



More than one piece

Expanding your self-worth

Flinders University Institute for Mental Health & Wellbeing



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University

Institute for Mental Health &

wellbeing

Want to expand your self-worth?

In **Part 1 – Learn** of this chapter, you'll learn about the risks of judging your self-worth based on just one or two aspects of your life.

In **Part 2 – Do**, you'll discover ways to build a more balanced sense of self-worth.

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.



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!

An eating disorder can cause people to **judge their worth** as a person primarily—or even solely—**on perceived control over eating, weight, or shape**. All the other important and unique aspects of self are overshadowed and dismissed.

Given the eating disorder constantly criticises you for not achieving enough, this means you end up constantly feeling **not good enough** and **fatally flawed**.



Take Chloe's story for an example...



Chloe's story:

I've always been good academically, and my parents always told me to work hard. I love it when people praise me. Over time, I started to work hard on my appearance as well, I lost weight in my final year of high school and a lot of my friends said I looked great.

Now I am at university and my weight is going up. Sometimes I binge on food late at night after studying when I am tired and I try to control my weight using purging, but it only seems to make the binge eating worse. I am finding it hard to concentrate in lectures.

The only thing that really matters to me now is losing weight, but because I can't do it, I feel like I am a total failure. Even getting a good grade doesn't make me feel good for very long.

Here is an example from Nick...

Nick's story:



I think about food all the time and count every single calorie. I stick to a strict meal plan and always try to eat under my limit so I can get toned. I spend hours on social media looking for new recipes, workout tips, and “clean” eating ideas, just in case I’ve missed something. I also spend a lot of time at the gym, pushing myself harder every day.

But honestly, I feel really lonely and don’t have much of a social life right now. When friends invite me out, I hesitate because I worry about the food at restaurants being “empty calories.” Even when I do go, I’ll order the lightest thing on the menu or just pick at a salad while everyone else enjoys burgers and fries, laughing and having fun. I act like it doesn’t bother me, but I hate going out like this.

What’s worse is that my mood is always low, I’m tired all the time, and I’m not even interested in being close to my partner anymore. I guess this is just the price I have to pay if I want to look fit. No pain, no gain, right?

The eating disorder works like a **“telescope”**. Over time it focuses more and more on just one aspect of self—your perceived control over your eating, weight and/or shape. All the other aspects of yourself get lost to view, even though they are still there.

Another way to think about this is **“not seeing the wood for the trees”**. Your focus on one tree in a forest means you don’t notice all the other trees around you.



This is called **selective attention**. For early humans this part of our brain helped us to focus during times of stress. But, it was never meant to be a default setting.

The eating disorder gets your brain stuck in a selective attention phase, and the big picture is lost. We need the big picture to help us get all the information we need to make good decisions.

For an example of how selective attention works, watch this video¹:



When our brain is under stress—like counting the number of passes the team in white makes—it gets into selective attention mode and screens out all other information.

This is why most people don't see the moonwalking bear on the first time. This means we can miss pretty important information. Chloe and Nick are experiencing selective attention, which means they're putting all their energy into controlling their eating and ignoring other important parts of their life.

To recover from an eating disorder, you have to take the focus off it and start paying attention to your whole life again. Eating shouldn't be the thing that controls everything you do.



¹ <https://www.youtube.com/embed/pTv4yD6BKIA?feature=oembed>

Good news! By taking action, you can break out of selective attention mode.

Taking action helps you break out of that narrow focus—just like when you finally spotted the moonwalking bear.

Instead of putting all your energy into just one thing—like focusing on eating or how you look to feel good about yourself—you can start building up other parts of your life too. That way, if one area isn't going well, it's not a disaster, because you've got other things that help you feel okay about yourself.



It's time to take action.

Part 2 – Do!

