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How to overcome

BODY DYSMORPHIA

Body dysmorphic disorder is a mental illness associated with body image. It's a condition that can affect your happiness and quality of life. But, with the right support, it can be overcome.

What is body dysmorphia?

From time to time we all might feel self-conscious or nervous about our bodies or how we look. "If we asked everyone about their body, we'd all probably find something we don't particularly like about our appearance. But body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), or body dysmorphia, is a far more intense body image issue," says clinical psychologist Dr Catherine Madigan (www.anxietyaustralia.com.au).

"BDD is when you spend a large amount of time and energy obsessing over a part of your body, and seeing it in a negative way that's out of proportion with reality. For example, you might exaggerate your size, or imagine a defect," explains clinical psychologist Dr Cindy Nour (www.drcindy.com.au).

The most common body parts that people with BDD focus on are facial skin, facial features, body symmetry, size and

shape of any individual body part, or the size and shape of the entire body.

Classified as a mental health issue, BDD can range from mild to severe, affects about two per cent of the population and impacts both men and women equally.

"It's important to overcome BDD because it stops you living your life," says Dr Nour. "It can prevent a person from working or forming intimate relationships and can also lead to excessive surgery. Overcoming BDD will help to improve your mood and boost your quality of life."

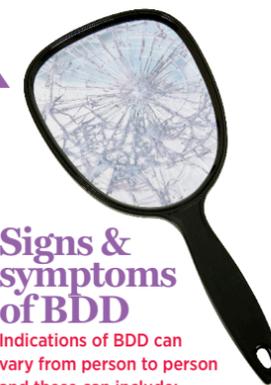
Some people who've lost weight might think they experience BDD when they constantly grab their old, larger size off the rack, rather than their new, smaller size. "This isn't really body dysmorphic disorder - it's more of a habit formed from years of shopping at that size," explains Dr Nour.

Dr Madigan agrees: "This is simply adjusting to your weight loss." >

Signs & symptoms of BDD

Indications of BDD can vary from person to person and these can include:

- Spending a long time looking in the mirror.
- Avoiding looking in the mirror.
- Spending a lot of time getting ready each day and grooming obsessively.
- Wearing excessive amounts of make-up.
- Undergoing or wanting to have surgery for a perceived defect.
- Thinking about the perceived defect for hours every day.
- Over-exercising and constant dieting.
- Comparison with others and worrying about the failure to look like celebrities and models.
- Constantly asking trusted loved ones for reassurance about looks, but not believing the answer.
- Having a strong belief there is an abnormality or defect that makes them ugly.
- Belief that others take special notice of their appearance in a negative way.
- Staying at home and often choosing to avoid social situations.
- A reluctance to appear in pictures, or taking a lot of selfies in order to analyse a particular body part.
- Depression and anxiety, including suicidal thoughts.



“People who experience weight-related BDD have often been teased about their weight. Even when they’ve lost weight, they can’t see themselves objectively.”

What causes it?

“We don’t exactly know what causes BDD,” says GP, Dr Ginni Mansberg (www.drginni.com.au). “We do know it’s usually diagnosed along with one or more co-morbidities, or conditions that sit alongside it, such as depression, eating disorders, binge drinking, social anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), self-worth issues and perfectionistic thinking.”

“BDD is a highly complex issue,” says Dr Madigan. “We think people with BDD may have a genetic predisposition to it. This genetic vulnerability doesn’t mean you’ll develop BDD, it just means you’re more susceptible to it. It tends to be prompted by external influences and other people.”

BDD is often triggered in your teens, but it can occur later in life. “It’s common for people to develop it when they’re younger and this may create a lifelong attention to the body part,” says Dr Nour.

Dr Madigan says it manifests in different ways. “For example, some people might have BDD about their skin because they were bullied about pimples growing

up. Sometimes, your parents might comment negatively on your body, or on other people’s bodies and this leads to excessive concern.”

