

BODY DYSMORPHIC DISORDER

A Guide for University Students



When you're struggling with BDD, university may seem very daunting. You may be at the planning stages, or have begun your course already. Perhaps you have had BDD for years or maybe BDD has become a problem now that you're organising your life and studies away from the support of family. Whatever the situation, we hope you find this information useful; more support is available at bddfoundation.org

WHAT IS BODY DYSMORPHIC DISORDER (BDD)?

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is a psychological condition where a person becomes very preoccupied with one or more features in physical appearance, e.g. nose, skin, hair, etc. The concern can be very specific (e.g. "my nose is too big") or it may be vague (e.g. "I feel ugly").

People with BDD engage in behaviours to 'fix' or hide the perceived flaw/s that are difficult to resist or control (e.g. frequently checking mirrors, seeking reassurance, etc).

BDD can seriously affect a person's daily life, including school, social life and relationships. As a result, social anxiety, isolation and depression are very common in BDD.

COMMON SIGNS OF BDD

- Obsessive worries about one or more features
- Checking mirrors/reflective surfaces a lot or avoiding them altogether
- Going to a lot of effort to conceal perceived flaw/s (e.g. with make-up, clothes, postures or other means)
- Avoiding pictures
- Constantly comparing one's appearance to others
- Frequently seeking reassurance about appearance
- Avoiding social situations
- Excessive skin picking

IMPACT OF BDD

People with BDD worry a lot more than others about their appearance. They may spend several hours per day worrying about how they look and trying to fix or hide their appearance. It is very common for young people with BDD to feel anxious, upset, depressed because of their appearance concerns and experience life as being a struggle.

WHAT CAUSES BDD?

No one knows exactly what causes BDD, but research suggests it is a combination of different (risk) factors, such as:

- Genetics
- Chemical imbalances in the brain
- Exposure to frightening or upsetting experiences (e.g. bullying, abuse, life stresses)
- Perfectionism

Whatever it is that causes BDD, we know that it is not your fault or anybody else's fault and that there are effective treatments available to help overcome BDD.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

BDD often begins in adolescence, but it can start earlier in childhood. BDD affects up to 4.4% of students; this means that, if in your university there are approximately 2,000 students, around about 88 will suffer from BDD.

Remember, you are not alone!

DO I HAVE BDD?

BDD Screening Questions

1. Do you spend an hour or more everyday worrying about your appearance?
2. Do you find yourself carrying out lots of behaviours to cope with your appearance worries (e.g. mirror checking, grooming routines, comparing your appearance with others, etc)?
3. Do your appearance worries upset you a lot and/or get in the way of daily activities (e.g. socialising, going to school, leisure activities etc)?
4. Are your appearance concerns exclusively focused on being too fat or weighting too much?

If you answered "yes" to questions 1) to 3) and "no" to question 4), it is possible you may be experiencing BDD.

Caution! Please note that the above questions are intended to screen for BDD, NOT diagnose it; the answers indicated above can suggest that BDD is present but can't give a definite diagnosis.

"I have to do my hair every morning until it looks right... This means washing, straightening, styling, and then starting again if it doesn't turn out."

"I was spending an average of 4-5 hours getting ready to leave the house, with all my energy going into plastering on foundation and concealer and re-constructing my face as much as I could"



GETTING TREATMENT

The good news is that BDD can be successfully treated, and it is important to prioritise getting effective treatment.

The recommended evidence-based treatments for BDD are Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), involving graded exposure and response prevention (ERP), and medication with selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs). You can read more about treatments on our website.

If you are moving away from your family home you will need to register with a new GP to access treatment for BDD. You can find out a lot about local practices through the NHS Choices website. Factors you might want to take into consideration when choosing a GP include:

- The number of GPs at the practice – in a larger practice you have more chances to find a GP who is knowledgeable on BDD
- The individual interests and specialisms of the GP – there may be someone with a psychiatry or psychology background
- Whether the practice has its own counselling/ CBT practitioners
- How convenient it is to make appointments and get repeat prescriptions

You should register with a new GP as soon as you have written proof of your new address.

If you are already in treatment with a mental health clinic, you should talk to your therapist about your options for ongoing treatment when you move away. You may have to be referred to a clinic in the area you move to, and so it's good to get on the waiting list as soon as possible.

If you are going to the GP for the first time we have a downloadable 'GP Card' that can be helpful to take with you.

bddfoundation.org/resources/leaflets

UNIVERSITY SERVICES

An alternative route to therapy could be through university itself, which is likely to have a Health and Wellbeing centre (or some similar service, the set-up will vary from place to place). Many universities can offer counselling or even CBT to students.

You should be aware, though, that CBT with ERP is the recommended treatment for Body Dysmorphic Disorder. However, counselling services can help with other aspects of student life, and may help you access more targeted CBT options.

