Learning to Love Your Looks:
A Body Image Group for Men and Women

TI 082 - Thematic

By

Barbara Sparrow, M. A. and Allison Sallee, M. A., LMFT
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The Clearinghouse for Structured/Thematic
Groups & Innovative Programs

Counseling & Mental Health Center
The University of Texas at Austin
100A W. Dean Keeton St.
1 University Station A3500
Austin, Texas 78712-0152
512-471-3515 Fax 512-471-8875
www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/clearinghouse
Learning to Love Your Looks

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Introduction

It is hard to imagine in today’s world that one does not scrutinize with the utmost of concern his or her body. Images of “perfect” bodies bombard our daily lives, making it difficult to ignore what is for most an impossible and unrealistic goal. Our bodies, our beings, often become an enemy in which we must live (Hutchinson, 1994). This unhealthy relationship with our bodies may begin with family messages about our short-comings and societal pressures to meet certain ideals. For many, these messages are internalized into fundamental and core beliefs about the self.

Core beliefs may be identified as basic and relatively stable beliefs about oneself, such as “Nobody loves me” (Beck, 1995). Cognitive patterns often arise from a person’s core beliefs. For example, it is very common for people operating under negative core beliefs to engage in a cycle of negative self-talk. These core beliefs often lead one to develop and, hence, operate by a given set of assumptions about the world. These assumptions may include beliefs such as “If I could change this one (often physical) thing about myself, my life would be just fine.” Assumptions and beliefs related to body image often stem from multiple origins. Family values and experiences about a person’s body undoubtedly influence one’s own core beliefs. In addition, societal and peer pressures send messages to individuals about expectations.

This group is designed to help members learn how to identify origins of their body image issues as well as patterns involved in maintaining such an unhealthy cycle. It is the goal of this group that members leave with clear ideas of their own core beliefs and how such beliefs influence these patterns and cycles. In addition, group members should be able to develop ways by which to break the cycles maintained and replace negative patterns with more positive ones.

Group Format

The Learning to Love Your Looks body image/appearance group will be a seven to eight session semi-structured psychotherapy group. Sessions will be conducted on a weekly basis for one and one half hours. Initial sessions are designed to help members clearly define their body image concerns and begin to explore possible origins of issues. In addition, these sessions should ease members’ discomfort around discussing such sensitive issues. Middle sessions focus on deeper understanding of origin issues and the impact of concerns. Later sessions focus on aiding members in actively employing strategies to combat irrational beliefs, etc. and continuing to do so after termination.

Population

The group will consist of six to ten members with mixed gender and a range of ages. Although such a group may be appropriate for a variety of settings, the initial group was executed in a university counseling center setting. The group will include all body image concerns in order to
provide a broader outreach to this population. That is, the group is designed to address not only weight concerns but also other important body image concerns such as height, facial features, and general body appearance issues. Potential participants experiencing thought disorders, suicidal ideations, suicidal tendencies or recent attempts, and/or severe depression will be excluded, as this group may not be able to provide the necessary support and services for such issues. In addition, members experiencing an active eating disorder should also be considered for exclusion as the necessary support and services may not meet such a member’s needs. Leaders may consider such a member for inclusion if the participant is in concurrent individual therapy specifically addressing the eating disorder and/or one of the leaders has personal experience with the member. All participants should be able demonstrate a capacity for insight into their body image concerns as well as some level of desire for change.

**Group Screening Interview**

A pre-group interview (PGI) will be conducted for potential participants by both group leaders as a means of member selection. PGI sessions will be approximately 30 minutes and may be held during group time slot and on the day the group is to meet. PGI sessions will provide the applicant with a description of the group so that the potential participant may assess his or her suitability for the group. As part of the selection process, PGI sessions will provide leaders with the opportunity to assess the applicant’s level of insight as well as his or her “fit” for the group. PGI sessions will provide leaders with the opportunity to gain an understanding of the nature of the potential participant’s concern(s). In addition, these sessions will allow for leaders to explain in general the group expectations and “rules”.

