

Beating BDD Episode 44

Holly Sherriff first had symptoms of BDD in her early teens, but it wasn't until she was 18 that the condition really took hold – and lockdown pushed it to its worst. In this conversation, Holly talks about the years she spent hiding from the world, the therapy that gave her life back, and how, five years into recovery, her life now feels vivid, joyful and connected.

“Run towards the fear, not away. You’re so much more capable than you know.”

How Holly's life is now

[01:32] When her BDD was at its worst, Holly's world became very small. Now she can leave the house without safety behaviours, and life feels more joyful.

[03:35] Since starting treatment, she's taken a gap year to travel, found a supportive partner and landed a job she loves. Pre-treatment Holly would have thought all of this was impossible.

[04:35] Holly works in the NHS, running a health and wellbeing programme for people struggling with their mental health.

How her BDD started

[05:35] Holly was an anxious child who struggled with perfectionism, self-criticism and shame. From around 12, she compared herself to others – on looks, schoolwork and friendships – and felt she didn't measure up.

[07:15] Her trigger came on A level results day. Not getting the grades she expected left her feeling like a failure who'd let everyone down.

[08:00] At university, three and a half hours from home, she became preoccupied with her side profile and upper arms. She camouflaged with clothes and makeup, and being around people became exhausting.

Hiding from the world

[09:10] Then lockdown hit. Holly's BDD thrived in isolation, and she counted down the days until it ended, researching cosmetic surgery to 'fix' herself in time.

[12:05] At university, she avoided housemates completely – doing her washing at 4am and using the kitchen when she knew everyone would be hungover in bed.

[15:00] At home, she slept through the day and ate dinner after her parents had gone to bed. Even in the same room, she positioned herself carefully to control what they could see, convinced they were repulsed by her.

[17:15] At her lowest point, she had thoughts of not wanting to be here. Knowing her friends and family loved her kept her going.

Finding help

[18:05] A friend mentioned body image disorders on a phone call. Holly Googled it, found the NHS and BDD Foundation pages, and felt huge relief and hope.

[19:40] She's never had a formal diagnosis, which fed a lot of imposter syndrome – 'What if I'm just ugly?'

[20:55] Her GP referred her to a wellbeing practitioner who didn't know what BDD was. Holly was acutely aware she didn't fit the treatment being offered, so she shut down.

[24:30] Two years after her symptoms became severe, her mum offered to find private help. They found a therapist who understood BDD and had treated it before.

What's helped most

[26:35] CBT – especially behavioural experiments – gave Holly her life back. Her experiments focused on makeup, which she cut back on gradually until she could leave the house without it.

[30:00] When Holly told her therapist she felt disgusting, the therapist described a stinking, overflowing bin and asked if that's how Holly saw herself. Hearing herself say yes shocked her and made her determined not to feel that way anymore.

[31:20] Her master's research introduced her to a paper by Professor David Veale and Professor Paul Gilbert, which frames BDD as the brain's overactive threat system trying to protect us. It helped her let go of the shame and anger she felt towards her BDD.

[34:13] Treatment also helped with her perfectionism and other anxieties. She now questions the standards she sets herself and is much kinder to herself.

Giving back

[35:28] Holly facilitates the BDD Foundation's Overcoming BDD programme and recently stepped up to lead it. Staying connected to the BDD community matters to her.

[37:05] She now feels a sense of self-acceptance when she sees herself. If anything, she sees herself as 'a little ball of light'.

[37:40] Her advice to anyone struggling with the disorder: you're not alone. Run towards the fear – the alternative is much worse than the fear itself. One day you might look back and be shocked at how far you've come.

Resources

- The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org
- Veale, D and Gilbert, P (2014) Body dysmorphic disorder: the functional and evolutionary context in phenomenology and a compassionate mind.
Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders

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