

Beating BDD Episode 25 – Rachel Koutnik

Now a holistic therapist, Rachel is our first guest from across the pond, and hopefully the first of many! In this episode, she shares her experience of BDD and how everything from working at a cat hotel to learning ballroom dancing has helped her to manage the disorder and find joy.

“BDD used to take up about 95% of my being. Now, the parts of me that bring me joy are bigger than my BDD.”

Where Rachel is now

[00:00.53] It's taken a long time for Rachel to find the support for her BDD, including the BDD Foundation website and the podcast. But she was always determined to speak about what she's gone through.

[00:02.42] For about 15 years, BDD took up about 95% of her being, and she didn't think she'd ever feel truly joyful. Now, it doesn't take her over. She takes care of her body, mind and soul to stay on top of her symptoms.

[00:05.01] Rachel now recognises that what she sees when she's in a distorted BDD state isn't what other people see.

[00:05.27] Being around and helping other people and animals has helped her during some of the worst times.

How her BDD developed and when

[00:06.46] Mental illness runs in Rachel's family. She also has early memories of comparing her appearance to other people. The focus of this shifted as she got older, from her bangs (fringe!) to her lip hair.

[00:09.50] She now knows the false fantasy that if you fix something you'll feel better. If anything, you'll feel worse.

[00:10.25] As a teen, Rachel was friends with everybody, but also felt a deep desire to fit in. And when she started to share her appearance concerns, her friends would agree with her but not necessarily think it was an issue.

How the condition manifested itself

[00:13.13] At first, Rachel had a lot of grooming rituals, particularly around body hair.

[00:14.25] Her aunt told her she had a unibrow and waxed her eyebrows without asking. Rachel then started plucking her eyebrows until there was almost nothing left. When she realised what she'd done, it precipitated a huge crisis.

[00:17.24] Rachel managed to get into college but couldn't continue with her rituals and had to drop out.

Treatment and recovery

[00:19.22] Rachel contacted her mother and godfather when she started feeling suicidal. Her mother put her into treatment at an eating disorder clinic.

[00:21.47] The therapy and the clinic made her want to live again, but the BDD wasn't formally diagnosed or treated. At one point they put wrapping paper over the mirror to stop her looking at her eye brows, but Rachel just pulled it back!

[00:23.47] After leaving the clinic she worked at a cat hotel for a year then went to Chicago to a different college. She made some friends and started ballroom dancing, which got her out of isolation and really helped with her BDD. It gave her another purpose and showed her what she was capable of.

[00:28.18] At the end of her undergraduate programme, Rachel sought help but had a negative experience of therapy for OCD. So she went to work as a nanny and again found joy from that.

[00:30.02] One of the women she nannied for was a social worker, so she decided to study to work with children and families. It felt like a good fit, but after three years of working she burned out. That's when she hired a therapist specifically for her BDD.

[00:31.52] The therapy helped Rachel to change her relationship with the mirror. Now, she focuses on "have you put your makeup on?" not "do you feel you look okay?" She made significant strides with her health and moved into group practice.

[00:35.04] Training to be a therapist helped Rachel to have more compassion for her own experiences and childhood. She also knows how to identify BDD in others and is very interested in helping people with ongoing treatment once they have the tools.

What would Rachel say to her younger self or to someone who's really suffering with the condition?

[00:39.34] She'd tell her 10-year-old self not to change her body and to spend more time doing the things she loves. Appearance shouldn't be the thing that defines us.

[00:41.26] She'd tell someone who's struggling not to give up on themself or on life. There are free or low-cost options for help out there, including support groups. You don't have to suffer alone.

Resources

- The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org
- <https://rachelktherapy.com>