**Change Model**

**Stage: Developmental (Contemplation)**

According to Prochaska and DiClemente (1984), the contemplation stage of change involves an awareness of the issue in the member’s life. In this stage the member generally presents as interested in understanding more about how their issue(s) affects his or her life but may not have made the decision that he or she is actively ready to engage in the process of change. The member should be able to demonstrate an awareness of his or her body image issue(s) in his or her life and should be able to describe how his or her body image issue(s) currently impacts his or her life. In addition, the participant should be able to demonstrate a clear desire to work with his or her body image issue(s) and should be ready to begin to develop a deeper understanding of thoughts, patterns, etc. related to the issue(s). The participant should demonstrate a capacity for insight into the origins (i.e., familial, societal, peer) of his or her issue(s) and also be able to disclose this process as well as the issues around origin to the group. Finally, the member should be open to developing deeper awareness of levels of body image concerns. As members begin to explore issues of origin and begin to identify the cycle of negative patterns associated with their body image issues, each member in the contemplative stage should begin to move toward the action stage of
change. According to Prochaska and DiClemente (1984), in the action stage, the member moves to a place where he or she is ready to actively pursue making more positive changes.

**Stage: Remedial/Psychotherapeutic (Action)**

At this point, members should begin to have a much clearer understanding not only of how their body image concerns impact their relationships with others and the world but also how body image affects their core beliefs about themselves. By the end of the group, members should have moved into the action stage and should begin exploring and identifying ways in which each has made or plans to make more positive changes. Members are expected to move through the following steps to get from the contemplation stage to the action stage:

1. begin to demonstrate capacity for thinking about their issue differently (i.e., demonstrate better understanding of family and societal pressures as well as how their own patterns contribute to the maintenance of the body image concern)
2. begin to actively seek discussion concerning body image issue(s) in group (i.e., exploring other members’ patterns and cycles as well as asking for feedback about their own)
3. begin to implement new strategies for dealing with feelings, thoughts, and behaviors related to concerns (i.e., demonstrate active attempts to “try out” suggestions and activities by leaders and/or other members and discuss the success or failure of the attempt)
Outline of Group Sessions

Session 1: Getting to Know Each Other

Goal: Getting to know each other and building trust. Beginning to talk about negative body image.

Rationale: The first session needs to be devoted primarily to setting group expectations (some may need to be negotiated by the group and some may be set in advance). Rather than setting aside a large amount of time for activities, the focus should be on processing each member’s needs. There should be a discussion about goals and the fact that body image problems will not be “cured” at the end of the eight sessions.

Activities:

- Talk about confidentiality, set ground rules (number of sessions that can be missed, tardiness, etc.) – See Group Contract, Appendix A
- Semi-structured introductions with processing around what brings each person to the group
- Discussion of members’ goals – see Introductory Goal Sheet, Appendix A
- Handout about body image and discussion about the importance of being ready to love your body the way it is, the difference between changing your body and changing your body image, etc. Sketch out how the group will unfold.
Session 2: Uncovering Past and Current Sources of Negative Body Image


Rationale: Body image problems often begin with teasing, criticisms from family, and/or comparisons to others. Guided imagery is used to allow members to explore possible sources of problematic automatic thoughts in a powerful (and hopefully insightful) way. Leaders need to keep an eye on members’ reactions, as the imagery may be overwhelming.

Activities:

- Process reactions/surprises/disappointments from first session
- Relaxation and guided imagery, Appendix A
- Process guided imagery, with discussion about societal and familial pressures, etc. (if appropriate)
- Brief didactic introduction to automatic thoughts (ATs) with examples. Automatic thoughts are "quick, evaluative thoughts...[that] are not the result of deliberation or reasoning [which] seem to spring up automatically; they are often quite rapid and brief. [One] may be barely aware of these thoughts; [one is] far more likely to be aware of the emotion that follows. As a result, [one] most likely uncritically accept[s] [such] automatic thoughts as true" (Beck, 1995, p. 14). The introduction should cover the following points (Beck, 1995):
  1. ATs are common in everyone and are not signs of pathology.
  2. ATs are usually not attended to specifically because you have probably been saying/thinking them (or some variation of them) for a long time.
  3. You’re more likely to notice a certain emotion rather than the ATs because they are tough to notice at first.
  4. Dysfunctional ATs are likely to be running through your mind when you start feeling down about yourself.
  5. ATs can be images or memories as well as self-statements.

