

Beating BDD Episode 33

This episode features Olivia Wood (Liv), who shares her journey with undiagnosed autism and ADHD, as well as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). Liv explains how learning to understand her conditions helped her build self-esteem and self-compassion and reclaim her life from BDD.

“It’s completely possible to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and to reach that light.”

A feeling of not being “right”

[01:38] Liv experienced a persistent feeling of “not being right” or “different” from a very young age. She also perceived that she had physical deficits compared to her peers, and from the age of seven, she struggled with trichotillomania (hair-pulling disorder).

[02:57] Liv later discovered she was dealing with autism and ADHD, in addition to BDD.

[04:15] Recent studies show a link between neurodivergence and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), but the link with BDD is only just beginning to be explored.

How Liv feels today

[05:35] Gaining awareness and diagnoses for her conditions has made a huge positive impact on Liv’s self-esteem. Understanding why she is the way she is has allowed her to show herself compassion – a significant step in her recovery.

[07:40] Today, Liv is a mental health counsellor working with neurodivergent individuals. She also volunteers for the BDD Foundation and enjoys busking, drawing, animals and gaming.

[08:51] She finds busking helpful for her autism and ADHD because it’s a structured activity without the need for small talk or “masking”. But BDD still affects her. On those days, she actively refocuses her attention on her singing and guitar.

[10:40] She’s learnt that avoidance isn’t helpful; it’s what keeps the cycle going.

The genesis of Liv’s BDD

[11:28] Liv’s BDD began around her pre-teen years (9-11). A vivid memory is seeing a family photo and thinking she looked like a “hideous monster”.

[12:20] The social stress she felt was a huge trigger. Her brain turned to her physical appearance as something tangible it could control. She believed that fixing her appearance would fix everything – her emotions, happiness and social functioning.

[14:00] The focus of Liv’s BDD was on her body shape, weight, face shape, and symmetry. She would swing between avoiding mirrors and reflections and obsessively checking. She did lots of comparing and imagined surgical procedures to fix perceived flaws.

How BDD affected Liv’s life and school

[15:58] The distress caused by BDD led Liv to a point where she felt she couldn’t be here anymore. Her childhood and senior years were completely stolen.

[16:37] School became progressively harder, especially secondary school. Her trichotillomania worsened, and the constant change in her appearance exacerbated her BDD. The challenges of autism, ADHD, puberty and the rise of social media severely triggered her BDD.

The road to diagnosis and therapy

[17:00] Liv was never formally diagnosed with BDD, though she was offered CBT for it.

[17:35] At 18, while receiving counselling for trichotillomania, her counsellor noticed traits of autism and ADHD, leading her to discover that she’s neurodivergent. The realisation came as both a shock and an immense relief.

[21:46] Liv spent 2-3 years processing her autism and ADHD diagnoses, but the BDD remained all-consuming and felt separate.

CBT and a “eureka moment”

[22:51] At 21, Liv had CBT for her BDD, which helped her understand the link between her core beliefs, negative automatic thoughts and behaviours.

[24:44] A significant eureka moment happened during an exercise which made Liv realise she admired celebrities for their personality, skills, and values – not their physical appearance. This contrasted with how she viewed herself, where her worth was merged with her appearance.

Volunteering with the BDD Foundation

[27:20] Liv became a volunteer for the BDDF after seeing an Instagram post seeking individuals with lived experience to help facilitate its Overcoming Body Dysmorphic Disorder programme.

[28:06] Being part of a community where people understand, don’t judge, and share similar experiences has been profoundly healing for Liv.

[29:44] Volunteering helps to shift her focus to supporting others and acts as an alert system for any safety behaviours creeping back in.

Message of hope

[30:07] Liv describes herself as being in “lifelong recovery”, observing that it takes huge mental and emotional courage to face BDD.

[31:35] Her message to listeners struggling with BDD – especially those who are also neurodivergent – is that they are not alone and not broken. Help and support are available, and it is “completely possible to see the light at the end of the tunnel and reach that light”.

Resources

- The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org
 - The National Autistic Society: autism.org.uk
 - ADHD UK: adhduk.co.uk
 - *Prevalence and correlates of the concurrence of autism spectrum disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder in children and adolescents: a systematic review and meta-analysis*, 2024 ([link](#))
 - *Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder: towards better diagnosis and management*, 2024 ([link](#))
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