

Beating BDD Episode 34

In this episode, Gem Ponting shares her experience with BDD, particularly the impact cosmetic surgery can have on the condition. She also highlights the power of self-compassion and forgiveness in the healing process.

“Your current and future self are worthy of so much more than your BDD will convince you of.”

Managing BDD through “acts of quiet rebellion”

[01:25] Gem describes managing her BDD today through acts of what she calls “quiet rebellion”.

This involves showing up and doing something anyway, even when her BDD brain tells her not to.

[03:58] She notes that this is particularly effective in the recovery maintenance phase. In the earlier stages of recovery, it’s best to tackle these issues with support and a BDD-trained therapist.

[04:42] Life feels much more fulfilling now, and she’s quicker to notice when something is a BDD thought or feeling. While the distress can still be high, she now feels more in the driving seat.

BDD onset and triggers

[06:00] Gem showed signs of BDD around the age of eight or nine, initially focusing on her hair.

Things dramatically worsened after university when she started living alone.

[07:00] A significant trigger was a serious horse-riding accident at age 14. This caused a big trauma to her face. Gem feels this increased her chance of developing a more serious preoccupation.

The peak and the pursuit of physical fixes

[08:28] Before her diagnosis, Gem recalls her BDD being relentless, leading to constant exhaustion and feelings of shame. She had panic attacks at work and felt intense anxiety about socialising.

[10:00] Coping mechanisms included mirror checking, taking photos, having suicidal thoughts, and spending hours researching surgeries and physical fixes.

[11:34] Gem's BDD peaked when she decided to have rhinoplasty surgery, after which she felt immediate regret and shame. She later realised that even wanting the surgery was a symptom of BDD, as she had mistakenly thought a physical solution would alleviate her feelings.

Diagnosis, treatment and the “BDD trap”

[12:55] Gem initially Googled her feelings but dismissed what she found because she didn’t think her flaw was perceived. Eventually she was encouraged to seek help by her sister and was diagnosed and given cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) specifically tailored for BDD.

[15:42] She made great progress and regained normal functioning. But then she fell into a “BDD trap” of expecting her negative thoughts about her appearance to improve because her safety behaviours had reduced. Believing she could combine therapy and physical fixes, she decided to pursue a second surgery three years after the first.

Relapse, rock bottom and finding hope

[18:55] Gem went to Istanbul by herself for her second surgery against the advice of her loved ones. She realised it was a mistake and spiralled almost immediately. Her partner flew out the next day because he knew about the high suicide rate linked to BDD.

[20:53] The regret, self-hate, and blame were intense the second time because she knew the guidance was not to engage with surgery. This period marked her rock bottom.

[21:45] After this relapse, Gem took support from the BDD Foundation, attending support groups, a retreat day and the 2019 conference. She credits this with giving her hope and connection.

The role of self-compassion and other tools

[23:50] Gem re-engaged with therapy and focused on being responsible for her own recovery. This mindset was empowering; she realised the power to recover was within her, with the right support.

[25:28] Every day she would write three aims and three things she was grateful for in a notebook.

[26:29] Self-forgiveness and self-compassion have been major components of Gem's recovery. She now views her surgeries as attempts to alleviate her distress and suffering.

How life is for Gem now

[28:11] Life is significantly better: she has more joy, a loving relationship, a sausage dog, wonderful friends and hobbies. She has more brain space and emotional energy than before.

[29:23] Gem now works at the BDD Foundation as a project manager, having previously been a service user and volunteer. She finds this work rewarding and says it helps keep her accountable.

[32:11] To keep herself well, she uses attention refocusing techniques and practises yoga. She also continually works on small acts of courage and finds it reassuring to know that BDD brains work differently. (Research shows visual processing distortions – see Resources, below).

Message to listeners

[37:37] Gem advises listeners to trust that the distressing BDD thoughts and feelings are not true, even though they feel real. She also urges those struggling not to go it alone, as there is a large community and support out there.

Resources

- The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org
 - Visual processing in BDD: <https://bddfoundation.org/visual-processing-distorted-perceptions/>
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