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## WHAT IS BDD AND DO I HAVE IT?

This chapter will tell you:

- what BDD is and how it differs from normal appearance concerns
- the common worries associated with BDD
- the common behaviours associated with BDD
- how BDD differs from eating disorders
- what muscle dysmorphia is
- how to figure out whether or not you have BDD.

The fact that you are reading this book means that you are probably struggling with worries about your appearance or you know somebody who is. You might be thinking, 'But isn't it normal to worry about the way you look?' Well, you would be right! Virtually everybody worries about their appearance from time to time, especially during teenage years, and that is not necessarily a problem. However, for

some young people these worries snowball. Appearance worries can get to a level where they take over a young person's life, make them feel miserable and get in the way of everyday activities. If this has happened to you, it is worth considering whether you have body dysmorphic disorder (BDD).

## **What is body dysmorphic disorder?**

The core feature of BDD is worrying about perceived flaws in appearance. The flaws are things that other people cannot see or do not generally notice. For example, a young person with BDD may spend hours every day worrying that their nose is crooked, when in fact it appears normal to others. Sometimes the appearance flaw can be seen by other people if it is pointed out. However, other people view the flaw as being very minor and they would not usually notice it, despite it feeling very obvious to the young person. In this sense, BDD can be described as a problem with lack of confidence.

In BDD, appearance worries are often all-consuming and make the young person feel very distressed. They might feel anxious, depressed, disgusted and/or ashamed of the way they look. Furthermore, a young person with BDD will usually say that their appearance worries get in the way of them doing the things that they want to do. They might avoid specific situations, such as places with bright lights. Or they might avoid a much wider range of situations, like school and social activities. When BDD becomes very severe, young people might struggle to leave their house at all because they are so worried about how they look and what

other people will think of them. Young people with BDD also carry out various repetitive behaviours in an attempt to cope with their worries, such as checking or camouflaging (covering up) their perceived flaw/s. These behaviours can be extremely time-consuming and are carried out at the expense of getting on with other important activities, such as seeing friends or doing homework.

If this description sounds familiar to you, the first thing to say is that you are not alone. You might be surprised to hear that BDD is actually relatively common and affects approximately 2% of young people and adults. That means that, on average, in a school with 1000 students, there will be 20 young people with BDD. The disorder affects both boys and girls, and it can start at any age, although it usually begins during teenage years. Unfortunately, BDD often goes undiagnosed because people are too embarrassed to talk about it and there is limited awareness of the disorder. Sometimes people with BDD think that if they tell anyone about their appearance worries, they will seem vain. It is very important to emphasise that BDD is *not* about being vain. In fact, BDD is the opposite of vanity. People with BDD are concerned about perceived flaws in their appearance and typically worry that they look ugly or abnormal.

## **Do I have BDD or a real flaw in my appearance?**

In BDD, young people worry about flaws in their appearance that are generally not noticeable to other people. Sometimes young people with BDD acknowledge this fact and recognise that they are worrying more than they really

need to. However, many are convinced that there is actually something physically wrong with their appearance. Even if other people tell them that they look OK, they do not believe it and reassurance does not help. Sometimes young people think that they cannot have BDD because their appearance flaws are real. It is important to try not to get caught up in thinking about whether your appearance concerns are ‘real’ flaws or not. At the heart of BDD is feeling worried and ashamed about appearance, being distressed and finding it hard to get on with normal life. If this applies to you, then it is possible that you have BDD and it is worthwhile seeking help (see Chapter 6 ‘Treatment for BDD’).

## **What are common BDD worries?**

The majority of people with BDD worry about multiple aspects of their appearance. The most common concerns are facial features such as skin, hair, nose, eyes, chin and teeth. However, any part of the body can become a focus of concern, including genitalia. Some people with BDD do not worry about specific features but instead say that they feel generally ugly. Others say that they do not mind their individual features but feel that they do not ‘fit together’ properly. Sometimes young people worry that they look too feminine (e.g. their shoulders are too narrow) or masculine (e.g. their hands are too big), or that they do not look right compared with their family or cultural group (e.g. their skin is too light or dark).

