



# Flip the script

*Changing the way you see your body*

Flinders University Institute for Mental Health & Wellbeing



Flinders  
University

Institute for Mental Health &

wellbeing

## Ways to improve how you feel about your body?

In **Part 1 – Learn** of this chapter, you’ll learn about negative body image and how focusing on negative thoughts or feelings about your body, or trying to have the “perfect” appearance, can influence how you feel about yourself and make you feel not good enough.

In **Part 2 – Do**, you’ll learn about the actions you can take right now to start to improve your body image and change your life for the better.

Then, **we will ask for your advice** on how to share this information with other people who have an eating disorder.

All the stories in this chapter are based on the experiences of real people who have struggled with eating disorders.



## Help us help others!

People tell us the ideas in this chapter are interesting and helpful. But we need your help to learn how to best support people with eating disorders. By sharing your experiences and advice, the more we can help others with negative body image or a negative view of their body.



We know that **you are the expert** in your life and have more insight into what it's like to be a person with an eating disorder.

Please complete this chapter thoughtfully and share your feedback at the end to help us learn the best way to present this information to others like you.

Tell us what worked well for you and what didn't, so we can improve and make a real difference **together**.

## Part 1 – Learn!

Do you ever feel like you're not good enough  
because of the way you look?

Do you worry about your body or its appearance?

Do you compare your body negatively to others?

Do you believe you would be happier if you could  
reach your appearance goals?

These are common experiences for people who have **negative body image** or a negative view of their body.

## What is body image?

**Body image** is how we feel and think about our body and its appearance and the things we do based on these views. Our body image can affect our self-worth, self-esteem, and how we feel about ourselves.



# What is negative body image?



**Negative body image** is when we develop concerns about or a negative view of our body or its physical appearance.

Someone with negative body image often feels unhappy or dissatisfied with all or parts of their body and may focus on what they think are their flaws.

They may also compare themselves negatively to others (e.g., “I’m bigger than they are”, “They have more muscles than me”).



Negative body image is common and affects **9 out of every 10 young people**. Year after year Australian youth report body image as being in the top 3 issues that worry them.

Research has shown that negative body image is associated with serious mental health issues such as **eating disorders**, **anxiety**, and **depression**.

Let's look at an example of someone with negative body image...

**Isaac's story:**



*Isaac frequently checks his arms and legs in the mirror—flexing them and wishing they were bigger and more defined. He's smaller than the other boys on his team, and even though people have complimented him on his athletic physique, it never seems to be enough. He's always comparing himself to the bigger guys, convinced that he needs more muscle to be strong or just "fit in".*

*He spends hours at the gym, pushing himself through gruelling workouts, sometimes even twice a day, and he takes protein supplements, hoping they'll speed up his progress. But instead of feeling stronger, Isaac feels drained and frustrated.*

*His obsession with getting bigger is starting to take a toll—he's irritable, anxious, and pulling away from friends who try to reassure him. Despite their support, Isaac still feels inadequate, trapped in a cycle of overexertion and self-doubt, struggling to feel good enough.*

**What are some of the ways that negative body image has negatively impacted Isaac's life?**

**Now in a few sentences, describe the consequences of negative body image in your own life. How has negative body image impacted your life?**



## But, what about social pressure & the appearance ideal?



In today's world, society tells us how we should look and what body type we should aim for.

We're led to believe we need to have the "perfect" appearance to be seen as beautiful, attractive, or successful in the world, even though this appearance is impossible or unhealthy for most people.

We call this the **appearance ideal**, and it can change based on who you are—whether you're a man, woman, or have another identity—because different groups are often held to different beauty or body standards.



Take a moment to think about what society tells you you're supposed to look like.

Now, in one sentence, describe this appearance ideal.

We receive messages about what we're supposed to look like from all directions—family, friends, school, social media, TV, movies, magazines, the fashion industry, and everyday life. They are often hard, if not impossible, to get away from.

Over time, we can start to believe we need to meet these standards and try change our bodies to meet this appearance ideal, which can lead to harmful or risky behaviours such as skipping meals or over exercising.



Let's look at an example of a young person who is trying to conform to specific beauty standards...

