

Beating BDD Episode 1 – Rob Willson

For this first episode of Beating BDD I spoke to Rob Willson, a London-based CBT therapist who specialises in researching and treating OCD, BDD and health anxiety. Rob's also chair of the world's first charity exclusively devoted to body dysmorphic disorder, the BDD Foundation, which is also behind this podcast. In an interesting half hour Rob talked about how to recognise and treat the disorder, why he believes in curing not managing it and what to do with all that spare attention when you're cured.

“As far as I'm aware, we get one shot at life and you want it to be the best possible quality. So for every person, we should be aiming to help them to get as far down the road of being cured as we possibly can.”

What is BDD?

[00:03:12] BDD symptoms include a preoccupation with a minor or non-existent flaw in appearance that causes significant distress and interferes with that person's life.

[00:04:59] How the level of preoccupation in BDD compares with a healthy level of concern about appearance.

What causes BDD?

[00:06:41] BDD can arise from a combination of brain tendencies and capacities, personality types and some life experiences.

[00:07:44] Perfectionism can also play a role, along with being bullied or made to feel in any way different.

[00:08:37] Brain scans of people with BDD by Jamie Feusner have shown hyperactivity in areas of visual processing.

What is the treatment for BDD and why is it so important?

[00:09:17] BDD and OCD tend to take a chronic course unless they're treated properly. That's partly because of some powerful maintaining mechanisms.

[00:11:00] People with BDD often aren't convinced they have the disorder until they've recovered.

[00:12:22] Treatment involves testing if this is truly a psychological problem by treating it as a worry or preoccupation problem.

[00:13:15] The two main evidence-based treatments are high-dose antidepressants, and specialised cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT).

[00:14:32] Studies in CBT for BDD have involved about 20 sessions, but they aim to improve not remove symptoms.

Can BDD be cured?

[00:16:25] BDD has historically been poorly understood and therefore poorly treated. So a lot of clinicians and therapists would say that BDD is something you have to learn to manage. But that's not good enough.

[00:17:42] The big struggle in treatment is when something happens that makes the person flip back into feeling as if the problem is their looks.

[00:18:57] Then there's a period of helping to normalise that experience and see it as being part of the classic journey of recovery.

[00:20:07] The brain can almost run on two tracks during recovery: one where people begin to see themselves in a kinder, less self-focused way, and one with the old beliefs.

[00:20:44] You have to dig deep and keep pushing to strengthen that alternative track until it's so robust that it's very hard to unsettle. And that takes a while.

How does someone in recovery from BDD stay well?

[00:21:10] Work on relapse prevention in OCD shows that it's really important to engage in hobbies, further education and absorbing pursuits.

[00:23:08] Delays in seeking and receiving treatment have partly been because of a lack of awareness that BDD existed and partly because a sufferer truly thinks they're ugly.

[00:24:42] The BDD Foundation is testing a self-help support group with some structured material and volunteers to help guide people through the steps and principles of recovery.

How to support someone with BDD

[00:26:19] For friends or family member of someone with BDD, it's important to understand that the person has a recognisable, diagnosable condition.

[00:27:24] The best thing is to help the person to talk about other aspects of their world.

[00:28:48] It's important to recognise that changing the media and society's attitude towards appearance would help. But BDD is quite a lot more complicated than that.

Resources

- The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org
- Jamie Feusner: <http://www.bri.ucla.edu/people/jamie-d-feusner-md>