MAKING PEACE WITH YOUR BODY

A Body Image Workbook

Ten Structured Exercises for Body Acceptance

Grounded in CBT, ACT, and Self-Compassion Research

Prepared for use in individual therapy. This workbook is a companion to your sessions, not a replacement for them — please bring your reflections back to discuss together.

Moustafa Kamel Mahdy · Psychotherapist
moustafatherapist.com

A Note Before You Begin

Body image struggles are rarely about the body itself. They are usually about a painful relationship with the body — built over years, shaped by comparison, criticism, and moments when we learned to equate our worth with our appearance. That relationship can change. It changes slowly, through repetition, not through a single insight.

This workbook contains ten exercises. They are sequenced so that early exercises build the awareness and skills that later exercises depend on — please move through them in order the first time, even if some feel more appealing than others. Some will feel uncomfortable. That discomfort is expected and is part of the work, not a sign that something is wrong.

Try to complete one exercise focus per week, repeating the daily/weekly practices within it as instructed. Bring this workbook to sessions so we can review what came up.

> *If at any point these exercises bring up thoughts of self-harm, or intense urges around restricting food, purging, or compulsive exercise, please contact me directly before continuing, or reach out to emergency services if you are in immediate danger.*

How This Workbook Is Organized

The exercises move through four phases:

- Phase 1 — Awareness (Exercises 1–3): noticing thoughts, triggers, and behaviors without yet trying to change them.
- Phase 2 — Cognitive work (Exercises 4–6): examining and loosening the grip of harmful beliefs about the body.
- Phase 3 — Reconnection (Exercises 7–9): rebuilding a felt, functional, appreciative relationship with the body.
- Phase 4 — Integration (Exercise 10): consolidating the work into a forward-looking practice.

Exercise 1 · The Body Image Diary

Approach: CBT — self-monitoring **Suggested frequency:** Daily, for two weeks, ideally in the moment or within a few hours

Purpose

Before we can change a pattern, we need to see it clearly. This exercise builds awareness of exactly when body dissatisfaction spikes, what triggers it, and what the client does in response (avoidance, checking, comparing, seeking reassurance). It also creates the raw material we'll use in Exercises 4–5.

Instructions for the client

1. Each time you notice a strong negative feeling about your body, pause and write down the situation (where you were, what was happening, who you were with).
2. Rate the intensity of the distress from 0–10.
3. Write the automatic thought that went through your mind, as close to word-for-word as you can recall (e.g. "I look disgusting in this").
4. Note what you did next — did you avoid a mirror, change clothes, seek reassurance, skip an event, check your body repeatedly, compare yourself to someone?
5. Do not try to correct or challenge the thought yet — just record it.

Reflection prompts (client writes these down)

- What situations came up most often this week?
- Was there a time of day, a place, or a type of interaction that triggered these moments more than others?
- Looking back over the week, what is one pattern you notice in your own reactions?

Clinical note: watch this diary for signs of compensatory behaviors (restriction, purging, excessive exercise, body checking rituals). If these emerge with clinical severity, this shifts toward eating-disorder-informed treatment and may need a different protocol.

Exercise 2 · Identifying the Inner Critic's Voice

Approach: CBT / Schema-informed **Suggested frequency:** Once, as a structured writing exercise (about 30–40 minutes), reviewed together in session

Purpose

Body-critical thoughts often aren't really 'about' the body — they are the voice of an internalized standard, sometimes traceable to a parent, a peer group, an ex-partner, or media messaging absorbed over years. Naming that voice as separate from the client's own reasoning begins to create distance from it.

Instructions for the client

1. Review your Body Image Diary from Exercise 1 and pick out three or four recurring critical thoughts.
2. For each one, ask: whose voice does this sound like? Where might I have first learned this standard?
3. Give this inner critical voice a name (client's choice — some people use a neutral label like 'the Critic' or 'the Judge').
4. Write a short paragraph describing when this voice first became loud in your life.
5. Write one sentence about what this voice was trying to protect you from, even if its method is harmful now (e.g. rejection, exclusion, not being taken seriously).

Reflection prompts (client writes these down)

- What does the Critic sound like — whose tone or words do you recognize in it?
- What was it trying to protect you from?
- What would you want to say back to it, now, as an adult?

Exercise 3 · Graded Mirror Exposure

Approach: CBT — exposure-based, evidence-supported for body image disturbance **Suggested frequency:** 5–10 minutes, 4–5 times per week for two to three weeks

Purpose

Avoidance of mirrors and reflective surfaces maintains body image distress by preventing habituation and reinforcing the belief that looking is dangerous. Structured, non-judgmental mirror exposure is one of the most consistently evidence-supported interventions for body image disturbance.