There are two main steps you can take to help you see your self-worth in a more balanced and healthy way:

1. Think about how much you judge yourself based on how well you control your eating, weight, and appearance. Then, come up with an alternative and **a more balanced way to see your self-worth**—one that's based on lots of different parts of your life, not just how you eat or look.
2. Make a plan to:
 - a. Spend more time and energy on **other areas of your life** that make you feel worthwhile, and/or
 - b. **Rediscover** parts of your life that make you feel worthwhile or **discover new ones**.



Research highlight

Research shows that even small amounts of dieting can change how the brain works—and this is especially true for young people, whose brains are still developing. When your brain doesn't get enough food, it can shrink and stop working properly. This affects how you think, handle emotions, learn, and make decisions.

When your brain is starved, it gets stuck in '**selective attention**' mode, making it hard to see the bigger picture.

To break out of that stuck mindset, your brain needs proper nutrition. That's why treatment for an eating disorder always has a focus on adequate nutrition—because your brain can't heal or create new, healthy habits without it. Eating enough helps your brain build new pathways that support new behaviours that can make you feel better.



Remember Nick's story? What is one thing Nick could do to break out of selective attention mode? Tell us in 2-3 sentences below. If you're not sure, it is OK to guess.



Thanks for giving Nick advice! Here is what he ended up doing:

I told my partner that I felt I had lost perspective and together we wrote a list of what we appreciated about each other. She mentioned things about me that I had not known were valued, like my love for animals. We decided to volunteer a few hours a week at nearby animal shelter to take dogs for a walk. It really helped our relationship as we got to talk on these walks and enjoy nature and animals together.

Then I got some help from a personal trainer to reduce my time working out in the gym and to develop a "good enough" eating plan that gave my brain enough carbohydrates.

To spend less time in the gym, I had to replace the time with something else. A mate of mine who I had previously travelled with got me learning French using the free Duolingo app and we started planning a holiday in France. We both really enjoy travel and see it as an important way of breaking out of own narrow experiences. It reminds me I am so much more than how I look.



By doing something differently, Nick started to rely less on controlling his appearance to feel good about himself. As he tried out new ways of thinking and acting—and made sure he was eating enough carbohydrates to fuel his brain—his brain began to build new pathways. These changes made the healthy behaviours feel more natural and easier to stick with over time.

So, by doing something differently, Nick was able to break out of selective attention mode and start to focus on other areas of his life that made him feel worthwhile. This is something anyone can do, including you ... simply by taking action.



Let's choose ways you can start taking positive action in your own life.

1. Find a more balanced way to see yourself

Take a moment to think about how you judge yourself. **How much of your self-worth depends on how well you control your eating, your weight, or how you look?**



Everyone has their own way of judging themselves. When we feel like we're doing well in the things that matter to us, we feel good. But when we don't, it can make us feel bad about ourselves.

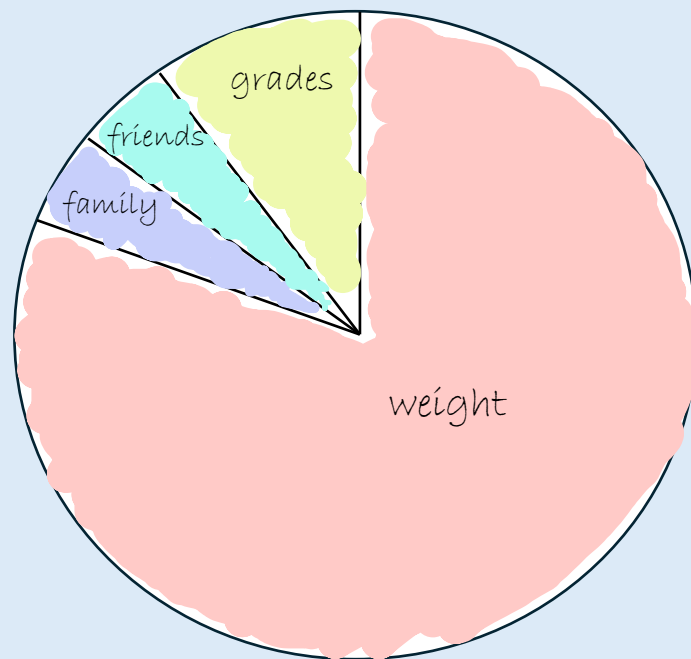
People often judge themselves based on things like how their friendships or relationships are going, how they're doing in school, or how well they perform in things like sports, music, or other hobbies. For many, appearance is also a big one.

