

Beating BDD Episode 19 – Nicole Schnackenberg

Nicole has many strings to her bow, including being a writer, a psychotherapist and a trustee of the BDD Foundation. With her lived experience of both BDD and anorexia, she brings some really fresh and interesting perspectives to the podcast.

“BDD isn’t who you are, and it doesn’t last forever.”

How did Nicole’s BDD emerge and manifest itself?

[00:03.56] She was initially treated for anorexia as a teenager, then her focus moved from her weight to her skin.

[00:05.36] She sought all sorts of help for the mild acne around her jaw, and oscillated between spending hours in front of the mirror and covering it up.

[00:08.06] She managed to keep working but would organise the rest of her life around not being seen.

How did she get diagnosed and treated?

[00:12.15] Nicole repeatedly went to the doctor, who would treat the acne because she was so distressed. But she saw that as confirmation that her beliefs were true.

[00:13.19] An occupational therapist finally realised what was wrong and Nicole was referred for CBT.

What’s been most helpful in her recovery?

[00:15.19] Mindfulness, yoga and meditation have been very supportive, as has family therapy.

[00:17.30] Traditional BDD treatments have helped too, along with co-facilitating the support groups and writing.

[00:17.30] Nicole describes how our self-concept builds through the relationships we have when we’re young. As adults, we can really explore that to find our “true self”.

What research has Nicole done into young people with BDD?

[00:22.04] She carried out in-depth interviews with 10 young people with BDD as part of her professional doctorate.

[00:23.20] The themes of shame and identity emerged strongly. Nine of the 10 had experienced eating struggles. All felt they’d been punished or shamed for their BDD in educational settings.

[00:26.29] There’s been a rise in young people struggling with body image, but Nicole hopes that’s because there’s also more awareness.

What advice would she give to parents?

[00:28.27] Support the whole family, particularly siblings, and be careful about how you talk about your own body.

[00:30.08] Seek support for yourself and BDD-specific treatment for your child.

[00:30.53] Nicole and two colleagues from The Maudsley Hospital in south London have put together a book for parents of children with BDD (see Resources).

What can she tell us about the support groups?

[00:32.18] There’s been an increase in enquiries and attendance at the online groups since the coronavirus pandemic began.

[00:33.50] Some people use them as graded exposure, building up until they can participate with the camera on.

[00:34.25] The BDD Foundation now offers a weekly support group online, so people can feel less alone.

[00:35.38] Attendees feel they're in the right place because can hear their thoughts being reflected in other people's. The groups are also very supportive.

How have Nicole's experiences shaped the person she is?

[00:38.19] She's been able to travel back to the person she was before she took on ideas about being "defective". Now, she loves and respects herself.

[00:39.21] This journey has hugely informed the kind of work she does and the enjoyment she gets from life.

[00:40.53] She wishes she'd known that these feelings wouldn't last forever; that beliefs about herself weren't necessarily true; and that she was lovable.

What would she say to someone struggling with BDD?

[00:42.54] It isn't who you are, and it doesn't last forever. And even in the darkest moments, there's always hope.

Resources

- The BDD Foundation: bddfoundation.org
- The Parents' Guide to Body Dysmorphic Disorder: How to Support Your Child, Teen or Young Adult (Jessica Kingsley, 2020)
- www.nicoleschnackenberg.com