

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Keeps Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) Going?



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).

Common difficulties in BDD include:

- Constantly feeling or believing that there's something wrong with how you look.
- Seeing as 'big flaws' things about your appearance that other people don't notice or consider to be very minor.
- Trying to be sure about how you look. (e.g., frequently checking in the mirror)
- Planning or having treatments. (e.g., using cosmetic surgery to change how you look)
- Trying to hide features you dislike. (e.g., using clothing or make-up as camouflage)
- Trying not to look at yourself because it feels upsetting.
- Avoiding situations where other people can see how you look. (e.g., where there are bright lights or lots of people around)
- Thinking a lot about how you look and why you look that way.
- Judging how you look against certain standards. (e.g., comparing yourself with others or an 'ideal' appearance)

Research studies have shown that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a helpful psychological therapy for BDD. CBT therapists work a bit like firefighters: while the fire is burning they're not so interested in what caused it, but are more focused on what is keeping it going, and what they can do to put it out. This is because if they can work out what keeps a problem going, they can treat the problem by 'removing the fuel' and interrupting this maintaining cycle.

The *What Keeps Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) Going?* information handout describes some of the key factors which act to maintain BDD. It illustrates them in a vicious flower format in which each 'petal' represents a separate maintenance cycle. Helping clients to understand more about these processes is an essential part of cognitive therapy for BDD. Therapists can use this handout as a focus for discussion, or as a template from which to formulate an idiosyncratic model of a client's experiences.

Instructions

Suggested Question



One interesting way of thinking about body dysmorphic disorder is to look at why, for some people, it does not get better by itself. This handout shows some of the most common reasons why some people keep experiencing symptoms of body dysmorphic disorder. I wonder if we could look at it together and think about whether it describes some of what is happening for you?

References

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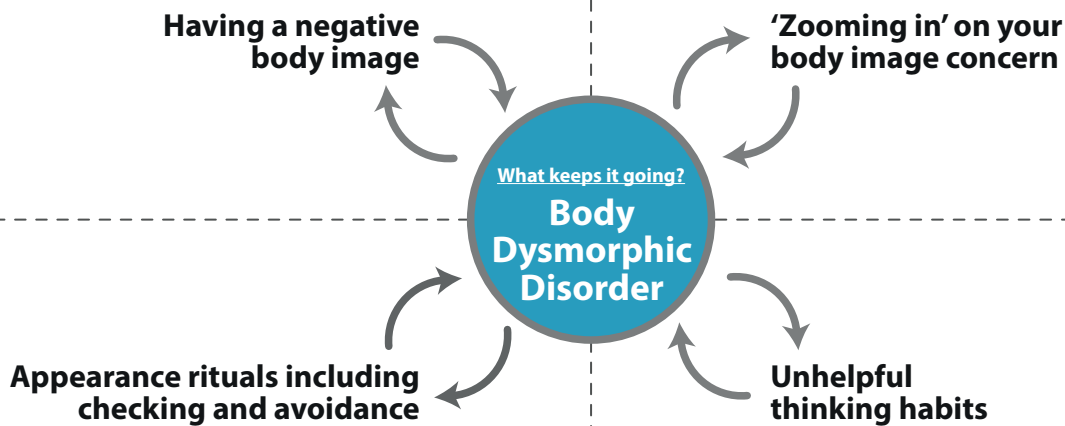
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If you have BDD, you are likely to have a negative body image. This means that you have a very negative view of how you look, and you struggle with feeling afraid, hopeless, ashamed or disgusted. You might also fear being rejected by other people because of how you look. Your image of yourself might be linked to upsetting memories of things that have happened to you.

Acting as if this image of yourself is 'true' can prompt you to behave in unhelpful ways. Our beliefs can be so strong that they feel like facts, when actually they are more like opinions. If your self-impression is not entirely accurate, it may put you under a lot of unnecessary pressure.

People with BDD have superior visual processing when it comes to spotting details. When they feel bad about how they look they check by 'zooming in' on features they don't like. People with BDD often examine unwanted features very intensely in the mirror.

One problem with paying close attention to certain parts of your appearance can be that you are not so good at processing the 'big picture'. This selective attention distorts your mental image of how you look. Part of treatment for BDD includes learning to see the big picture again rather than focusing in on details.



Having a negative body image means that people with BDD spend excessive amounts of time checking their appearance, comparing it to how they feel it should be, trying to improve it (e.g. with make-up or cosmetic surgery), and hiding it, either by hiding a feature or by avoiding situations altogether. Sometimes acting in these ways might bring relief for a while, but typically this feeling does not last. Worse, doing these things can leave you feeling more distressed and preoccupied by the negative image of how you look.

People with BDD are often very critical of themselves. They may experience a bullying voice telling them how ugly they are. They may ruminate on this or worry about how the future will be. They may fall into thinking traps like mind-reading and emotional reasoning where they use their own negative self-image to conclude that other people are finding them ugly.

These thinking processes typically increase negative emotions and make the negative image that people have of themselves feel even more convincing.

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