Instructions for the client

1. Stand in front of a full-length mirror, fully clothed at first, in a private space where you won't be interrupted.
2. Describe your body out loud or in writing using neutral, factual, non-evaluative language only (e.g. "my shoulders are square, my hair is dark and reaches my collarbone") — no words like 'good', 'bad', 'fat', or 'ugly' are allowed, only descriptive ones.
3. Start at the top of the body and move down systematically, including the parts you usually avoid looking at and the parts you don't mind.
4. Notice the urge to criticize, rush, or look away — and gently return to neutral description each time.
5. Rate your distress at the start and end of each session (0–10).
6. Once clothed mirror-work feels tolerable (distress consistently below 4/10), progress to the same exercise in more everyday clothing, at the pace that feels manageable — do not force this progression.

Reflection prompts (client writes these down)

- How did your distress level change from the start to the end of each session over the week?
- Which body parts triggered the strongest urge to judge or look away?
- What did you notice about your ability to simply describe, rather than evaluate?

Clinical note: pace progression according to the client's readiness; do not rush toward less clothing. For clients with significant trauma history connected to their body, slow this down further and stay longer at each stage.

Exercise 4 · The Courtroom of Thoughts

Approach: CBT — cognitive restructuring **Suggested frequency:** Twice weekly, applied to a different thought from the diary each time

Purpose

This is a structured thought-challenging exercise adapted specifically for appearance-related beliefs. It teaches the client to treat their harshest body thoughts as claims requiring evidence, not facts to be accepted automatically.

Instructions for the client

1. Choose one recurring critical thought from your Body Image Diary (e.g. "Everyone notices how my stomach looks").
2. Play 'prosecutor': list every piece of evidence that seems to support this thought.
3. Play 'defense': list evidence against it, including times this thought has been wrong before, and alternative explanations for the 'evidence' above.
4. Play 'judge': write a more balanced, realistic verdict — not a falsely positive one, just a fair one (e.g. "My stomach looks the way it looks; most people are absorbed in their own concerns and are not scrutinizing me").
5. Rate how much you believe the original thought (0–100%) before and after the exercise.

Reflection prompts (client writes these down)

- What surprised you about the evidence on the 'defense' side?
- Did your belief in the original thought change? By how much?
- What would you say to a close friend who had this exact thought about themselves?

Exercise 5 · Uncovering the Core Belief

Approach: Schema Therapy — downward arrow technique **Suggested frequency:** Once, in session together, then reflected on independently for a week

Purpose

Appearance-based thoughts are often the surface layer of a deeper core belief about worth, lovability, or acceptability. This exercise traces the thought down to its root, which is where lasting change happens.

Instructions for the client

1. Take one strong body-critical thought (e.g. "My arms look flabby").
2. Ask: "If that were true, what would it mean about me?" Write the answer.
3. Take that answer and ask the same question again: "And if that were true, what would it mean?"
4. Repeat this 3–5 times until you reach a core statement about your worth as a person (common ones: "I'm not lovable," "I don't deserve good things," "I will be rejected").
5. Write the core belief at the bottom, and circle it.

Reflection prompts (client writes these down)

- Does this core belief show up in other areas of your life beyond your body — relationships, work, friendships?
- How old were you when you think this belief first formed?
- On a scale of 0–100%, how much do you believe this statement is actually true, when you look at it in daylight?

Clinical note: this is schema-level work — plan to revisit the identified core belief across several future sessions, not just within this workbook.

Exercise 6 · Defusion: 'I Notice I'm Having the Thought That...'

Approach: ACT — cognitive defusion **Suggested frequency:** Daily practice, especially in the moment a critical thought arises, for at least two weeks

Purpose

Rather than debating whether a body-critical thought is true or false, defusion teaches the client to change their relationship to the thought itself — recognizing it as a mental event, not a command or a fact.

Instructions for the client

1. When you catch a critical body thought, silently or out loud restate it as: "I notice I'm having the thought that ___."
2. Then add one more layer: "I notice that I'm noticing I'm having the thought that ___."
3. Say the original harsh thought slowly, ten times in a row, using a strange or comical voice (e.g. imagining a cartoon character says it) until the words start to lose their emotional charge.
4. Picture the thought as a leaf floating down a stream, or written on a passing cloud, watching it drift away rather than grabbing onto it.
5. Notice: you do not have to make the thought go away. The goal is distance, not deletion.

Reflection prompts (client writes these down)

- What happens to a thought's intensity when you say it in a silly voice ten times?
- What's different about relating to a thought as 'something my mind produced' versus 'the truth'?
- Which defusion technique (naming it, repeating it, the leaf/cloud image) worked best for you?

Exercise 7 · Values-Based Living Beyond Appearance

Approach: ACT — values clarification and committed action **Suggested frequency:** One planning session, then a weekly check-in

Purpose

Body image struggles often narrow a person's life — they skip events, avoid intimacy, or delay things 'until my body looks right.' This exercise reconnects daily choices to the client's actual values rather than appearance management.

Instructions for the client

1. List 5 areas of life that matter to you (e.g. friendship, creativity, intimacy, movement, learning, family, adventure).
2. For each, write one sentence describing the kind of person you want to be in that area — regardless of how your body looks.
3. Identify at least two things you have been avoiding, postponing, or opting out of because of body image concerns (e.g. swimming, dating, dancing, certain clothing, social events).
4. Choose ONE of these to re-engage with this week, even in a small or modified way, guided by the value rather than by comfort.
5. After doing it, write down what it was like to act from your values even while the uncomfortable body thoughts were present.

