance.

Helpsheet for Change: Talking Back to My Beauty-or-Beast Distortions

A typical activating event or situation is:

My distorted Private Body Talk often says:

To correct my distorted thinking, my New Inner Voice talks back and says:

Correcting Your Unfair-to-Compare Distortions

The Unfair-to-Compare Distortion comes in three forms. You pit your appearance against your own personal ideals, the media images of physical perfection, or people you find good-looking whom you encounter in everyday situations. So, you compare your appearance only with images of what you'd like to have. As a result, you spend a lot of time noticing others who you think look better than you do. And, not surprisingly, you end up feeling unattractive.

This distortion fills Private Body Talk with words and phrases like "should," "ought," "must," or "I have to be." Shame, envy, and intimidation arise from unfair comparisons. Examples of faulty Private Body Talk here are "I should be more attractive," or "I wish I were as attractive as that person is," or "That person makes me feel so ugly." Seldom do you notice that there are few people who come close to meeting your ideals for yourself.

Corrective thinking for this distortion first recognizes what you're doing. It catches you in the act of comparing yourself with somebody, leaving you upset about your looks. Use the following suggestions to let your corrective thinking set you straight:

- Replace "shoulds," "musts," and "oughts" with less demanding language. Instead of saying, "I should be better looking, taller, thinner, or ...," correctively assert, "It might be nice if I lost a few pounds, but I look pretty good the way I am. I refuse to belittle myself for not looking like a magazine cover model."
- Other helpful corrective thoughts are "I don't have to have a perfect body to have an appealing appearance." Or "Nobody's perfect; even models have imperfections that are digitally removed." Or "Nobody (but me) expects me to look different. Nobody's complaining about me but me." (If someone else is complaining about how you look, I'll help you deal effectively with his or her unhelpful comments in the Afterword of this book.)
- Be adamant in a stance that says, "I refuse to continue to buy into this societal ideal of attractiveness; it's sexist and I refuse to treat myself that way."
- The reality is that everybody is better-looking than somebody else, and everybody is less attractive than somebody else. Tell yourself, "I don't have to feel bad just because there's something about me that I don't like as much as I like what someone else has."
- Recognize that your mental compliment of someone else doesn't have to be a mental criticism of you. "The fact that I like the way a person looks has nothing to do with how I look. That person doesn't make me look bad; he or she doesn't make me do anything."
- Your New Inner Voice says, "Okay, if I'm going to compare, then I need to be fair. So, whom am I more attractive than?"
- Finally, say to yourself, "I'm going to take time now to think of something else about me (a special skill, talent, or personality trait) that compares quite favorably with other folks."

Helpsheet for Change: Talking Back to My Unfair-to-Compare Distortions

A typical activating event or situation is:

My distorted Private Body Talk often says:

To correct my distorted thinking, my New Inner Voice talks back and says:

Correcting Your Magnifying Glass Distortions

When you view your looks through the distorted Magnifying Glass, you focus on what you don't like and minimize the attributes that don't cause a problem. You take a tunnel-vision perspective on yourself. When you think about your loved ones, do you think only about their weight, warts, or wrinkles? Of course not! You have a fairer, more balanced picture of their looks and who they are as people. Freed from this distortion, your Private Body Talk will reflect a more balanced view of your looks and yourself.

- Begin by asking yourself, "Am I dwelling on what I don't like and forgetting about those parts of me that are fine?" When you magnify, you can correct your mind's eyesight by saying to yourself, "I'm just focusing on my dislikes and that's not the whole picture. I do like (for example) my expressive eyes, my warm smile, and if I say so myself, I do have good hair."
- Say to yourself, "I may not like my _____ (hair, hips, muscles, etc.), but other people see more to me than the feature that I'm hassling myself about."
- Just as you do to correct the Beauty-or-Beast Distortion, replace pejorative statements about magnified attributes with less demeaning descriptions. "Small-chested" is more accurate than "flat as an ironing board."
- When you start self-criticizing in the mirror, interrupt your thoughts and say, "I caught myself picking on myself again. I'm going to stop, give myself a smile, walk away from this mirror, and say something accepting of myself."
- Promise to abide by the Equal Time Rule, which states that you should spend an equal amount of time on your likable features or traits whenever you catch yourself mentally harping on what you dislike about your body.