- Assign as “homework” the monitoring of ATs: “When you notice that you’ve begun to feel bad about your looks, ask yourself, ‘What was just running through my head?’ Were you remembering something, seeing an image, or saying something negative to yourself? Try to remember this – or better yet, write it down – and bring it to the next session.”
Session 3: Learning About Distressing Situations and ATs

Goals: Learning about distressing situations and the automatic thoughts that often arise in these situations.

Rationale: We will be teaching members about automatic thoughts (ATs) and their influence on feelings and behavior so members understand the power of self-talk. By looking at ATs, we can build a base for uncovering core beliefs about the self. We’ll use an adapted Distressing Situations Test from The Body Image Workbook (Cash, 1997) to help members think about their distressing situations and the ATs and assumptions that surface in these situations.

Activities:

❖ Check in from last session – process reactions to guided imagery and talk about specific roots of body image problems brought to mind by the guided imagery
❖ Process the homework of monitoring ATs
❖ Introduce idea of distressing/problem situations and have members fill out the Distressing Situations Test, Appendix A
❖ Discussion of members’ distressing situations, focusing on ATs that are triggered as well as some of the assumptions that feed their ATs and reactions to their distressing situations (See Appendix A for a list of common body image assumptions from Cash, 1997.)
❖ Presentation of the idea of talking back to ATs and body image assumptions by examining validity and utility (Beck, 1995). The discussion should focus on “talking back to those automatic thoughts/images/assumptions! Test the validity (What’s the evidence for this? Is it really true?) and the utility (Does thinking this way help me meet my goals?) of what you’re saying to yourself. Would you talk to someone you love that way? What would you say to a friend who was saying those things about her/himself? Be a scientist (gather information) and a lawyer (argue the validity and utility).”
❖ Processing of relevant thoughts, feelings, and experiences
Session 4: Uncovering Core Beliefs

Goal: Uncovering participants’ core (or deeper level) beliefs.

Rationale: In helping participants find the enduring beliefs that lie near the heart of the negative body-image thoughts, group members can see that they are acting under the influence of global, powerful beliefs such as “I’m unworthy/unlovable.”

Activities:

- Provide downward arrow information sheet (Appendix A)
- Provide an example during which group members practice downward arrow questioning.
- Downward arrows for each participant. Start with an automatic thought and have the other group members continually probe with questions like, “What’s so bad about that?” or “What’s the worst part of that?” You might also write the process of the downward arrow on a chalkboard/sheet of butcher paper.
- Process the downward arrow experience
- Assign as “homework” thinking about consequences of operating under the pull of ATs and core beliefs

[Note: this may take 2 sessions to complete, since the downward arrow process is very time-consuming]
Session 5: Behavioral Consequence of Negative Body Image

Goal: Enhance awareness about behavioral consequences of negative body image – especially behaviors linked to negative ATs by talking about patterns of behavior and “breaking the chain.”

Rationale: Now that automatic thoughts have been discussed and some core beliefs uncovered, members can link the thoughts and beliefs with behavior and feelings that continue the pattern of self-derogation. Once the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are better understood, patterns can be questioned and broken.

Activities:

- Process the downward arrow activity from last session
- Talk about the emotional and behavioral consequences of the core beliefs and the resultant negative AT’s (such as avoiding certain situations, people, and activities due to body image-related fears, behaving in ways that push others away and then becoming upset that others don’t come near, rituals such as appearance checking and appearance fixing, etc.) [See worksheet Appendix A.]
- Members’ process the emotional and behavioral consequences linked to the core beliefs and AT’s they have noticed in their lives
  - Brainstorm as a group ways that members can combat or break the chain of AT’s → bad feelings → behavior
  - Remind members to dress comfortably next session for relaxation and/or movement exercises!
Session 6: “Getting to Know Your Body”

Goal: “Getting to know your body” through movement, relaxation, and homework exercises.

Rationale: Have members get to know their bodies better, since body image problems almost always result in a disconnection between mind and body.