ADVANCE PLANNING

It's a good idea to try and identify your key needs and potential problem areas. This will help when looking at what different universities might have to offer, and subsequently if you choose to approach your university's disability services or apply for Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) (see later section).

Maybe sit down with your parents or someone who knows you well to have an honest conversation about how BDD affects your life. Draw up a brief outline of what a regular day or week looks like, taking into account bad days as well as the best. What sort of support do you normally get in your home and school/college environment? What happens if nobody is there to support you? What makes it more difficult for you to manage your condition? What coping strategies make it easier? Remember, it may not be obvious to other people how BDD affects your life. Often only those closest to you can see the struggle.



TELLING YOUR UNIVERSITY

There's a lot of support available during your time at university, and to give yourself the best chance possible it is well worth exploring what is available. It will ultimately be your decision when, or indeed whether, to share your BDD diagnosis. However, tackling BDD can be challenging. Getting people on your side can make a massive difference and help you to feel that you are not facing it alone. Remember, you have great potential, and it is important that you have the right support to achieve your goals.

BDD and other mental illnesses that have 'a substantial and long term (lasting over 12 months) effect on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities' constitute a disability under UK legislation. Your university will have a disability service, and many students with BDD find it really helpful to register with it.

You can contact the university disability service at any stage of your application or studies. You can find it on the university website, or search at the Disabled Students' Allowance Quality Assurance website: www.dsa-qag.org/students

It may seem a strange thing to say when you're just starting at university, but it can actually help to remember that you can always leave – there is a way out if it's not for you. There are no certainties in life – and that's OK!

COMMON WORRIES

You may be worried about potential discrimination from tutors and fellow students. However, under UK legislation a publicly-funded higher education provider cannot create a situation in which a disabled student is put at a disadvantage, and this covers all aspects of attending the course, including the admissions process, the provision of teaching and access to facilities and services. 'Reasonable Adjustments' have to be made.

Another worry could be that you won't even get an offer of a place if your BDD is declared at the outset. Though universities by law are not allowed to discriminate in this way, ultimately it is up to you whether or not to disclose a disability on your UCAS form. UCAS makes this very clear:

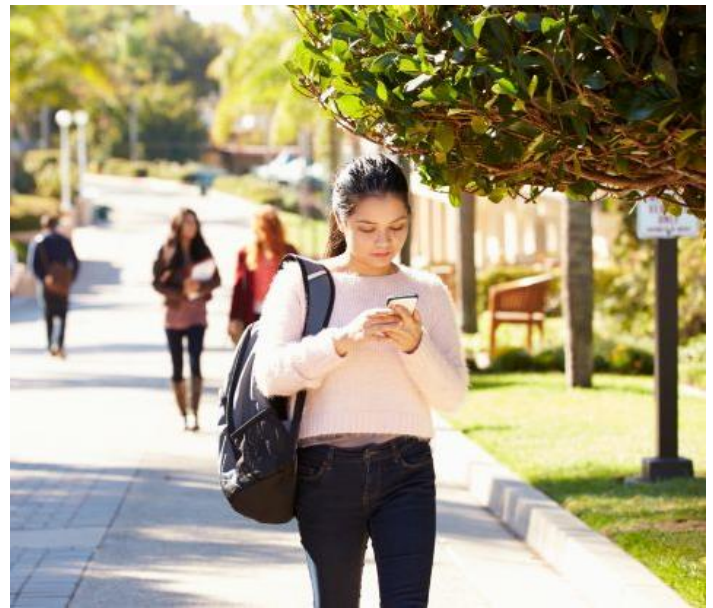
"You can always tell your chosen course providers about your situation once you're accepted – after your welcome email arrives – but check what support they have on offer first"

"I found the on-site mental health support at Uni really good".

You can find out whether your university has a Mental Health Adviser affiliated with the University Mental Health Advisers Network at www.umhan.com

You can choose whether or not to give the disability service permission to share your situation with your departmental staff.

It may be best to discuss your situation with your university disability services or tutor just in case, even if you are currently doing OK and are confident your work will not be affected by your BDD. If you leave it until the day before an exam or deadline to seek help, it may be less likely that you'd be offered special consideration.



REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

The 2010 Equality Act in England, Scotland and Wales requires publicly-funded universities to make 'reasonable adjustments' to enable people with disabilities to study without being at a disadvantage. The 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and 2005 Special Educational Needs & Disability Order in Northern Ireland work very similarly. In this context 'reasonable' means that it must be effective, be financially viable (often with the help of Disabled Students' Allowance), fulfil health and safety requirements and not disadvantage other students.