Pip's story:



*Pip spends hours every day scrutinising her reflection in the mirror, comparing her body to the flawless images of women and models she sees online. She focuses on the parts of her body that she sees as her flaws. Her stomach isn't flat enough today, her thighs are too wide, she thinks to herself.*

*Despite feeling drained, she pushes herself harder at the gym and tries to skip meals or eat as little as possible, convinced that losing weight will make her feel better. But it never does. The more she tries to control her body, the more disconnected she feels from herself.*

*Her energy is low, and she can't concentrate at school or work. She feels anxious around food, and guilty after eating even the smallest snack. Pip's thoughts are consumed by her weight and appearance, leaving little room for anything else. She's isolating herself more, avoiding social events because she's terrified of how others might see her.*

*The more she tries to control her body, the worse she feels, yet she can't stop, believing that changing her body is the only way to feel good enough.*

Now that you've read Pip's story, write a letter to someone like Pip who believes they need to have the "perfect" or "ideal" appearance.

Explain the problems or dangers they might face if they try too hard to look "perfect". Try to think of as many examples as you can.



*Dear...*



# So, why do we care about our bodies so much?

## Cavemen science!

Our hunter gatherer ancestors needed to compare themselves to others for survival.

For example, an early human might look at another and think “Wow, they are really strong and I’m weak.... What are they doing differently and how can I do that too?”. This might lead to crafting better hunting tools or looking for food in a different area.

Comparing also helped early humans know where they fit in. It was important to be in a tribe for survival—protecting each other from threats, looking food together, and finding suitable mates.

So, this makes sense! Comparison was essential for survival.



## But what about now?

Luckily, we now don’t need this brain wiring anymore. Comparison is not essential for our survival; it no longer helps keep us safe.

## The good news is that we can rewire our brains!

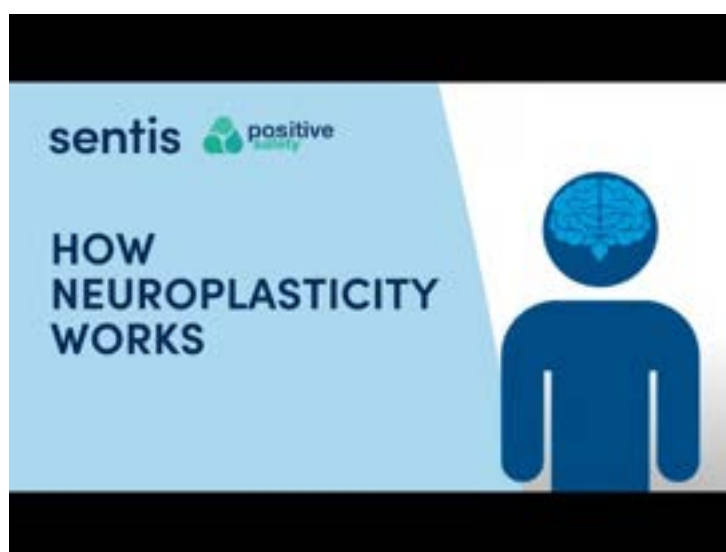


We can teach our brains to not spend so much time worrying about our bodies.

This is because the brain is adaptable—it can change and reorganise itself by creating new neural connections and pathways—a process called **neuroplasticity** or **brain plasticity**.

By trying new activities, challenging your brain, and learning new skills, you can foster positive change your brain.

Do you want to know more about how the brain changes? Watch this video<sup>1</sup>:



## But what about brain food?



Your brain's ability to change and grow, can be influenced by what you eat.

Eating the right foods gives your brain the fuel it needs to work its best, especially **carbohydrates**, which help you think and learn. Without good nutrition, your brain can shrink, making it harder to focus, solve problems, manage emotions, or challenge negative thoughts about yourself.