Reflection prompts (client writes these down)

- What has body dissatisfaction cost you in terms of the life you actually want to live?
- What did it feel like to do the avoided activity anyway?
- Which value do you want to prioritize acting on next?

Exercise 8 · Body Functionality Inventory

Approach: Positive body image research — functionality appreciation **Suggested frequency:** Once, then revisited weekly with new entries added

Purpose

Research on functionality appreciation shows that shifting attention from how the body looks to what it does is one of the more robust routes to improved body image — more reliable than simply trying to think 'positive' appearance thoughts.

Instructions for the client

1. Make three columns on a page: Body Part / What It Lets Me Do / A Specific Memory.
2. List at least 15 things your body allows you to do — from major (walking, breathing, healing from illness) to small and specific (typing a message to a friend, tasting your morning coffee, hugging someone you love).
3. For at least 5 of these, write a specific memory tied to that function (not a general statement — an actual moment).
4. Each day this week, add one new entry, however small, before bed.
5. Notice: this is not about forcing gratitude for appearance. It is strictly about function — what the body does, not how it looks while doing it.

Reflection prompts (client writes these down)

- Which function on your list did you take most for granted before this exercise?
- Did writing specific memories change how the exercise felt, compared to just listing functions?
- How does it feel to relate to your body as something that does things for you, rather than something to be looked at?

Exercise 9 · Self-Compassion Break for Body Distress

Approach: Self-Compassion (Neff model) — in-the-moment practice whenever body distress arises, plus one dedicated practice session daily **Suggested frequency:** In the moment,

Purpose

This is a brief, portable practice for the exact moment body distress spikes, replacing self-criticism with the same kindness the client would offer a friend, without denying that the moment is genuinely hard.

Instructions for the client

1. When body distress arises, place a hand over your heart or another comforting spot, and pause.
2. Say internally: "This is a moment of suffering." (Mindfulness — naming what's true without exaggerating or minimizing it.)
3. Say: "Struggling with body image is part of being human — I'm not alone in this." (Common humanity.)
4. Say: "May I be kind to myself in this moment. May I give myself the compassion I need." (Self-kindness — client can adapt the wording to their own voice.)
5. Take three slow breaths before returning to whatever you were doing.

Reflection prompts (client writes these down)

- What was it like to physically pause and speak to yourself this way, rather than continuing straight into criticism?
- Which of the three steps (mindfulness, common humanity, self-kindness) felt hardest to genuinely mean?
- Did the intensity of the distress shift at all after the practice — even slightly?

Exercise 10 · Letter From Your Future Self, and a Forward Practice Plan

Approach: Integrative — narrative technique + relapse-prevention planning **Suggested frequency:** One extended session (45–60 minutes), then reviewed monthly going forward

Purpose

This closing exercise consolidates the previous nine, builds a compassionate long-term narrative, and creates a concrete plan for continuing the work independently once formal sessions on this topic taper off.

Instructions for the client

1. Write a letter to yourself, dated one year from today, from the perspective of a version of you who has a genuinely more peaceful relationship with your body — not a 'perfect' body, a peaceful relationship with it.
2. In the letter, describe what a normal day looks like for that future you: how she gets dressed, how she moves through the world, what she no longer spends energy on.
3. Have her acknowledge, kindly, how hard the earlier struggle was — without judging that struggle.
4. Have her name which 2–3 exercises from this workbook mattered most to her, and why.
5. Close the workbook by choosing 3 practices from Exercises 1–9 that you will keep doing on an ongoing basis (e.g. weekly self-compassion break, monthly functionality inventory top-up), and write them down as a standing commitment.

Reflection prompts (client writes these down)

- What surprised you about what your future self chose to say?
- Which single exercise in this workbook created the most noticeable shift for you?
- What will you do the next time body distress spikes sharply — name your specific plan, step by step?

For the Therapist — Delivery Notes

A few practical notes for using this workbook in ongoing treatment:

- Screen for disordered eating before assigning Exercises 3 and 8 specifically — mirror exposure and body-focused attention exercises need adaptation (or postponement) if active restriction, bingeing, purging, or compulsive exercise is present.
- Review the diary from Exercise 1 together rather than only having the client self-report progress — early sessions often reveal avoidance patterns the client hasn't consciously named.
- The pacing (roughly one exercise per week) is a default, not a rule — some clients need two weeks on mirror exposure (Exercise 3) or the core-belief work (Exercise 5) before moving on.
- Exercises 6 and 9 (defusion and self-compassion break) are designed to become long-term daily tools, not one-time assignments — reinforce their continued use well beyond the ten-week arc.
- Consider re-administering a body image measure (e.g. Body Image States Scale, MBSRQ subscales) before Exercise 1 and after Exercise 10 to track change quantitatively alongside the qualitative material.