

Beating BDD Episode 36

For years, Dan Joseph's life was governed by his BDD and a strict set of rules and rituals designed to camouflage his perceived flaws. Today, he truly believes it doesn't matter how he presents to people – and the next day is no longer to be survived, but to be lived. In this episode, Dan speaks with remarkable openness about his experience and why spontaneity is now a defining marker of his recovery.

“Recovery begins the moment you allow yourself the possibility that life can be bigger than your rituals.”

Living by rules, rituals, and fear

[02:25] Dan explains that from as early as he can remember, his life was shaped by rigid rules designed to avoid being “outed” as ugly, unlovable or “not enough”.

[03:41] His preoccupation centred on his face and head. Camouflaging – particularly through his hair – became his way of coping.

[04:55] These rituals extended into daily life: avoiding wind, rain, certain angles, physical closeness, and any risk that someone might touch his hair. Over time, the rituals multiplied.

[05:40] Dan describes “interrogating” every successful day, analysing what he might have done differently and adding it to his rulebook.

Discovering freedom: flexibility and spontaneity

[06:18] Today, Dan truly believes it doesn't matter how he presents when he leaves his flat. He feels able to function, work, and maintain close relationships.

[07:55] Spontaneity has become a powerful sign of recovery. Previously, every action began with conditions: “I can only do this when...” Now the next day is not to be dreaded or simply survived, but to be lived.

How BDD took hold: childhood and adolescence

[12:48] Dan recalls early signs at age 6 to 8 – feeling lanky, awkward, and self-conscious, refusing to remove jumpers in summer.

[14:02] In secondary school, years of acne narrowed the focus onto his face. Anxiety and perfectionism added to the vulnerability.

[15:36] Dan's hair became the main way of hiding perceived flaws. He spent hours in secret bathrooms at school adjusting lighting, mirrors and hairspray.

[16:57] He was able to talk around his mental health without disclosing how he felt about his appearance specifically. His symptoms were also masked by the nature of his social group.

[20:16] Dan feels that as a male, the stigma around being perceived as vain was also a factor.

University, isolation, and discovering BDD

[22:42] Even with his family, who he was close to, Dan could only talk about co-occurring symptoms such as low mood and social anxiety. Eventually, in 2019, he decided to attend the BDD Foundation conference, bringing his mum and telling her about his BDD for the first time.

[25:10] University was very tricky for Dan because of the BDD. After graduating, he fell into a depressive phase of BDD, abandoning grooming rituals and hiding with clothes, hats and layers. He felt like he was protecting others from seeing him.

[27:30] Dan unexpectedly encountered the term “body dysmorphic disorder” in a psychology lecture for his master's degree. As the lecturer explained it, he felt exposed yet profoundly recognised. This moment led him to the BDD Foundation.

Therapy, exposure work, and rebuilding a life

[29:22] Accessing therapy in 2019, Dan began understanding BDD from a psychological perspective. Through exposure work and behavioural experiments, he tested predictions and gathered evidence that feared outcomes didn't occur.

[32:57] A pivotal step was committing to cut his hair – terrifying, but transformative. Exposure work remains central to his recovery, especially when symptoms re-emerge.

Relapse, relationships and honesty

[34:40] In late 2024/early 2025, Dan experienced a significant relapse. Entering a romantic relationship reignited subtle symptoms, like certain safety behaviours.

[37:00] Rituals returned, work became difficult, and he initially hid the relapse from his partner. Therapy helped him tell her about his BDD.

[38:10] Dan emphasises how vital relationships are in reducing secrecy, shame and isolation, even though BDD can place a strain on them.

Advocacy, community and finding purpose

[39:00] Dan now volunteers as a peer facilitator on the BDD Foundation's 20-week programme. He describes it as "nourishing" to witness people making real progress.

[39:40] He no longer feels the need to hide; in fact, sharing his experience has become meaningful and empowering.

[41:10] He describes the BDD community as speaking "a different language" – one in which people immediately understand one another. It remains crucial to his wellbeing.

Staying well and a message to others

[42:03] Dan maintains recovery by staying connected, sleeping well, keeping life organised, and remaining curious about his BDD with compassion and interest.

[44:22] His message to those struggling is:

- Talk to someone – the BDD Foundation is a great place to start.
- Reducing secrecy reduces shame.
- Having someone "fight your corner" makes all the difference.
- Recovery isn't an exception – it's absolutely possible.

Resources

- The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org

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