Helpsheet for Change: Talking Back to My Magnifying Glass Distortions

A typical activating event or situation is:

My distorted Private Body Talk often says:

To correct my distorted thinking, my New Inner Voice talks back and says:

Correcting Your Blame Game Distortions

The Blame Game makes the mistake of *misattribution*. That occurs when you too quickly infer that your appearance is responsible for some disappointment or other undesirable event. Examples of Private Body Talk based on playing the Blame Game are “I don’t have a boyfriend because I’m so unattractive” and “People are unfriendly to me because I’m balding.”

To correct Blame Game thinking, you first must realize that blaming your looks for unfortunate events usually involves jumping to conclusions based on a guess—a biased guess. What’s the real evidence? If you objectively examine the facts, often the only evidence that indicts your appearance is your own discontent with your looks—hardly convincing proof.

How can you talk back to the Blame Game?

- Sometimes all you need to do is catch yourself blaming your looks, see that you have no evidence for your conclusion, and tell yourself, “Stop blaming!” Then, move on to more important things—like being friendly or having fun. Or you could say to yourself, “Here I go again, blaming my looks for ruining everything. I’m going to leave my appearance out of this and focus on what I can do to make things better.”
- Your New Inner Voice is a voice of reason and says, “I know I’m probably blaming my looks simply because I don’t like them. That doesn’t mean my looks are actually causing anything bad to happen.”
- Blaming isn’t sufficient evidence to warrant a conviction. Ask yourself, “Okay, what real evidence do I have that my appearance is to blame for this? What other explanations are there?”
- Suppose you do have reasonably good evidence that your looks really did cause the problem; for example, you asked someone out for a date and the person declined, giving your looks as the reason. So what? Not everyone will like everything about your looks. For that matter, not every person you meet will like your car, your clothes, your politics, or your religious beliefs. One person’s opinion is not everyone’s opinion. If a few folks reject you because of such reasons, it may be their problem, and their loss! There are some judgmental, prejudiced people in this world. If you’re overweight and someone is hatefully biased against overweight people, this person is not rejecting you; he or she is rejecting an entire category of people. Do you really need to be concerned about what such a bigoted person thinks about you? Say “Adios” and move on.

Helpsheet for Change: Talking Back to My Blame Game Distortions

A typical activating event or situation is:

My distorted Private Body Talk often says:

To correct my distorted thinking, my New Inner Voice talks back and says:

Correcting Your Mind Misreading Distortions

Mind Misreading happens when you project your own thoughts about your looks into the minds of others. You leap to the incorrect inference that other people see and judge your appearance in the same way that you do. Then you fill their heads with your own thoughts. You think, "Everybody who sees me is thinking about my _____ (large ears, acne, big breasts, short stature, or whatever)."

As I mentioned earlier, Mind Misreading often occurs in tandem with the Blame Game Distortion. Suppose, for instance, that your Private Body Talk is blaming: "My partner didn't want to have sex last week because he or she is turned off by my awful body." While you condemn your looks as the reason for sexual "rejection," you reached your verdict only by Mind Misreading. How do you know that your partner's thoughts about your looks led to a lapse of interest in sex? Could it be that your partner was simply not in the mood or was preoccupied with work? Besides, did you make it clear you were interested in sex? If not, why did you expect your partner to read your mind and know that you were feeling amorous?

The strategies for handling Blame Game thinking are also useful in managing Mind Misreading. Here are more ideas to help you "keep your thoughts to yourself":

- First, accept what you're doing—you're thinking about what someone else might be thinking about you. Do the thoughts and opinions you suspect others are having about your looks strangely resemble your own opinions? If you're being presumptuous, simply admit that you may be Mind Misreading.
- Accept reality: Say to yourself, "I'm fairly bright, but I can't read minds. The only mind I'm reading here is my own."
- Do you have any evidence that contradicts what you presume another person is thinking? If it's someone you know well, has the person ever made positive or affirming comments about your looks? Has he or she ever disagreed and reassured you when you complained about your appearance?
- Ask yourself, "If my appearance isn't what bothers people, what else could it be?" Among alternative explanations, consider several that are often true. People aren't likely to be warm and amiable if you are not friendly. Could you have been acting cool and distant because of your worry that others won't like you or your looks? Also, others may be shy or having a bad day. Could their behavior mean that something is wrong with them—not with you?
- Talk back assertively to your Private Body Talk when it is disparaging: Say to yourself, "I need to stop thinking about what others may be thinking. Instead, I need to change what I am thinking."