Activities:
- Talk about the disconnection/distancing inherent in body image problems.
- Introduce systematic body desensitization (Cash, 1997) and/or movement exercises. We found it immensely productive to bring in a movement therapist who talked to the participants about her experiences in the health industry which caused her to pull away from the idea of “no pain, no gain.” She also talked about exercise as punishment versus exercise with health and well-being as its focus. The movement therapist led us through exercises designed to help participants notice what their bodies feel like during certain movements and to help them come to understand what feels good to them. [Confidentiality issues were discussed with participants before the therapist, a non-group member, was brought in.]
- Complete the exercises
- Process the experience as well as feelings and thoughts around exercise and movement
Session 7: Processing Gains and Failures

Goals:  Processing of gains made and failures. Room for any termination processing.
Relapse prevention and generalization of gains.

Rationale: Validation of gains made in changing automatic thoughts and becoming more accepting of body as well as allowing discussion of relapses or slip-ups

Activities:
- Check-in and processing of any issues surrounding gains made and relapses as well as any other relevant issues
- Tip sheet, Appendix A
- As appropriate, affirmations to each other and letters to the self can be worked into this session. Members may be interested in telling each other/writing notes to each other expressing positive comments and encouragement. In addition, leaders may have members write letters to themselves stating what they have learned during the group, positive self-statements they would like to use in place of their negative self-talk, and other positive, growth-enhancing comments they know they’ll want/need to hear. Leaders can then mail the letters at a later date.
Session 8: Termination

Goals: Termination

Activities:
- Time for any remaining “loose ends” from previous sessions
- Continued processing gains/slip-ups
- Processing of group experiences as a whole
- Any structured termination activities/celebrations desired by group members and leaders
- Fill out end-of-group evaluations
APPENDIX A – Materials for each session

SESSION 1: Group Contract

• All group members and leaders will treat anything that is said and done in the group with the utmost confidentiality. This confidentiality includes names and any other identifying characteristics of group members.

• I am expected to arrive on time and stay for the duration of the group meeting. If missing a session is unavoidable, I will contact this agency or one of the group leaders to cancel.

• Because this group is semi-structured, exercises and topics build upon each other. For this reason, it is expected that I will make a commitment to attend all eight sessions.

• It is expected that, if I decide to stop attending for any reason, I will attend one more session. This is necessary in order to say goodbye to group members and discuss alternative ways of meeting my needs.

• In order for group work to be effective, it is expected that I will actively work on my body image issues in the group. This includes disclosure about thoughts and feelings as well as feedback for other members. However, the level of my participation is up to my discretion.

• I understand that I should treat relationships formed in the group therapeutically. For the duration of the group, the leaders ask that members do not contact each other socially.

I am committed to the above therapeutic goals and expectations for the body image group.

__________________________________________________ ___________________
Name                                                Date
SESSION 1: Introduction and Goal Sheet

Transforming your body image versus transforming your body
When you dislike your looks, it is understandable that you want to change what you look like. You probably have spent a lot of time thinking about the ways you would like to change your body, from dieting to having plastic surgery. Changing your body image involves an attitude adjustment instead of an appearance adjustment. It means feeling at home in your own skin rather than feeling separated from your own body.

What is body image?
Body image is not what you look like. It has to do with your personal relationship with your body, which includes your:
- Thoughts
- Beliefs
- Perceptions
- Feelings
- Actions

My body image goals:
What are your goals for the future, even if your body has not changed in appearance from the way you look today?

Thoughts
When I think about myself, I’d like to stop thinking ______________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
and think __________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
instead.

Feelings
When I look in a mirror, I’d like to stop feeling___________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
and feel____________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
instead.

Actions
I’d like to stop_______________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
and start ___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________
instead.
SESSION 2 Relaxation and Guided Imagery

Relaxation:

- Speak in a slow, soothing voice. Have member’s close their eyes and get as comfortable as possible.
- Have participants concentrate on their breathing – breathing from lower diaphragm instead of up in chest.
- Have them breathe slowly in and out, concentrating on each breath
- Start with the feet, asking participants to tense up the muscles in their feet (for about 8 seconds) and then release the tension (again, about 8 seconds), noticing the difference between the tension and the relaxation. Make the relaxation more real by using examples such as, “Feel the tension flowing out of your feet like water out of a faucet.”
- Do the same with the lower legs (tense for 8 seconds, relax for 8 seconds), then the thighs
- Move to the abdomen and then to the chest
- Move to the hands, then forearms, then upper arms
- Move to the shoulders. A helpful image here is to have them imagine that there are strings tied to their shoulders that are being yanked upward for the tension segment.
- Finish with the face, spending time on the forehead and jaw in particular

Guided Imagery:

I want you to think back to time in your life when you didn’t feel self-conscious about your looks. This might be a time when you were very young. Imagine what you look like and what you’re wearing. Where are you? What are you doing? Who else is there? What do you feel like? What smells and sounds are there around you? What thoughts are running through your head? Take a few minutes and enjoy this time of freedom.