Here is a list of common areas that other people have said are important to how they see themselves:

| Appearance | Pets |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Body shape/weight | Dating/Romantic relationships |
| What I eat in a day | Friends |
| Social media presence (e.g., TikTok) | Family relationships |
| Exercise | My work |
| School/Grades/Study | Volunteering in my local community |
| Sports (e.g., Netball) | Travel |
| Music | Other |

A simple way to see how you judge yourself is to draw a **pie chart**. Each slice of the pie shows a different part of your life that matters to you when it comes to how you see your self-worth. The bigger the slice, the more importance you give that area. Makes sense?

Remember Chloe's story? This is what Chloe's pie chart looks like and what she said about it...



I don't like my pie chart. Looking at it actually makes me quite sad that this is what my life has become.

I am so used to focusing on my weight that I've said no to hanging out with my friends. I've always wanted to do more trips with friends, but I tell myself I can't manage to control my eating if I am away. Every time mom knocks on my door, I tell her to get out, and I can tell it hurts her.

Looking at this pie chart is confronting, but I know that I don't want my life to be like this forever.

Now, let's draw yours.

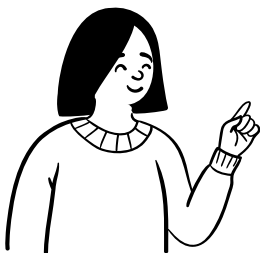
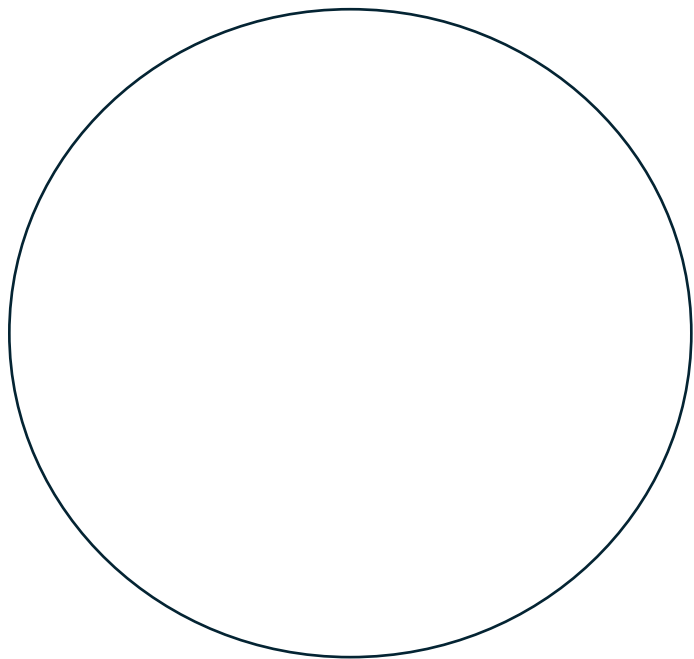
First, make a list of what is included in your pie chart. You can have as many pieces in your pie chart as you want—add more to the list below if you need. If it helps, check out the list of above of areas other people have said are important to how they see themselves, it might give you some ideas.

Then, draw your own pie chart to show how each part makes up your life. If it helps, you can give each piece a percentage—just make sure they all add up to 100%.

My pie chart:

The pieces of my pie chart that make up my life:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



Great job. Take a moment to reflect on your pie chart. How do you feel about it? What would you like to change?