Helpsheet for Change: Talking Back to My Mind Misreading Distortions

A typical activating event or situation is:

My distorted Private Body Talk often says:

To correct my distorted thinking, my New Inner Voice talks back and says:

Correcting Your Misfortune Telling Distortions

The Blame Game charges your appearance with past or current offenses, but Misfortune Telling distorts your thinking about the future with pessimistic predictions that bad things will happen because of your looks. Your Private Body Talk uses words like "always" or "never." For example, consider this thought: "I'll always be a misfit because of my looks." Misfortune Telling can also distort expectations about specific situations, such as "I'll have a terrible time if I wear this bathing suit at the beach" or "Once my boyfriend sees me naked, our relationship will end." Can you detect the Mind Misreading that's happening here?

When correcting this faulty thinking, you should again see that you are jumping to conclusions in the absence of evidence. How do you really know that your worst fears will come true? Separate your emotions from your judgments of your future. Here are some helpful ways to do that:

- Realize that your pessimism may actually stem from the expectation that you'll feel self-conscious in some situation. In fact, your discomfort is probably the worst thing that will happen. So quit making dire predictions and start finding ways to accept feeling some self-consciousness in the situation.
- When you think, "I'll never be loved because of my appearance," realize that what you may really be feeling is this thought about your future: "I'm worried that I won't be loved." But by definition, your future hasn't occurred yet; it's your experience of despair or apprehension that's occurring. If you focus on feeling more accepting of your appearance, you'll feel less apprehensive. Tackle other worries separately.
- Analyze the evidence. Have your pessimistic predictions always come true? Think about instances in which events turned out more favorably than you'd expected. What did you do to make a difference?
- Listen to your New Inner Voice say, "I'm going to quit worrying about the future and concentrate on now. What can I do now to prove my doom-and-gloom predictions wrong?" The answer, of course, is to live your life with the opposite assumption: "My future is up to me!"

Helpsheet for Change: Talking Back to My Misfortune Telling Distortions

A typical activating event or situation is:

My distorted Private Body Talk often says:

To correct my distorted thinking, my New Inner Voice talks back and says:

Correcting Your Beauty Bound Distortions

When you think, "I can't do that because of my looks," you are engaging in the Beauty Bound Distortion. This is a hazardous distortion because it can set self-fulfilling prophecies in motion. For example, imagine you tell yourself you're too fat to go to the pool party. Misfortune Telling and Mind Misreading drive you to make this Beauty Bound mistake in your thinking. So, you pass on the party and sit at home wallowing in self-pity, lamenting that your "loathsome looks" have robbed you of a good time—again! Of course, your looks didn't deprive you of anything, your emotional decision did. Beauty Bound Distortions also create catch-22 situations like "I can't go to the gym and exercise to lose weight until I lose weight."

Later, in Step 6, I'll teach you some terrific behavioral techniques to overcome the limits you allow Beauty Bound thinking to set for you. Until then, here are some ways to talk back to this distortion:

- Ask yourself, "So why *can't* I do such-and-such?"—for instance, "I can't go to the class reunion unless I lose twenty pounds." Why not? Will there be a sign posted that says, "Heavy Folks Not Admitted Under Penalty of Law"? Your answer is "Because I am self-conscious about my weight and will worry about what others are thinking." Dispute your Misfortune Telling and Mind Misreading mistakes. It's your own discomfort stopping you, not your looks or what other people are truly thinking.
- Talk back to "I can't do it" by asking, "How can I do it? What would make it easier to do?" For example, "I can't go to the mall with this haircut" becomes "I can go if I wear my favorite hat." Replace "I can't go to the gym until I lose weight" with "I can go to the gym if I remind myself that facing my anxiety is an act of admirable courage."
- Face the fact that other people, who are far from being perfect physical specimens, engage in the same activities that you deny yourself. Do they all really look better than you? Or do they refuse to deprive themselves of involvement in life simply because they aren't perfect? Will you really have the only imperfect body at the gym or the pool party?
- Think about other times in which you've accomplished things that you first felt insecure about until you gave yourself a little push, took them on, and mastered them. Didn't it feel good to prove to yourself that you could overcome obstacles and succeed? Remember those occasions and tell yourself you can do it again.
- When you are ruled by the Beauty Bound Distortion, how do you feel? Frustrated? Angry? Dejected? Imagine how you would feel if you stood up to "I can't" by saying, "Oh yes I can." Imagine that you face your apprehension and do it anyway. How would you feel? More confident? More in control?
- Counter your Beauty Bound pessimism with motivating experiences. Apply the wisdom conveyed in the inspirational, not-just-for-children book *The Little Engine That Could*. Affirm to yourself, "I think I can! I think I can!"