Now move ahead in time to a scene in which you felt painfully aware of some aspect of your looks. Is this the first time you felt like this? What are you wearing? What sounds and smells are around you? Who else is there? What are they saying? What do you imagine they are thinking about you? What thoughts are running through your head? How are you feeling?

Now jump forward in the future to a time—maybe a month from now or a few years from now—when you are in a situation that usually causes you distress about your body. But this time imagine that you don’t feel upset. Imagine that, although nothing about you has changed and you look the same as you do right now, and you feel relaxed and comfortable. The thoughts running through your head are positive or neutral—you do not berate yourself or make comparisons to others. The absence of overwhelming negative emotion allows you to engage with those around you. You feel a sense of freedom similar to that long ago time when you felt positive about your looks. What is this like for you? Take a minute to breathe in the smells and hear the sounds that surround you. Feel a comfortable smile cross your face as you enjoy this time.

Now begin to notice the room you are in and the sounds in this room. When you are ready, open your eyes.
SESSION 3: Distressing Situations Test  
(adapted from Cash, 1997)

How often do/would you have negative feelings about your appearance in each of the following situations?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>Frequently</td>
<td>Almost Always</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_____ 1. At social gatherings where I know few people.
_____ 2. When I’m the focus of social attention.
_____ 3. When people see me before I’ve “fixed myself up.”
_____ 4. When I’m with attractive people of my sex.
_____ 5. When I’m with attractive people of the opposite sex.
_____ 6. When I think someone has ignored me or rejected me.
_____ 7. When the topic of conversation pertains to appearance.
_____ 8. When someone comments unfavorably on my appearance.
_____ 9. When someone else’s looks are complimented or criticized.
_____10. When I remember teasing or unkind things people have said about my appearance.
_____11. When I see attractive people on T.V., in movies, or in magazines.
_____12. When I’m trying on new clothes at the store.
_____13. When I’m wearing certain types of clothing.
_____14. If I feel I’m dressed differently than everyone else at an event.
_____15. When my clothes don’t fit just right.
_____16. After I get a new haircut.
_____17. If I’m not wearing any makeup/my hair isn’t fixed just right.
_____18. If my friend(s) or partner doesn’t notice that I’m fixed up or have made a change.
_____19. When I look in a mirror.
_____20. When I look at my nude body in a mirror.
_____21. When I see myself in a photo or on video.
_____22. When I have my picture taken.
_____23. When I haven’t exercised as much as I’d like.
_____24. When I’m exercising.
_____25. After I’ve eaten enough to feel full.
_____26. When I step on a scale.
_____27. When I’m already in a bad mood about something else.
_____28. When I think about how I used to look.
_____29. When I think about how I’d like to look.
30. When anticipating having or having sex.
31. When someone sees me undressed (in a locker room or in an intimate situation.)
32. If someone touches a part of my body I dislike.
33. When someone doesn’t show sexual interest.
34. When I’m with ________________________________ (a person).
35. At ___________________________________________(a time of day).
36. At ___________________________________________(a time of month).
37. During _______________________________________(season or holiday).
38. During _______________________________________(an activity).
39. When I eat_______________________________________.
40. Other: _______________________________________________________________.
SESSION 3: Common Body Image Assumptions
(Adapted from Cash, 1997)

1. Physically attractive people have it all.

2. The first thing people notice about me is what’s wrong with my appearance.

3. Outward appearance is a sign of the worth of the person.

4. If I could just change ________________, my life would be happier.

5. By controlling my appearance, I can control my self-esteem/social life/emotions.

6. My appearance is responsible for what has happened to me in my life.

7. It’s my duty to always look my best.

8. The media’s messages make it impossible for me ever to be satisfied with my looks.

9. I can only like my looks if I change them.

Other: ____________________________________________
SESSION 4: Core Beliefs
(Adapted from Judith Beck)