2. Expand the parts of your life that make you feel worthwhile

Now, try setting some goals to expand the parts of your life that make you feel good about yourself. This might mean:

1. Spending more time and energy on things you already enjoy.
2. Getting back into things you used to like but haven't had time for lately.
3. Trying out new things that might make you feel good.



A discussion with your therapist at this point will be helpful to sort out the different specific areas of your life you want to expand on to shrink the influence of eating on your self-worth.

Have a go at listing these areas below.

| 1. Current areas of my life I want to expand... |
|---|
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |
| |

2. Areas of my life I want to reintroduce...

| |
|--|
| |
| |
| |
| |

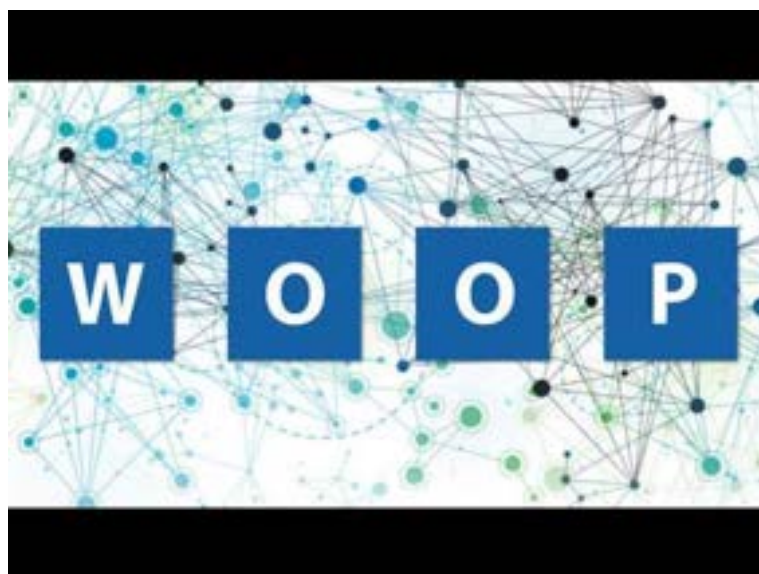
3. New things I want to try...

| |
|--|
| |
| |
| |
| |

Make a plan

Let's do a Wish Outcome Obstacle Plan (WOOP) for how you might start to expand the parts of your life that make you feel worthwhile.

Watch the video below³:



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

Create your WOOP for one of the goals above you would like to make progress on.

The goal I chose is: _____

My WOOP:

| | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <p>What is your <u>wish</u> for the next 4 weeks that seems challenging but achievable? <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></p> | <p>Wish:</p> |
| <p>What is the best <u>outcome</u> that you can imagine, the best outcome about fulfilling your wish? <i>Picture the scene in vivid detail—where are you, what are you doing, and how do you feel?</i></p> | <p>Outcome:</p> |
| <p>What is the one main <u>obstacle</u> in you that stands in the way of realising this wish. <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></p> | <p>Obstacle:</p> |
| <p>What is your <u>plan</u> to overcome your obstacle? <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></p> | <p>Plan (action/thought):</p> |
| <p>If/then plan: If [write obstacle here]: _____ Then [write action/thought here]: _____ _____ <p style="text-align: center;">Great work. Now slowly repeat this plan.</p> </p> | |

Congratulations! You have completed a WOOP that will help you expand the parts of your life that make you feel good about yourself.

Look out for obstacles or roadblocks!

Dealing with obstacles is part of life but it can be tricky.

Sometimes you may find yourself up against **“roadblock thoughts”** when you try to take positive action and break out of the selective attention mode.

Roadblock thoughts are negative, unhelpful, and exaggerated things people say to themselves that get in the way of their goals. Everyone has them from time to time.



Let's look at two common roadblocks.

1. I don't even know where to start! It's not like I can just switch it off.

This is a very common thought. Sometimes it just takes time for your brain to “catch up” to the helpful actions you decide to do. In the meantime, here are some things you can try: start by intentionally giving less focus on controlling my eating and paying more attention to other slices of the pie. For example, consider opposite behaviour to a focus on eating restriction, such as going out to dinner with family and friends on a regular basis, and building relationships.

