Beating BDD Episode 46

Chris Trondsen spent years isolated and withdrawn, cut off from the outgoing, sociable person he knew himself to be. Today, he's a licensed therapist specialising in BDD, a leading advocate in the US and in a happy relationship. In this episode, Chris talks about his experiences with BDD and how treatment and human connection brought him back to himself.

"Human connection is the way to overcome BDD."

How Chris's life has changed

[01:50] Chris has always loved people, but at his worst, BDD left him isolated and depressed – only going out at 3am or 4am to avoid being seen.

[04:25] Travel used to terrify him. Now he's spoken twice at the BDD Foundation conference in London and explored Norway and Iceland.

[05:35] Chris is also celebrating a year with his boyfriend. Dating was 'the ultimate exposure', and first he had to believe he deserved love.

[8:58] Now, he loves the side of himself that gets to be there for someone else. And he's learnt that others don't share his harsh judgment of his appearance.

[11:45] BDD no longer makes his decisions – he says yes to new experiences instead.

How his BDD started

[13:20] Chris remembers having a fixation with his hair aged nine or 10. He'd sneak combs into school and comb his hair in front of a mirror until it felt perfect. Later he worried about dark circles and his body shape.

[15:50] In high school, he became fixated on acne, even though friends said his skin was clear. He repeatedly visited dermatologists and at his most desperate, he was caught shoplifting skincare products.

[18:17] After moving out at 18, his BDD got much worse. Passing comments about his forehead and nose became new fixations.

Hiding from the world

[20:00] Chris quit his job and college, stopped seeing friends and family, and was mostly housebound for three years – constantly researching and seeking treatments for his perceived flaws.

[21:15] He fell into a severe depression and lost hope, ultimately attempting to take his own life. Fortunately, his roommate found him in time, and he was taken to hospital.

[24:40] When he moved in with family afterwards, they noticed behaviours no one had picked up on for years, like how he'd spend hours at the mirror.

Finding help

[26:50] After seeing many therapists for depression, Chris opened up to his OCD therapist, who said it sounded like BDD. After an assessment with a BDD therapist, Arie Winograd (our guest for episode 29), Chris finally felt understood.

[28:05] At first, he felt like an outsider in the BDD support group Arie had set up. But as it was a treatment-based group, Chris started doing CBT and exposure work, which he says saved his life.

What's helped most

[30:57] When Chris got a job in TV, he found watching himself on camera very difficult, and he felt the pressure to look a certain way for both work and dating. So he went back to Arie for one-on-one treatment.

[34:00] Treatment also looked at childhood abuse, abandonment and bullying. He realised BDD was trying to protect him: if he pushed everyone away, he couldn't be hurt.

[37:47] In exposures, Chris walked around LA with his hair off his forehead and went out in daylight. People were friendly – the opposite of what he expected. He realised he couldn't know what people were thinking and learnt to view himself holistically.

[40:55] Arie told him human connection is the way to overcome BDD. When so many people came to his birthday party that they couldn't all fit in the apartment, Chris realised BDD had been lying to him.

Turning pain into purpose

[48:10] Other than losing people he loves, Chris says nothing will ever be as difficult as BDD. This motivates him to turn his pain into purpose – helping to spread the word about the condition and how to treat it.

[49:15] He agreed to appear on The Montel Williams Show, and afterwards he was flooded with messages from people saying, 'That's me.' He's done several other appearances since then.

[54:51] Chris is now a licensed therapist specialising in BDD. He also trains clinicians and helped launch the first BDD Awareness Day with the IOCDF and the BDD Foundation.

[1:00:24] His message to anyone struggling is: break your silence. Even if you're not ready for treatment, tell someone you trust so you're not going through it alone.

Resources

- The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org
- IOCDF BDD website: bdd.iocdf.org

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