It is recommended that approximately 50% or more of total energy of your diet should come from carbohydrate. **Select at least 4 servings of carbohydrates over the day** – examples of servings are below.<sup>2</sup>

<input type="checkbox"/> ½ cup muesli	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ Corn Flakes	<input type="checkbox"/> ¾ cup cooked cous cous
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sustain	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 roll	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked barley
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup All Bran	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 pita bread	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup sweet corn
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Sultana Bran	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 slices bread	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked quinoa
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup Just Right	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 fruit toast	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup mashed potato
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked porridge	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 tortillas	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 medium baked potatoes
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Special K	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked pasta	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 large sweet potato
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 ½ cups Rice Bubbles	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 cup cooked rice	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 cups cooked noodles

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/ELpfYCZa87g?feature=oembed>

<sup>2</sup> This information is available from the Real Food Guide - <https://cbt-t.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/resources>

## Can my body image change?



Just like our bodies change over time as we grow, our body image and how we feel about our body can change too.

For example, during puberty, when your body is going through many changes, you might start paying more attention to how you look. It's normal to notice your own body and the bodies of others as you go through life.

It's when we spend too much time worrying about what our body looks like, comparing ourselves to others, and trying to meet **society's unrealistic expectations** that this can become a problem.

**Good news! By taking action today, we can change our brains and our relationship with our body to improve our lives for the future.**



It's unrealistic to aim to be completely satisfied with our bodies, but we can learn to be more accepting. This is likely to take some time, but there are things you can do **right now** to improve your body image:

1. Update past negative memories you have of your body by thinking about them in a different way.
2. Shift your focus away from appearance and learn to appreciate your body for what it can do, care for your body, and remember that you are so much more than just your body.

## Past imagery updating



People with body image issues often say that **memories of early negative appearance experiences**, like being teased about how they look, can still affect how they feel about their body, even years later. These negative images can get ‘stuck’ in our minds.

We can't change what happened, but these past experiences don't have to continue to impact our lives today.

With a strategy called ‘**imagery updating**’, we can look at those old memories in a new way, which helps us stop letting them affect how we see ourselves. This method is proven to make those memories feel less important over time.

**Let's give this strategy a go, it has 3 steps...**

### Step 1:

Try to think about the **earliest** event you can remember of an **unpleasant body experience where you felt ashamed or embarrassed of your body or how your body looks**.

It could be something that happened to you when you were a child, or a teenager. Some examples are:

- being teased by your peers about how you look.
- receiving negative/critical comments about your body or appearance.
- feeling uncomfortable/insecure about your body when trying on clothes in a change-room, looking yourself in the mirror, getting ready with friends to go to a party, walking past a group of people who were looking at you, out in public.





*Now take a moment to close your eyes and imagine this earliest event as if it is happening **right now**. Notice the thoughts and feelings that come up for you.*

*Please only continue when you have a picture of this earliest event in your mind.*

**When you're ready, in a few sentences, write about this earliest event you just thought about. Describe the event as if it is happening right now.**

- 1. Write using “I” language (e.g., “I’m in the change room, trying on a pair of blue jeans. My friend is in the change room next to me also trying on clothes.”)**
- 2. Include as much detail as you can, such as what you are doing, who you are with, what you can see, how you are feeling, and what thoughts are going through your mind.**

Well done! Let's move on to Step 2.

## Step 2:

Think about the same memory again.

This time, when you close your eyes and imagine this event, imagine it **as if you were someone else watching the event happen from the outside, or like you are watching a movie on a screen.**





Now take a moment to close your eyes and re-imagine this event as if you were observing it **right now**.

This time you are **someone else watching the event happen from the outside**, or on a screen. Imagine you are watching your younger self going through the event again.

Please only continue when you have a picture of this in your mind.

Now, in a few sentences, write about this event as if it is happening **right now**. This time write about what **someone else would see if they were watching the event happen from the outside**, as if it were happening to your younger self right now.

1. Write as if someone else is telling the story about you (e.g., "I see Sarah in the change room, she is trying on a pair of blue jeans. She's with her friend who is also trying on clothes.")
2. Include as much detail as you can, such as where Sarah is, what Sarah is doing, who Sarah is with, how Sarah might be feeling, and what thoughts might be going through Sarah's mind.

Well done! Now let's do Step 3, the final step.



## Step 3:

Think about the same memory one last time.