2. I've been like this for so long, how am I going to change?

That thought is perfectly normal – you will have easier days and harder days. Every day is a new chance to succeed in practising new behaviour that allows your brain builds to new neural pathways—like creating new roads! The more you practice something, the stronger these brain paths get. So, every time you try something new, you're helping your brain grow and get stronger so that the behaviour becomes easier!

When facing a roadblock there are two important things to remember:

1. Something Christopher Robin said to Winnie-The-Pooh:

*"You are braver than you believe,
stronger than you seem,
and smarter than you think".*













2. You don't need to do this alone, look for others who can support your journey along the way.

**Let's make a plan for dealing with the roadblocks
if they come up for you.**

| Roadblock thought | My action plan |
|---|--|
| 1. I don't even know where to start! It's not like I can just switch it off | <input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support Person: |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ... |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> One small thing I can do to take positive action is ... |
| 2. I've been like this for so long, how am I going to change? | <input type="checkbox"/> I can ask this person for help or support Person: |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> I can be a good friend to myself saying ... |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> One small thing I can do to take positive action is ... |

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 action to change your pie chart?

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|---|---|-------------------------------------|
| 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"/> | |

Creating your *ideal* pie chart is a great way to imagine the balanced life you want! By thinking about the range of areas you want to focus on—like friendships, hobbies, health, or personal growth—you can see how you want to spread out your self-worth.

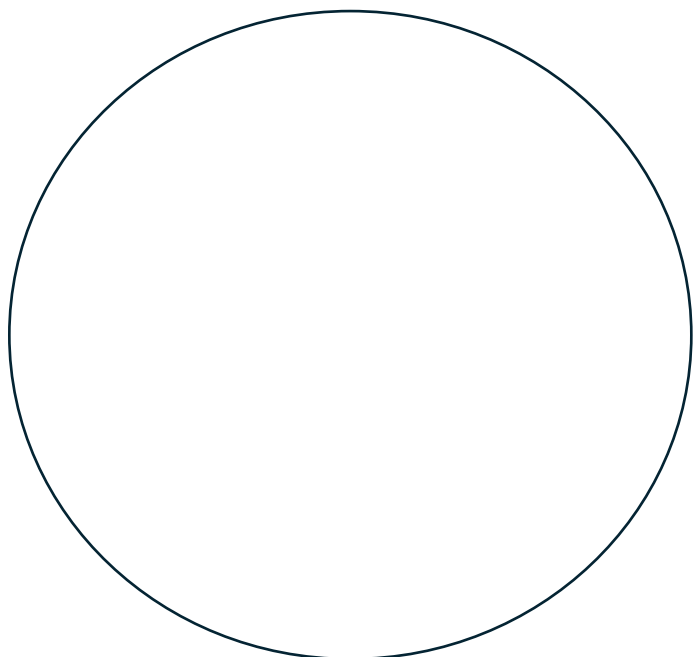
Let's have a go at creating your ideal pie chart.

First, make a list of what is included in your *ideal* pie chart. Then, draw your own pie chart to show how each part makes up your life.

My ideal pie chart:

The pieces of my pie chart that make up my **ideal** life:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



Keep your **ideal pie chart** somewhere you can see it often, like on your fridge or in your notebook. It will remind you to make small changes every day that help you live a happier and more balanced life.

Every time you make a choice that matches your ideal pie chart, you're building new habits and staying focused on living a happier, more well-rounded life!

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.



Imagine someone your age (Lexi) who defined themselves by only one or two parts of their life—most importantly their appearance.

Based on what you have learned today about the brain and building a healthier and more balanced sense of self-worth, what advice would you give to Lexi to help her feel better about herself?

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 More than
One Piece chapter!**

*Keep Up the
Good Work!*

Remember...

