Beating BDD Episode 23 – Berni Benton

Berni hid what she called her “secret shame” for 40 years before discovering she’d been suffering from skin-picking disorder – a common co-morbidity with BDD that can also manifest on its own. She’s since learnt how to say no to the skin-picking voice and has even appeared in a naked calendar.

“Forgive yourself… Many more people than you realise live this life. They just look like they have it all together.”

How did the naked calendar come about?
[00:00.57] Berni explains how the COVID-19 pandemic has actually given her time to look into her skin-picking disorder.
[00:05.00] She saw something online about World Naked Gardening Day and decided to take part. She went on to create a calendar with 23 others that raised over £1,000 for the BDD Foundation.
[00:10.10] The calendar made her very proud and in awe of the stories people told.

What does it feel like to have skin-picking disorder?
[00:15.28] There’s a voice in Berni’s head telling her to pick, and her mind is always scanning her body for something to smooth out.
[00:17.23] It’s really compulsive and rarely stops. Using Zoom has made her realise how little her hands are still – she’s always touching her skin.

When did her symptoms start and why?
[00:24.46] When Berni was a pre-teen, she had a lot of eczema, followed by acne in her teens. The family moved around a lot too and she experienced bullying.
[00:26.52] She started skin-picking because it made her feel in control.
[00:27.25] As an adult, she had periods of great confidence and others when she’d avoid a lot of activities because she wanted to cover up.
[00:29.38] Until 15 years ago, she didn’t leave the house without full make-up.

How did Berni find out what she was actually suffering from?
[00:11.32] It was her secret shame for 40 years. She’d spent her life until then skin-picking and pretending she had an illness, which made her feel like a fraud.
[00:33.30] She only found out what was wrong when someone from the BDD Foundation gave her a book on BDD at an event. It included a story by Liz Atkins, who also suffers from skin-picking disorder.
[00:36.56] Berni told the doctor she had the disorder in 2020 and asked for help.

What strategies has she developed to cope with the disorder?
[00:19.38] She’s now working with a therapist to find a balance between the skin-picking voice and other aspects of who she is.
[00:23.23] Part of this is about celebrating being able to delay the picking, not do it as soon as the voice tells her to.
[00:38.05] Berni tries to be kind to herself. She finds that gardening and stained glasswork stop the body scanning. Creating a distraction also helps take control away from the skin-picking voice.
What would she say to someone who’s really suffering?

Berni uses the phrase “progress, not perfection” a lot. If you reduce or delay the picking, that’s an achievement. Look for the positives.

It’s also helpful to acknowledge that anyone who looks like they’ve got their shit together, probably hasn’t.

Resources

• The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org
• Liz Atkins speaking at the 2019 BDD Foundation International Conference: bddfoundation.org/conference-2019-body-focussed-repetitive-behaviours/