This time, **you are your younger self again, but your wiser and kinder older self is with you in the room.**

Your older self can get involved if you want them to. They can offer you kindness or provide new updated information based on what you know now, they can talk to you (or others) or do anything else that feels helpful and right in the situation.



*Now take a moment to close your eyes and re-imagine this event as if it were happening to you **right now**.*

*Remember, this time your wiser and kinder older self is with you and can get involved if you want them to.*

*Please only continue when you have a picture of this in your mind.*

Now, in a few sentences, write about this event as if it is happening right now, but this time, your wiser and older self is with you and can get involved if you want them to.



1. Write using “I” language like you did earlier (e.g., “I’m in the change room, trying on a pair of blue jeans. My friend is in the change room next to me also trying on clothes.”)
2. When you talk about your older self, write it like you’re telling a story about them (e.g., “older Sarah reminded younger Sarah to be kind and understanding towards themselves in the situation...”).
3. Include as much detail as you can, such as what you are doing, who you are with, what you can see, how you are feeling, and what thoughts are going through your mind.
4. Describe what your wiser and kinder older self says and does in the situation. Remember, they can offer you kindness or provide new updated information based on what you know now, they can talk to you (or others) or do anything else that feels helpful and right in the situation.

You’ve now completed your first past imagery updating exercise, great work!

In a few sentences, what did you learn from completing this exercise? Think about what you can tell yourself in the future to use at times when you feel challenged about your body image.

Something else you can do right now to improve your body image is to practice ‘body neutrality’.

## Body neutrality

**Body neutrality** means it’s okay if you don’t love your body and it’s okay if you do, these feelings come and go; mindfully noticing all thoughts about our bodies, whether good, bad, or neutral, and allowing them to exist without judgement; our bodies change over time and all bodies have different features, abilities, and conditions and that is okay.



Body neutrality recognises:

- Our feelings about our body change constantly depending on what is happening around us. So, our feelings are best mindfully observed without judgement.
- A central focus on what our body allows us to do and appreciating this will lead us to respect and care for our body.
- Acknowledging that our self-worth encompasses both internal and external passions and isn't focused primarily on our appearance.



There are many pressures you face to look a certain way or have the “perfect” appearance. We know body neutrality can’t take these pressures away, but... body neutrality offers a way to show respect to your body and other bodies.



Some young people who have learned about body neutrality say it feels more realistic than trying to love their body all the time. Sometimes, trying to always love how they look felt impossible or made them feel like they were failing when they couldn't do it. Body neutrality offers a way to feel better without that pressure.

**The good news is you can start to practice body neutrality right now, by using one of many strategies. Some examples are listed below.**



**From the examples listed below, which one strategy would you like to try this week to practice body neutrality?**

<input type="checkbox"/> Wear clothing that is comfortable and enjoyable
<input type="checkbox"/> Give away any clothing that no longer fits or makes you feel good
<input type="checkbox"/> Practice self-compassion – consider what you might say to a friend and use this as a starting point to speak kinder to yourself
<input type="checkbox"/> Self-care activities – whatever you like that shows love and respect to yourself and body (e.g., have a bath, listen to music, go for a walk outside, read a book, journal)
<input type="checkbox"/> Challenge any unhelpful body thoughts
<input type="checkbox"/> Redirecting body conversations with others (e.g., talking about something else instead)
<input type="checkbox"/> Use body neutral statements (e.g., my body allows me to do things I enjoy)
<input type="checkbox"/> Write a letter of gratitude to your body
<input type="checkbox"/> Clean up your social media! Unfollow content that makes you feel bad about your body. You might follow body neutral content instead
<input type="checkbox"/> Try to spend less time in front of the mirror. Covering it up might help.
<input type="checkbox"/> Try to decrease the number of times you weigh yourself or get rid of the scales completely
<input type="checkbox"/> Engage in body activism (e.g., write a letter to call out a body shaming advertisement)
<input type="checkbox"/> Find a community of like-minded individuals
<input type="checkbox"/> Practice ‘opposite action’ – do the opposite of whatever your unhelpful thought is telling you
<input type="checkbox"/> Write a list of your strengths, values, qualities