An extra consideration for students in some vocational fields, including medicine and nursing, is that the reasonable adjustments must also fit in with what is required by the relevant professional body, such as the General Medical Council or Nursing and Midwifery Council. This means that adjustments made cannot affect the safety of that individual in future practice.

EXAMPLES OF REASONABLE ADJUSTMENTS

- Extending coursework deadlines
- Extra time/rests during exams
- Time off when BDD is especially bad
- Support from welfare and counselling staff
- Taking exams in separate exam halls
- Being excused from whole class presentations

WHATEVER STAGE YOU ARE AT – IF YOU NEED HELP, ASK!

THE HARDEST THING IS MAKING THE MOVE TO GO AND FIND THAT HELP, BUT IT WILL BE WORTH IT.

FUNDED ADJUSTMENTS

Some adjustments and aids that you can benefit from may need to be funded. The Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) can pay for:

- Non-medical helpers, for example mentors, who would meet regularly with students and, for instance, help them keep track of their timetables and deadlines, or keep productive.
- Specialist equipment required for studying, such as a laptop, software or a Dictaphone.
- Extra travel costs incurred to get to your university because of your disability,
- Other costs such as photocopying, paper, and printer cartridges.

APPLYING FOR DISABLED STUDENTS ALLOWANCE

Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) is a grant designed to help with extra costs incurred in providing support for disabilities, including long term mental health conditions such as BDD. It is assessed solely on need and not income, and does not need to be repaid. It can fund specialist equipment, non-medical helpers, travel (for instance if you can't use public transport) and other general expenses.

DSA can be applied for either at the same time as you apply for student fees and loads, or afterwards. The form can be downloaded from the regional Student Finance websites, or from yourdsa.com You should also be able to get a copy from the student disability service at your university, and you will most likely be able to get help there to fill it in.

In order to receive DSA, you first need to provide

evidence to show that you qualify. You have to give a brief history of your condition, a letter or diagnostic assessment from your GP or mental health specialist is required as supporting evidence. This should clearly state how your condition affects your life and your studies. The DSA guidance notes that 'Sometimes a student's disability does not substantially affect their normal day-to-day activities but does have a substantial effect on their ability to study.'

Hopefully you will be sent a letter confirming your eligibility and offering to fund you for an assessment at a Needs Assessment Centre. This is a meeting with an assessor with a specialist mental health background who will talk through your difficulties and identify areas where DSA could help you.

If you are studying with the Open University you can book a visit from the OU Access Bus, which enables assessors to travel to those students who need to have their assessment at home.



After your assessment, the assessor writes up a report recommending particular support or equipment to be funded and sends it to be approved by Student Finance, which usually takes another few weeks. You will be notified whether your funding is approved, and you will then be able to access what DSA has to offer.

The process is unfortunately very lengthy, but throughout much of it support is at hand. You should apply for DSA as early as possible in order to have the best chance of having everything that is needed in place for the start of a course.

However, you can make an application at any stage.

For undergraduates, the DSA carries over to subsequent years of a course without needing to reapply, but if you are a part-time or post-graduate student, or DSA is the only student funding you are applying for, you will need to re-apply each year.

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Starting university and leaving your family and friends behind can be highly nerve-racking. More often than not you will settle in quickly, but if you are worried about getting to grips with a new place and new people, some find it helpful to seek out potential flatmates and people who will be on your course in advance by searching on Facebook, or via websites such as thestudentroom.co.uk

"Although I found it scary to live in halls initially, for me Uni was the final push towards recovery".

"I found Uni easier than school as the timetable was more flexible"

"At Uni I felt able to go out for the first time and enjoy my independence".



The BDD Foundation is a national charity for people affected by Body Dysmorphic Disorder.
www.bddfoundation.org

Registered charity no: 1153753

University requires a lot of hard work (not to mention partying!) so it's important to look after yourself.

- Sleep when you need it
- Eat a balanced diet
- Exercise regularly

BUILD A SUPPORT NETWORK

It's a good idea to make a list of where you can go for assistance and support.

- Don't forget your friends and family – plan regular check-in phone calls and visits home
- Your university Health and Wellbeing centre (or similar) and Disability Service, for advice, support and sometimes even therapy
- Your local GP, or mental health service
- Your personal tutor
- Your Students' Union support service
- Visit bddfoundation.org for more support and information
- Email support@bddfoundation.org for confidential email support
- Access BDD Support Groups bddfoundation.org/support-groups/
- If you need emotional support out of hours, call the student-to-student helpline Nightline – find a local service at www.nightline.ac.uk
- For crisis support call HopelineUK papyrus-uk.org/hopelineuk/
- For help with equality issues, welfare benefits or access to higher education, contact the Disabled Students' Helpline at Disability Rights UK: disabilityrightsuk.org
- OCD Action have a volunteer helpline for advice or someone to talk to and have training in BDD: 0856 390 6232

