

MALE BODY DYSMORPHIC DISORDER

Body of evidence

Body dysmorphic disorder sufferers become worry so obsessively about their appearance that some try to kill themselves. And it affects men as well as women. **Kelly Mattison** reports

Last May, Nicholas went to visit his parents. “Quite unexpectedly they got out some photographs of me,” the 33 year old tells *The Big Issue in the North*. “What I saw was extremely upsetting. I did not recognise the face in the photographs. It looked like a different person. Every feature seemed to be enlarged beyond what is normal. The person in the photograph was hideously ugly. That morning, shaking and distraught, I drove back to London and contemplated committing suicide that same night. My world had been completely destroyed. I know that healthy people have the occasional photograph that is unflattering or that they don’t like but it doesn’t drive them to suicide.”

Nicholas was diagnosed with body dysmorphic disorder three years earlier. BDD is a devastating problem with body image whereby the sufferer worries obsessively about their appearance and becomes overly concerned about one part of their body, often the hair or the face. The sufferer develops obsessive checking rituals in mirrors, windows and any reflective material to view any defects they believe that they may have and becomes preoccupied with the imagined defect. And although it’s often associated with women, experts say it affects just as many men.

Nicholas says: “My ongoing symptoms completely corrode the sense of who I am and my pleasure of life. I spend most of my days trying to find out exactly what I look like by looking in a variety of carefully positioned mirrors. I spent ten years completely avoiding mirrors but I can now at least look in the mirror. However I often get stuck there, constantly looking at my reflection for an hour or two hours, and then stopping for a short time and going back to it. I literally get stuck in the mirror.

“On some days it is difficult to leave the house because strangers in the street will look at my face and I think that they will also view me as hideous and defective.”

According to psychologist and author Dr Linda Papadopoulos, people with BDD have an irrational idea of how they look. “They think that they are walking around very distorted and disfigured so they

begin to avoid – they avoid behaviours, they avoid people and they avoid engaging in a certain way. They become obsessed and those obsessive thoughts can be absolute torture, as their appearance becomes the only thing that they think about.”

Nicholas twice had cosmetic surgery operations on his nose, neither of which helped him feel any better about himself. Another sufferer, Pete, 30, from Brighton, has also resorted to surgery.

“My issue is my teeth,” says Pete. “I have had surgery and cosmetic dentistry to correct the bite and protruding teeth. But what I see in the mirrors and on pictures is awful, like nothing has been corrected.

“The feeling of having BDD is like having a face and a body but not accepting being in your own skin. I feel like everyone is looking at my flaws and I just want to hide away for fear of being criticised.”

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David Knight, a mental health nurse who has worked with BDD sufferers for 12 years, says the condition is one of the most disabling psychological problems, some way removed from low self-esteem.

“For someone with BDD, if they are outside they tend to walk along staring at the ground. They will endeavour to get from A to B as quickly as possible,” he says. “They believe that everyone is staring at them and everyone is judging them. They have incredibly black and white views.”

Knight uses cognitive behavioural therapy to treat BDD sufferers. This talking therapy aims to teach sufferers to recognise the triggers for their behaviour and so change it, and is seen by some as the most effective treatment. But for one sufferer, Stephen Westwood, it wasn’t the right course.

“I was given CBT but I was in a very negative place at the time and I was being very secretive about my BDD. With CBT you are supposed to write down what triggers your thoughts and I kept writing: ‘Looking in



Papadopoulos: BDD has nothing to do with vanity



the mirror.' I couldn't bear anyone to know my trigger was my skin as it seemed so silly, so I lied and made up answers. There was no way my psychologist could have helped me as I was not being honest."

Westwood has had BDD since he was 15 but was only diagnosed and offered treatment when he was 30.

"I thought it was a physical defect, bad skin. I knew obsessing over my skin was a little crazy but I didn't know that it had a name and that it was a diagnosable mental condition. I kept my obsession with my skin a secret, basically because I felt stupid that it was so important to me. It made no sense yet I felt it so keenly. I didn't think that I would be able to make anyone understand."

Papadopoulos says that it is much more difficult for men to admit a body image disorder as society usually associates such physical concerns with women. "Sometimes people think that BDD is a woman's condition, but it's actually about 50/50. You would imagine that as it is to do with appearance that it is a woman's condition. But BDD has nothing to do with vanity. It's simply to do with a fear of not being accepted."

Westwood, having now almost fully recovered, considers himself almost a spokesperson for the condition. "BDD affected everything in my life. At my worst I locked myself away for days covering my face in Sudocrem [a skin healing cream], believing it would make new skin grow. I have tried to kill myself

Experts say cognitive behavioural therapy can be effective in treating BDD but it doesn't work for all sufferers

several times, and it was the BDD I really wanted to escape from."

Westwood agrees with Papadopoulos that the key reason people do not speak up is for fear of being labelled vain. He says: "BDD is the opposite of vanity. Vain people look in the mirror all the time because they like to look at themselves. People with BDD look in the mirror with fear and hatred – some try not to look in mirrors at all. People may be able to identify with not liking their appearance but BDD is so much worse, it is so debilitating. I think it's hard for people to get the enormity of it." ■

BDD: the facts

According to the BDD Foundation, the condition affects 1 per cent of people in the UK. Other studies put the figure at one in 200.

Sufferers tend to be most concerned with the appearance of skin, hair and nose, according to research by Dr Katharine Phillips published in her book *The Broken Mirror: Understanding and Treating Body Dysmorphic Disorder*.

There are similarities between BDD and obsessive compulsive disorder. BDD sufferers can feel the need to repeat certain actions, such as checking how they look, or repeatedly combing their hair, aiming for temporary easing of distress or anxiety. This is similar to the way compulsive behaviour can ease the distress of obsessive thoughts in OCD.