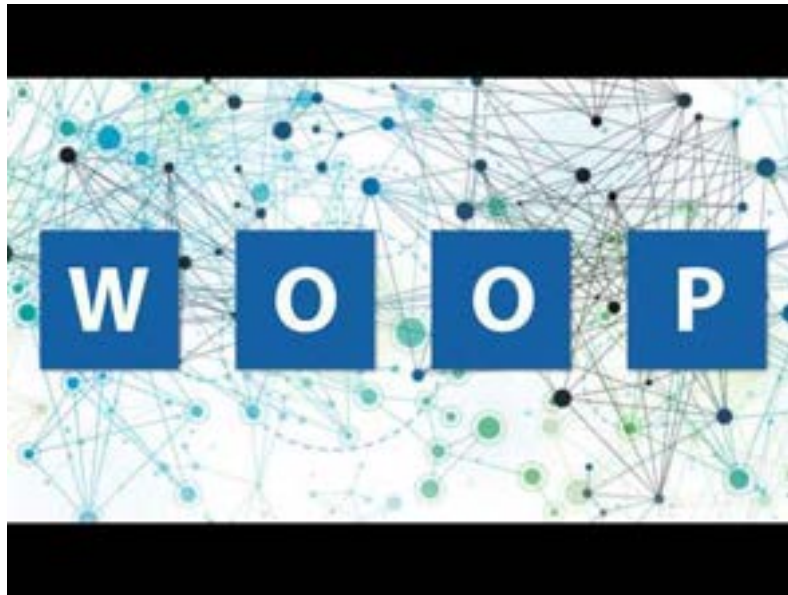




## Make a plan

**Let's create a plan for how you might practice body neutrality this week by using the strategy you selected. One way to do this is by developing a Wish Outcome Obstacle Plan (WOOP) goal.**

Watch the video below<sup>3</sup>:



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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/embed/yBaVSJ6zq4c?feature=oembed>



Create your WOOP for the strategy you selected above.











The body neutrality strategy I've selected to try this week is:

My WOOP:

<b>What is your <u>wish</u> for the next 4 weeks that seems challenging but achievable?</b> <i>As you name your wish in 3-6 words, imagine writing it in glowing letters on a sign at the end of your path. Keep it in the front of your mind as you move forward in this exercise.</i>	<b>Wish:</b>
<b>What is the best <u>outcome</u> that you can imagine, the best outcome about fulfilling your wish?</b> <i>Picture the scene in vivid detail—where are you, what are you doing, and how do you feel?</i>	<b>Outcome:</b>
<b>What is the one main <u>obstacle</u> in you that stands in the way of realising this wish.</b> <i>Picture a wall or barrier that appears on the path towards your wish, a habit, a fear, or a thought that makes it harder to move forward.</i>	<b>Obstacle:</b>
<b>What is your <u>plan</u> to overcome your obstacle?</b> <i>Imagine you have a tool in your hand that represents your power to overcome the wall. It could be a key, a ladder, or a burst of energy to break through. What action or thought is your tool? Picture yourself using it and watching the wall disappear. Write your action or thought in one sentence.</i>	<b>Plan (action/thought):</b>
<b>If/then plan:</b> If [write obstacle here]: _____ Then [write action/thought here]: _____ _____ Great work. Now slowly repeat this plan.	

**Congratulations! You have completed a WOOP that will help you to practice body neutrality this week to start to change how you feel about your body.**

Now, on a scale from 1 (not at all confident) to 10 (the most confident I can feel) how confident are you that you can take new actions to change how you feel about your body?

Not at all confident											The most confident I can feel
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

## Now we need your help...

Now that you've heard the science and heard from other people, we'd like you to share your own story and advice. We would like to use your story and advice to help other people like you to deal with some of the challenges they may be experiencing.



Based on what you've learned, what advice would you give to a young person (Belle) who is struggling with negative body image and feeling like they are not good enough?

Share which strategies worked for you or which ideas you found most helpful.



**Thank you for helping us today!**

**And well done – you’ve completed the Flip the Script chapter!**

*Keep Up the  
Good Work!*

Remember...



**You are braver than you believe,  
Stronger than you seem,  
And smarter than you think**

*Christopher Robin's message to Winnie the Pooh*