

Beating BDD Episode 40

In this episode, Sheila Paul reflects on the role that cultural expectations and painful childhood experiences played in her developing body dysmorphic disorder. And she describes how sharing her experiences within the African Caribbean community is helping reduce the shame around mental health issues.

“There is happiness after body dysmorphic disorder.”

Growing up with shame and self-consciousness

[02:33] Sheila’s lived experience drives all her activity today. As a Black girl growing up in East London, she remembers feeling different from a very young age and becoming highly self-conscious about her appearance.

[03:37] Words used in the community about beauty and appearance intensified the pressure she already felt.

[05:30] There’s still a lot of stigma about mental health in the community, plus fear of being medicated or sectioned. This means people feel unable to speak openly about their struggles.

[06:58] Life is now really good for Sheila and she’s very happy with the stage she’s at. She paints, colours, meditates and plays the saxophone.

When BDD first appeared

[08:33] Sheila recalls comparing her nose and hair with those of her cousins as a child, leading to a feeling something was wrong. An accident at 10 also led some hair to fall out. She then got caught in a “cycle of torment”, increasingly comparing and studying herself in mirrors.

[10:56] People in her community say what they see, which can be negative. It affected Sheila because she remembers her mother pinching the bridge of her nose as a baby/toddler. Comments about “good” hair directed at other children also sank into her subconscious mind.

[14:16] Although Sheila appeared to function outwardly, internally she felt overwhelmed by negative thoughts. As a teen, she stayed in her bedroom a lot by herself and didn’t tell anyone how she felt.

[15:32] She was caught in a cycle of looking in the mirror a lot even though it made her feel bad.

Getting diagnosed

[16:23] Sheila got diagnosed in 1994. Her doctor sent her to be assessed and then to have CBT therapy with MIND. The therapy was helpful, but the negative thoughts didn’t stop.

[18:37] Some good news Sheila received about someone else sent her to a dark place. She started thinking about her purpose in life and wanting to find it. She also worked on learning to love herself, which took many years.

[20:13] Sheila paid for private therapy with Black counsellors who would understand where she was coming from. Mindfulness, prayer, art, journalling, eating well and getting out into nature still help her today.

Creativity, healing and rediscovering herself

[22:10] Sheila began making and painting reborn baby dolls that women use as a comforter. These dolls symbolise healing, identity and the inner child.

[24:02] She brings a doll with her when she speaks about her experience with BDD at community events. It helps people to open up and talk about their own troubles.

[25:19] She reflects on how meaningful it has been to encourage people to seek support and direct them towards help, including the BDD Foundation.

Looking ahead and sharing hope

[27:15] Sheila hopes to continue working with her dolls as well as developing projects to help others share and heal, particularly by releasing themselves from painful words.

[28:18] Her message to anyone struggling with BDD is not to suffer in silence and to keep reaching out for support. There is happiness after body dysmorphic disorder.

Resources

- **The BDD Foundation:** bddfoundation.org
-

Sponsors

Thank you to our champion sponsor **JAAQ (Just Ask a Question)** – the mental health platform designed to give you the right information, from the right people, in a way that’s never been done before.

Thank you also to our community sponsors:

- **Nightingale Hospital** – a private mental health hospital located in central London. It provides specialist treatment for OCD, BDD and related disorders in its dedicated inpatient unit and day programme.
- **Orri** – a specialist eating disorder treatment service providing compassionate, multi-disciplinary care through tailored outpatient, day care and online programmes.
- **Blondes Fine Art** – a fine art dealership based in Hertfordshire and proud to support *Beating BDD*.