

## HOW DO I HELP MY FRIEND/FAMILY MEMBER WITH BDD?

Familiarise yourself with the symptoms of BDD:

- Repetitive checking in the mirror to see whether their 'defect' is noticeable or has changed in some way; or conversely, avoiding mirrors altogether.
- Continually comparing themselves to other people or to media images.
- Undertaking time-consuming 'rituals' aimed at improving or hiding their perceived defect, including excessive grooming (e.g., make-up, hair combing/removal, changing clothes), camouflaging (e.g., wearing a hat, wig, sunglasses, baggy clothes) or even standing in a certain way in public to make the 'defect' less noticeable.
- Despite receiving reassurance from doctors and others that their flaws are minimal or non-existent, surgery or dermatological treatment is still sought and generally does not alleviate the problem.
- Repeatedly asking family or friends for reassurance about their perceived 'flaw' or alternatively trying to convince them of their ugliness.
- Constantly touching, measuring or reading about the perceived 'defect'.
- Picking the skin, hair pulling (i.e., Trichotillomania), self mutilation.
- Feel self-conscious and anxious in social settings and generally try to avoid such situations.
- Do not have many friends and generally try to avoid intimate relationships.
- Feelings of shame, rejection and depression.

- Understand the importance of professional help.
- Create an empathic and supportive home environment. Show that you care and that you will try to understand and support them through their treatment and recovery.
- Be patient and avoid saying things like "just stop worrying about yourself" or "stop being so vain and get over yourself". Remember, they are experiencing irrational thoughts and will therefore not be able to respond rationally to such comments.
- Take their condition seriously and do not belittle or dismiss their concern as mere vanity.
- Avoid lengthy discussions about their perceived defects. It is important to communicate that continual questioning and seeking of reassurance is a symptom of BDD and is due to a distorted view of themselves rather than an actual defect in appearance noticed by all. Instead of engaging in fruitless reassurance, divert the conversation to talk about how they are feeling and coping with this.

- Be careful not to give in to requests for plastic surgery. This very rarely solves the problem and in fact often just makes matters worse. If they persist, encourage them to discuss this with their counsellor first.
- Don't make excuses for their non-attendance at family functions but rather encourage them to attend. Reiterate that the focus of the event is not them and that they will be around people who love and support them. It is important that family members be sensitive in this regard and not make fun of the situation or ask intrusive or embarrassing questions.
- Encourage them to face fearful situations, but at the same time, don't criticise them when they are unable to do so.
- Keep stress to a minimum as increases in stress can increase the severity of their symptoms which then may cause increased anxiety.
- Appreciate and compliment small gains made, no matter how small or insignificant.
- Show interest in their treatment plan and exercises and be available when they need your support.
- If your friend or family member is on medication, make sure you offer plenty of support. Familiarise yourself with the possible side effects and if any occur, make sure that they seek advice from their doctor and do not just stop taking their medication.

(Adapted from 'Learning to Live with BDD' by Phillips, Van Noppen and Shapiro (1997))