Beating BDD Episode 3 – Hannah Lewis

For the third episode of Beating BDD, I spoke to Hannah Lewis. Hannah’s BDD first appeared when she was about eight. Now 25 and in recovery, she’s recently embarked on a PhD on how to prevent the disorder from developing in secondary-school age children.

‘You might think that BDD’s taken years of your life and it’s never going to get better, But that’s how I felt – and I’ve made a career of it!’

What’s Hannah’s PhD about?
[00:00:01] She’s co-developing school-based interventions to prevent body image issues from developing among young people.

When did BDD appear and how did it manifest itself?
[00:02:50] At just eight or nine years old, she became very distressed about how she looked in a school photo.
[00:04:33] She didn’t tell her parents because she believed she couldn’t have been conceived naturally – so she felt suspicious of them.
[00:07:59] Hannah’s suspicion extended to thinking that the men she dated were doing it as a joke.

What safety behaviours did she use?
[00:05:35] She started using makeup and scarves to camouflage her ‘flaws’ when she got to secondary school.
[00:06:17] Bullying validated the way she already saw herself.
[00:08:57] She avoided going outside to play with friends in the summer holidays.

How did she find out she had BDD and seek help?
[00:10:34] Hannah’s rituals spiralled out of control when she went to university.
[00:12:56] The GP sent her to see a psychologist who diagnosed BDD.
[00:14:22] It was hard to admit she had BDD as it seemed like letting her guard down – until then she’d always ‘got in there first’ to tell people she was ugly.

What treatment did she have?
[00:15:22] Hannah had several rounds of CBT but found it hard to undo entrenched behaviours and ways of thinking.
[00:16:05] Recovery doesn’t happen overnight but each time you revisit therapy it gets easier.
[00:16:40] Most effective has been recognising that people value her for who she is.

What role can support groups play in recovery?
[00:18:04] Sharing a common experience of BDD helps to overcome shame, guilt and isolation.
[00:18:34] People see that everyone else thinks they don’t have BDD – they’re just ugly.
[00:20:13] Attending the groups improves people’s quality of life.

What’s life like for Hannah now?
[00:21:15] She’s learnt how to live her best life by managing her symptoms.
Your appearance is never going to be on your CV. Qualities like humour and kindness are what count.

With the right therapy and patience, it does get better.

Resources

- The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org