Helpsheet for Change: Talking Back to My Beauty Bound Distortions

A typical activating event or situation is:

My distorted Private Body Talk often says:

To correct my distorted thinking, my New Inner Voice talks back and says:

Correcting Your Moody Mirror Distortions

The final distortion is the Moody Mirror mistake, which involves emotional reasoning. It can happen in several ways. When you are "feeling ugly," you take your negative emotion as proof that you are ugly. You search for any or all things about your looks that might justify your feelings. This distortion can also occur when you're in a bad mood or upset about something other than your appearance; your funky mood contagiously infects your Private Body Talk. Moody Mirror thinking triggers other mental mistakes, activating one distortion after another and carrying you from one criticism to another, in waves of feverish distress.

Corrective thinking treats the spreading infection. The key is to understand that your bad mood came first, and you conveniently pointed to your looks to rationalize your distress. Other people with identical physical "flaws" do not necessarily feel as bad as you feel. An inferiority complex doesn't exist in the same genetic material that gave you a short stature or a receding hairline or extra cushioning on your butt.

How often have you heard people belittle their own looks, while your impression of their appearance was not as negative as theirs, and perhaps not negative at all? A friend may say to you, "My hair looks terrible," yet objectively you can see that it looks fine. Or you hear a woman say, "My hips are as big as a buffalo's," and knowing how big buffalo hips really are, you ignore her comment as an exaggeration much larger than her hips. You're not that person, so you can be unemotionally objective. You know that the individual's actual appearance isn't really the problem—even if your friend's hair could look better or the woman's hips could be smaller. The problem is what the person believes and feels.

The following corrective thinking tactics can temper your Moody Mirror mistakes:

- Approach the Moody Mirror by thinking as an unbiased, objective observer would. Catch the distortion as soon as you notice your mood and before the discontent spreads. Like a snowball rolling down a hill, the farther it goes, the larger and more forceful it becomes. Stopping it is much easier at the top of the hill than near the bottom. Realize that obsessing over your physical imperfections doesn't fix what's wrong. The obsessing is what's wrong.
- Ask yourself this: "Was something else already bothering me before I started worrying about or criticizing my body?" Then say, "Okay, my appearance isn't really the issue here. I need to accept that my day was really stressful and I'm going to leave my looks out of this."
- Use a mental stop sign to halt your Private Body Talk. Listen to your New Inner Voice say, "I'm not feeling very attractive right now. This isn't a good time to contemplate my looks. I'm just making myself feel worse. So I'm going to stop this!" Step away from this Private Body Talk (after a brief apology, of course, to your body for the false accusations). Then follow the Equal Time Rule, and compliment yourself.
- Suppose you've upset yourself by criticizing the way your hair looks. Then you begin to insult your weight. Stop right there! Mindfully catch yourself and say, "Okay, I'm at it again. Being discontent with my hair is no reason to pick on other things about my looks."

- Replace "I am" thoughts with "I feel" thoughts. For example, replace "I am awful looking in this sweater" with "I feel less happy with this sweater than I'd like to be."
- Fixating on feelings often intensifies them, like dwelling on a headache's sensations intensifies your pain. So mindfully notice your feelings, accept them, and then pull yourself out of the emotional quicksand and turn your attention to something that can create different feelings. Watch a funny video, visit your favorite Web site, listen to upbeat music, or take an invigorating walk.
- Your New Inner Voice obeys this variant of an old saying: "If I can't say anything nice about myself, I won't say anything at all." Then shift gears!

