Beating BDD Episode 4 – Gareth Stephens

For this episode I spoke to Gareth Stephens. In just eight years Gareth has gone from being too ill with BDD to work to helping others recover from anxiety disorders as a CBT therapist in south London. His interview shows that however bad things seem, it is possible to make a full recovery from the disorder.

‘In the last five or six years I’ve probably had two dysmorphic thoughts. On both occasions I looked in the mirror, then thought, “No, I don’t do this anymore.” And I was able to walk away and get on with my day.’

When did his BDD appear and how did it manifest itself?
[00:04:31] He has distinct memories of instances that made him very aware of his appearance from aged 8.
[00:05:36] The anxiety became a real problem at about 15-17 ears and got progressively worse. Leaving university after three months was a defining moment.
[00:14:14] His appearance concerns related to aspects of his face and body.

How did his BDD affect his life?
[00:01:20] A typical day involved spending lots of time scrutinising pictures and videos and feeling progressively worse.
[00:09:15] After dropping out of university, he had 8-9 years of being very affected. He was too anxious to hold down jobs and started having panic attacks.
[00:13:00] He became very socially isolated.

How did he find out he had BDD and why did it take so long?
[00:07:15] Gareth didn’t know what the problem was – just knew he was experiencing unpleasant feelings and situations.
[00:09:15] At about 24 he saw his GP about the panic attacks. This led to 4-5 years of unsuccessful treatment from psychologists who didn’t understand BDD.
[00:11:40] It was after seeing the programme Too Ugly for Love that he made an appointment to see David Veale and got a diagnosis.

What specialist treatment did he have?
[00:16:42] The therapy involved stopping maintaining behaviours and changing his relationship with his thoughts.
[00:17:54] Doing the things that made him uncomfortable was also key.
[00:17:02] There were two Eureka moments after about three and six weeks of treatment.

What else helped him to get better?
[00:13:25] Gareth met an ex-girlfriend through an online support group who helped him to see that things could be different.
[00:22:57] Supportive relationships have helped. He’s also done courses and set up/attended groups relating to other anxiety disorders, as well as used techniques like diaphragmatic breathing.

What’s life like for Gareth now?
[00:00:45] He’s a CBT therapist seeing patients and overseeing trainees.
He doesn’t have dysmorphic thoughts any more – in fact, he even has positive ones!

**What advice would he give to people suffering with BDD?**

It's important to open a door in your mind to the possibility that the way you see yourself may not be the reality.

Have some faith in your therapist and the therapy and push yourself as hard as you can.

**Resources**

- The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org