On the other side of this, even parents who repeatedly comment positively on other people’s appearance may send you the message that this is how you should look. People who experience weight-related BDD have often been teased about their weight. Even when they’ve lost weight, they can’t see themselves objectively because they still have strong memories about being teased.

“Additionally, people are born with certain temperaments and these are risk factors for developing BDD,” says Dr Madigan. These temperaments include avoidance, being especially sensitive, self-conscious and anxious. Furthermore, some cultures put excessive pressure on people to look a certain way, and people who have been sexually abused are also more prone to developing BDD.

Dr Madigan stresses that people with BDD are not vain. “BDD is a serious condition. People with BDD think they are intensely ugly or fat and they’re not.”

How to overcome it

When Dr Mansberg suspects that someone has BDD, she first looks for other conditions that may go with it, such as anxiety, depression, OCD and social concerns. She then refers the patient to a psychologist who can help treat the issue. “BDD is never treated in isolation. It always needs to be addressed holistically so that the BDD and anxiety, for instance, are treated together,” she says.

“If you suspect you have BDD, go to your GP, tell them and ask for a mental health treatment plan, as this entitles you to 10 discounted sessions with a psychologist during the space of a year,” says Dr Madigan. “If you’re too embarrassed to go to your GP, you can go straight to a psychologist, however you won’t get the Medicare rebate.”

The most successful treatments for BDD are cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), and coping and management skills. “CBT works towards cognitively restructuring your thoughts and also developing acceptance of your body,” explains Dr Nour. ■

Getting to know your body



Rachael Perry lost 20kg with Weight Watchers. Although she does not have BDD, she has experienced a fair amount of confusion about her size for a lot of her life.

“It’s been difficult for me to gauge my size because my shape stays the same no matter what weight I am,” explains Rachael. What helps her identify her difference in size is putting on her old clothes and seeing how big they are on her.

“I’m also judgemental of myself, so I still have trouble seeing my size in a realistic way,” reveals Rachael. “For example,

I’ve thought I looked good while getting dressed for a party, but when I’ve seen photos of myself from that party, I’m shocked at how slim I looked.

“That said, I’m not overly concerned about it. I don’t spend time worrying about it, but up until recently I would never wear shorts because I thought my thighs were too big. After a shopping day with friends, where we challenged ourselves to try on new things, I tried on and bought a pair of shorts. Having a trusted friend there helped me to accept that this is my shape and it won’t change.”

“I still have trouble seeing my size in a realistic way.”

Thought change
Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) strategies can involve:

- ✓ Challenging negative thinking and learning how to think about the imagined defect in more realistic ways.
- ✓ Reducing and eventually aiming to stop mirror gazing.
- ✓ Exploring what is true health and beauty.
- ✓ Helping you learn about your condition and your feelings, thoughts, moods and behaviour.
- ✓ Learning healthy ways to handle urges or rituals, such as mirror checking or skin picking.
- ✓ Learning how to spot your triggers or warning signs.
- ✓ Teaching you other healthy behaviours, such as how to socialise with others and how to stop avoiding social situations because of BDD concerns.

Other helpful strategies:

- ✓ Mindfulness training.
- ✓ Learning relaxation and stress management techniques such as meditation and deep breathing exercises.
- ✓ Regular exercise.
- ✓ Learning about your condition. Education about body dysmorphic disorder can empower and motivate you.
- ✓ Avoiding drugs and alcohol as they can worsen the symptoms of mental illness.
- ✓ Writing a journal. This can help you express your pain, anger, fear or other emotions.
- ✓ Participating in normal activities and getting together with family or friends regularly to reduce any sense of isolation.
- ✓ Taking good care of yourself, including eating well and getting enough sleep.
- ✓ Joining a support group, either online or in your community.

People who have lost a lot of weight may identify with BDD symptoms, but it only affects two per cent of the population, so it might just be a case of talking to your Coach to find ways to let your mind catch up your body’s changes.



“It’s important to overcome BDD because it stops you living your life,” says Dr Nour. “It often prevents a person from working, dating or forming intimate relationships.”