Helpsheet for Change: Talking Back to My Moody Mirror Distortions

A typical activating event or situation is:

My distorted Private Body Talk often says:

To correct my distorted thinking, my New Inner Voice talks back and says:

MAKING YOUR NEW INNER VOICE A NATURAL PART OF YOUR LIFE

By working with the Helpsheets for Change, you've helped your New Inner Voice find words to begin to create inner experiences that are free of painful distortions. This is an important beginning of more accepting Private Body Talk. Of course, the crucial issue is that you are able to carry out corrective thinking in the here-and-now events of everyday life.

A Mindful Mind-Set: Stop, Look, and Listen

In Step 3, you learned how to mindfully attend to and accept your thoughts and feelings as inner experiences—nothing more and nothing less. From Steps 4 and 5 you learned how to change your problematic Private Body Talk in daily life. Now, whenever you have negative feelings about your looks, you know how to Stop, Look, and Listen. First, you *stop* reacting, judging, and fretting. Second, you become mindful of your inner experiences—as you *look* at your thoughts and emotions objectively and accept that they exist and are only what they are. Finally, you *listen* to your New Inner Voice—a more reasonable, realistic, nonjudgmental point of view. Now, you can talk back to yourself with your New Inner Voice and correct your troublesome thinking. You can talk to yourself just as you would to a good friend who's said the same unfair, critical things about himself or herself that you've just privately said about yourself—and that you know aren't true.

Your New Body Image Diary

It's time to exchange your Body Image Diary, which you began using in Step 3, for a new, expanded version. You will still enter the A-B-Cs as before—the *Activators* of your body image discomfort or distress, the *Beliefs* inherent in your Private Body Talk, and the emotional and behavioral *Consequences* of these experiences. What's new in your New Body Image Diary is that you will add a *D* and an *E*. *D* stands for the *Dialogues* expressed by your New Inner Voice—how you correctively dispute Distortions and Appearance Assumptions that you detect in your Private Body Talk. *E* refers to the *Effects* of your New Inner Voice on your emotions and your actions. *E* identifies your improvements as a result of changing your Private Body Talk. From now on, use this New Body Image Diary to record the A-B-C-D-E sequence of your body image experiences.

Copy the New Body Image Diary at the end of this chapter, or simply use its format in the journal or notebook that you are using. From now on, each and every day, try to keep a record of your challenging body image experiences and how your New Inner Voice has handled these challenges.

Helpsheet for Change: My New Body Image Diary

Activators:

Beliefs:

Consequences:

Dialogues of my New Inner Voice:

Effects of my New Inner Voice:

FINAL WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

There are some important things to keep in mind as you work to strengthen your New Inner Voice in your everyday life. Your first attempts at corrective thinking may seem odd or unnatural, they may not fit quite right, like a new pair of shoes. That's certainly understandable. Your New Inner Voice may not sound like you. Don't worry; it will become a better fit soon.

Typically, human change is gradual. Don't expect that corrective thinking will cause your body image difficulties to disappear immediately and totally. Initially, your new corrective thinking will mostly prevent your distress from getting out of hand, so appreciate that "less bad" is good. And new events or situations may necessitate finding different words for your New Inner Voice, so be flexible and be innovative. I remember a client who, after a few days of corrective thinking, complained that he still hated his body. He concluded "Either this program doesn't work or, if it does, I'm a hopeless case." Eventually, however, after becoming more patient with himself, he saw that both of his explanations were untrue—the program did work for him and he was not a hopeless case. So be tolerant, and accept any tough times as expected "bumps in the road." Never give yourself a hard time for having a hard time. That only makes it worse. And you don't deserve worse! Accept that you are where you are. Don't judge it.

It's a fact of life that people are more likely to behave in ways that are rewarded and rewarding than in ways that aren't. Rewarding yourself for mindfully monitoring your body image experiences and for corrective thinking is crucial. Mentally recognize your efforts and commend your successes. Mindfully do something special to affirm yourself in your quest to improve your body image quality of life. Buy yourself some fresh flowers, treat yourself to a movie, or take an invigorating walk. In a later chapter (Step 8), I'll show you even more positive ways to promote your improvements.