

What is Body Obsession?

An obsessive conviction that one's appearance is severely flawed and warrants exceptional measures to fix it.

Body obsession can develop when a person suffers from extreme body dissatisfaction. Their thoughts and feelings about their body image can become an obsessive fixation that will influence their decisions and activities. People with body obsession can be fanatically preoccupied with their physical appearance, going to great lengths to change and preserve a particular body shape, weight or size; including dieting, excessive exercise, steroids and/or plastic surgery. Body obsession and dissatisfaction is a mindset that can be influenced by several external factors. For example, family, friends, acquaintances, teachers and the media all have an impact on how a person sees and feels about themselves and their appearance. Individuals in appearance-oriented environments or those who receive negative feedback about their appearance are at an increased risk of body dissatisfaction and/or obsession.

What are the warning signs of Body Obsession?

There are several warning signs to look out for that show when a person's focus on their weight and/or body shape has transitioned from 'just trying to stay healthy' to a dangerous obsession:

- Preoccupation with eating, food, body shape, and weight – at the expense of all other interests, and without moderation
- Extreme body image dissatisfaction
- Extreme dieting behavior
- Excessively restricting and/or counting calories
- Compulsive or excessive exercising
- Use of legal or illicit substances to alter the body size, weight or shape
- Repetitive or obsessive behaviours relating to body shape, size and weight
- Fixation on attaining the physical appearance of celebrities, models and even inanimate body representations
- Trying to replicate the effects of photographic manipulation through dieting or exercise
- Feelings of guilt and shame when exercise is missed or when particular foods are eaten
- Constantly weighing and measuring oneself
- Obsessive focus on and discussion of body size, shape and weight
- Having a distorted body image

What are the risks associated with Body Obsession?

The risks associated with Body Obsession can be serious, and include:

- Significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning
- Development of a clinical eating disorder
- Development of Body Dysmorphia Disorder
- Physical disfigurement
- Depression

What is Body Dysmorphia Disorder (BDD)?

BDD is a distressing condition which is often associated with depression, social anxiety and feelings of shame. At its centre is a fairly specific negative body image, marked by an intense preoccupation with a perceived flaw in your physical appearance. Individuals with BDD often spend significant periods of time worrying about and evaluating a particular aspect of their appearance. The preoccupation may be with any body part, and can change over time. It does not have to relate to weight and shape, although these are common concerns. Some of the areas that people with BDD report as being problematic include (but are not limited to): skin or complexion, nose size or shape, eyes or eyebrows, stomach, breast, legs, lips, teeth or smile, arms, height, scars and muscles.

Individuals with BDD are often concerned that the body part is too big or too small, not the right shape, asymmetrical, or out of proportion to the rest of their body. In BDD, usually the actual flaw a person is worrying about is so slight that others do not really notice or consider it important. In some cases, the flaw may be imperceptible to others. However, even if this is pointed out to a person with BDD, they will continue to worry about that area of their body and often believe that others are thinking negatively of them because of it.

Getting Help

If you suspect that you or someone you know is having problems with Body Obsession, there is help and support available. It is important to seek help immediately - the earlier you seek help the better your chances of recovery.

Call Butterfly's National Support Line for support, advice and access to resources.
1800 33 4673 (Mon-Fri, 8am-9pm AEST),
support@thebutterflyfoundation.org.au.