What is a core belief?
- It is an idea, not necessarily a truth
- You can believe it quite strongly and even feel it is true, even though it may be mostly untrue
- Because it is an idea and not a fact, it can be tested. (Is it valid? What is the evidence for it? What is the evidence against it?)
- It is often rooted in childhood events and experiences.
- It continues to be magnified the more it is untested. A core belief is very difficult to test, however, because we tend to disregard information that isn’t compatible with it. It acts like a screen around your head, only allowing in information that confirms what you think is the truth. (For example, it’s hard to believe a compliment about your appearance when you are feeling badly about the way you look.)
- It can be changed to better reflect reality.

What’s the point in looking for core beliefs?
- Less effective use of time working on more surface level beliefs, as core beliefs are the foundation upon which automatic thoughts and self-talk is built
- You are probably operating under the assumptions generated by the core belief in many areas of your life.
- If you come to understand what your core beliefs are, and you better understand where a core belief came from, it may be easier to find ways to disregard it.

The downward arrow technique may seem repetitive and silly, but it often uncovers core beliefs. When you have an automatic thought, ask the following questions:
- What’s so bad about _______________________?
- What’s the worst part about ____________________?
- What does that say about you as a person if you’re______________?
- If ___________________ really is true, what part upsets you the most?

Keep asking the questions until you keep repeating your answer. This answer is probably a core or deeper-level belief.

Where do you think this belief came from? When did you start believing it was true?
Session 5: Breaking the Cycle

Distressing/trigger situation

Core Belief that is filtering incoming information in the distressing situation

which begins this destructive cycle of thoughts and behaviors.

Negative automatic thoughts:

Results

Feelings

Actions/Behavior
(such as avoiding certain situations due to body image-related fears, behaving in ways that push others away and then becoming upset that others don’t come near, rituals such as appearance checking and appearance fixing, etc.)

How can you break this cycle?
SESSION 7: “Tip” Sheet

We hope the group has helped you move a little farther on the path toward changing the way you feel about your appearance. As with any change process, your will experience “ups and downs” in the future. Here are some tips to help you make the “downs” less frequent and less deep:

- Recognize when you are heading into a “distressing situation,” and do something to prepare yourself. You might prepare yourself by changing the situation as much as you can, surrounding yourself with positive people, thinking about your strengths, or anything else you can think of!
- Pair relaxation with guided imagery before you go into a distressing situation or if you feel your emotions about your body take a downturn.
  - Get comfortable and focus on breathing from your lower abdomen. Starting with your feet, tense up your muscles for about 8 seconds, focusing on the feeling of tension, then release the tension and focus on the relaxation. After you have progressed through feet and calves, thighs, stomach and chest, hands and lower arms, upper arms, shoulders, and head, check your body for remaining tension (especially in your jaw and shoulders) and let it go.
  - Picture yourself enjoying the potentially distressing situation and not worrying about your body, or in a calm and pleasant place thinking good thoughts about your body, or any other image that makes you feel calm and relaxed!
- Talk back to those automatic thoughts/images/assumptions! Test the validity (What’s the evidence for this? Is it really true?) and the utility (Does thinking this way help me meet my goals?) of what you’re saying to yourself. Would you talk to someone you love that way? What would you say to a friend who was saying those things about her/himself? Be a scientist and a lawyer.
- Take a look at your behavior – is it allowing you to get trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle? Check out the self-defeating effects of your behavior that you may not be noticing. Break the cycle by making changes at the thought and behavioral level.
- Get back in touch with your body through body-aware exercises. Be kind to and love the healthy body you have rather than punishing it and hating it. Practice self-compassion by allowing yourself to make the mistakes that come along with life. This means not beating yourself up for having a negative body image, too.
- Try positive affirmations – say a positive statement about yourself over and over in your mind. When you are focusing on something positive, there is little room left for negatives!
- Meditate on a positive self-statement. Try to frame it as “I am _______,” rather than “I will stop __________,” or “I don’t want to __________.”
- If all else fails, picture yourself saying/say out loud “STOP!!” whenever negative thoughts are running through your mind.
Works Cited