## What are common BDD-related behaviours?

Young people with BDD typically carry out a range of repetitive behaviours in an effort to cope with their appearance concerns. For example, they might try to camouflage or conceal their perceived flaw by covering it with clothing (e.g. wearing a hat or hood to cover their hair), applying excessive amounts of make-up (e.g. foundation to cover their skin) or using other parts of their body (e.g. holding their hand in front of their mouth when they speak to cover their teeth). They can also spend huge amounts of time examining their appearance in mirrors and other reflective surfaces (e.g. windows). Conversely, young people might avoid looking in mirrors as they find this too distressing. It is also very common for young people with BDD to spend a lot of time carrying out grooming routines, such as applying make-up and cosmetic products. Again, it is important to reiterate that these behaviours are not driven by vanity, but instead are fuelled by anxiety about appearance. Young people with BDD are not striving for perfection in their appearance, but rather are trying to correct their perceived defects in an attempt to look 'normal'.

Many young people with BDD say that they frequently examine other people's appearance and compare it with their own. Sometimes this is done online, with young people spending huge amounts of time comparing images with their own appearance. It is also common to attempt to seek reassurance – for example, by repeatedly asking family members if they look OK. Some young people with BDD engage in harmful behaviours in an attempt to improve

their appearance. For example, they might repeatedly pick their skin in an effort to rid themselves of perceived blemishes, which is often counterproductive as it can give rise to scarring and further fuel appearance anxiety.

## **What is the difference between BDD and an eating disorder?**

BDD is not the only condition that is characterised by concerns about appearance. People with eating disorders also worry about the way they look. The main difference between eating disorders and BDD is that eating disorders are characterised by concerns about body weight and shape, which lead to unhealthy patterns of eating (e.g. bingeing or restricted eating) in an attempt to lose weight. This is different to BDD which does not typically involve general concerns about being too fat or weighing too much, and is not usually associated with eating difficulties.

## **What is muscle dysmorphia?**

Muscle dysmorphia is a particular form of BDD in which young people are concerned about muscle size and shape. It is more common in boys than girls, and often involves worrying about looking too small or weak. As a result, young people with muscle dysmorphia often go to great lengths to 'bulk up' by changing their diet (e.g. following high-protein diets and taking supplements) and spending excessive amounts of time exercising.

## How do I know if I have BDD?

BDD should be diagnosed by a qualified healthcare professional and you should not try to self-diagnose. However, you can get a sense of whether or not you are likely to be suffering from BDD by answering the questions in the box below.

### DO I HAVE BDD?

1. Do you spend an hour or more every day worrying about your appearance?
2. Do you find yourself carrying out lots of behaviours (e.g. mirror checking, grooming) and/or mental acts (e.g. comparing your appearance with other people's) in an effort to cope with your appearance worries?
3. Do your appearance worries make you feel miserable (e.g. anxious, depressed or ashamed) and/or get in the way of daily activities (e.g. socialising, going to school or leisure activities)?
4. Are your appearance concerns focused on being too fat or weighing too much?

If you answer 'yes' to questions 1–3 and 'no' to question 4, it is possible that you are experiencing BDD and you should speak to a healthcare professional.

If you think you might have BDD, it is important to seek help. In the first instance, you can speak to your general practitioner (GP). He or she will probably refer you for an assessment with a mental health professional who will help you to figure out whether or not you are suffering from BDD. This process might sound daunting, but seeking help is the first step towards recovery. If you do have BDD, seeking help is very important because effective treatment is available (see Chapter 6 ‘Treatment for BDD’).

### THINGS TO REMEMBER

- ✓ BDD is characterised by appearance worries which cause distress and get in the way of day-to-day life.
- ✓ BDD is relatively common and usually starts during adolescence.
- ✓ Young people with BDD are not vain.
- ✓ Try not to get caught up in analysing whether your appearance concerns are ‘real’ physical flaws or not. Instead, focus on whether or not your concerns are making you miserable and getting in the way of everyday life.
- ✓ If you think you might have BDD, it is important to seek help.