

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Is Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)?



Description

Many people have concerns about how they look, but if worrying about your appearance becomes very distressing or you can't stop thinking about it, you may be suffering from body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). It's quite a common problem: research suggests that between 1 and 3 people out of every 100 suffer from it. Fortunately, effective treatments have been developed for BDD, including cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

The *What Is Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)?* information handout is designed to help clients with BDD understand more about their condition. It includes:

- A summary of the most common symptoms of BDD.
- Descriptions of what it can feel like to have BDD.
- An explanation of why BDD might not get better by itself.
- A brief overview of evidence-based psychological treatments for BDD.

Instructions

Our '*What Is ... ?*' series is designed to support your clients:

- **Reassure and encourage optimism.** Many clients find it hugely reassuring to know there is a name for what they are experiencing, and that there are evidence-based psychological models and treatments specifically designed to help.
- **Scaffold knowledge.** These handouts are perfect during early stages of therapy to help your clients understand how their symptoms fit together and make sense.
- **Signposting.** If you're just seeing a client briefly for assessment, or you have a curious client who wants to know more, these resources can be a helpful part of guiding them to the right service.

References

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What Is Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)?

You constantly feel or believe there is something wrong with how you look.

You think a lot about your appearance, and wish you could think about it less.

You spend a lot of time trying to be sure about how you look (e.g. by checking your appearance in a mirror).

You try to hide or change features you dislike, or have considered cosmetic surgery.

You try to avoid situations where other people can see how you look.

Many people have concerns about how they look, but if worrying about your appearance becomes very distressing, or you can't stop thinking about it, you may be suffering from body dysmorphic disorder (BDD).

BDD centers on the belief or felt sense that there is something wrong with how you look. The negative impression you have of yourself may relate to a particular feature or your overall appearance. Between 1 and 3 people out of every 100 suffer from BDD.

The core of BDD: a negative body image

Everyone has a *body image* – an impression of how you look. Your body image can be made up of more than just visual images; it might include physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts about how you look. If you have BDD, you're likely to have a very negative body image which may feel very convincing or take up your attention, and you might believe that it has serious implications for your life.

my teeth are yellow and bumpy. People will think I'm disgusting.



I've always been self-conscious about how my vulva looks. I really want to have a labiaplasty.



If I can't get my hair right, my face doesn't look right. I look weird and ugly.



In BDD, your negative body image can get stuck for a few reasons:

'Zooming in' on your body image concern

Psychologists have found that people with BDD have especially sensitive visual processing. This means that they often 'zoom in' automatically to notice their disliked features.

The problem with focusing on the parts of your body that concern you is that you're not so good at seeing the big picture, and it can distort your mental image of how you look.

Appearance rituals, including checking and avoidance

People with BDD spend excessive amounts of time checking their appearance and comparing it to how they feel it should be. They might try to improve it (e.g. with makeup or cosmetic surgery) or hide it (by hiding a feature or avoiding situations altogether).

Sometimes acting in these ways might bring relief for a while, but this feeling typically does not last. Worse, acting in these ways can leave you feeling more distressed and preoccupied by your image of how you look.

Mental rituals and unhelpful thinking habits

Repetitive things you do to try and 'solve' your negative body image are sometimes called rituals. When they are carried out in the mind, they are called 'mental rituals'. Common mental rituals in BDD include:

- Ruminating on distant memories, or on questions that are difficult to answer, like why you look the way you do.
- Worrying about what might happen to you in the future.
- Criticizing yourself for how you look, or for things you have done.

Treatment for BDD

The psychological treatment for body dysmorphic disorder which has the strongest research support is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) specifically designed for body dysmorphic disorder, which includes an intervention called exposure with response prevention. Medical treatments are usually recommended as a second-line treatment for BDD, either for those who don't want CBT, haven't responded to CBT, or in combination with CBT (for more severe cases of BDD).

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