Body Dysmorphic Disorder

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), also known as ‘Imagined ugliness syndrome’ or ‘Dysmorphia,’ is becoming a much more common condition these days (it is estimated that up to 12% of psychiatric out-patients have the disorder).

The most prominent feature of BDD is preoccupation with a perceived defect in appearance. Usually the defect is imagined, but sometimes there may be an anomaly in which the individual focuses on with unwarranted excessive concern. The body part focused on may be the same one, or may change over time. Those with BDD spend hours checking the defect, and may eventually seek plastic surgery ‘cures’ over and over again. Some even feel suicidal.

Reassurance from others does not seem to help. BDD is now classified as a ‘Somatoform Disorder’ - one in which emotional problems are expressed in the form of physical symptoms.

The following are indicators of BDD, and can be used as a rough guide in determining the presence of BDD:

- Frequently comparing your appearance with that of others; scrutinising the appearance of others
- Often checking your appearance in mirrors and other reflecting surfaces.
- Camouflaging the perceived defect with clothing, make-up, a hat, your hand, your posture or in some other way
- Questioning: seeking reassurance about the flaw or attempting to convince others of its ugliness
- Excessive grooming: (for example, combing hair, shaving, removing or cutting hair, applying make-up
- Avoiding mirrors
- Frequently touching the defect
- Picking your skin
- Measuring the disliked body part
- Excessively reading about the defective body part
- Exercising or dieting excessively
- Avoiding social situations in which the perceived defect might be exposed
- Feeling very anxious and self-conscious around other people because of the perceived defect

The most common body locations of perceived defects are as follows: skin, hair, nose, eyes, legs/knees, chin/jaw, breasts, lips, stomach/waist.

Other features of BDD

BDD usually starts in adolescence with either a gradual or abrupt onset. It is frequently misdiagnosed either as a result of sufferers’ reluctance to come forward, and/or it is passed off as another psychiatric disorder. Those with BDD may express their preoccupations in unusual ways - for example, some sufferers say that they look like a gorilla, or as ugly as the Elephant Man.

Some people suffer from ‘BDD by proxy’ - when an individual has an obsession with a supposed flaw in someone else’s...
appearance, which may involve insistence that the other person have surgery to correct the perceived problem.

BDD preoccupations are distressing and difficult to control. Sufferers on average, think about their perceived deformity for at least an hour a day. For example, a man who sang in a choir thought the entire audience was staring at a scar barely visible on his neck.

More than 90% of BDD sufferers perform one or more repetitive time-consuming behaviour, usually to examine, improve or hide their perceived defect. 60% of BDD sufferers also have major depression, followed by social phobia (40%), OCD (33.3%) and substance misuse disorders.

**Treatment of BDD**
Most sufferers of BDD seek the services of non-psychiatric help, assisting clients to learn to change the way they think and act. During therapy, clients learn different ways of thinking about their problem and how to refocus their attention away from themselves. The client learns to confront their fears and stop their rituals.

Anxiety UK has an in-house cognitive behavioural service available for members, including a phone therapy service. For more information on how to access this service contact Anxiety UK on 08444 775 774 or visit our website at www.anxietyuk.org.uk

**Medication:** The most promising treatment for BDD seems to be the SSRI class of antidepressant drugs in combination with cognitive behavioural therapy. This seems to reduce the central symptom of preoccupation with imagined ugliness.

**More information**
For more information on a range of anxiety disorders, including BDD, contact Anxiety UK:

Web: www.anxietyuk.org.uk
Email: info@anxietyuk.org.uk
Help line: 08444 775 774

Anxiety UK is the nation’s leading anxiety disorders charity. With more than 40 years experience, we provide access to therapy and support to a wide range of anxiety sufferers.