

Body dysmorphic disorder sufferers form devastating beliefs due to visual processing problems, research suggests

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Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) remains one of the least studied mental health disorders. However, new research from Swinburne

University of Technology is providing the most comprehensive understanding of the visual processing problems experienced by sufferers to date.

BDD is a devastating mental health disorder in which people fundamentally believe they are ugly or deformed.

Leading BDD researcher, Swinburne neuropsychologist Professor Susan Rossell, has led [controlled task-based trials](#) and [literature reviews](#) published from April—June 2024 to confirm an array of visual difficulties in those experiencing the debilitating disorder. The work has been published in *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry* and *Psychiatry Research*, respectively.

"BDD sufferers are facing debilitating problems including detecting emotions, over-reliance on detail processing, aberrant eye-scanning behaviors, and a tendency to overvalue attractiveness," she says.

Professor Rossell says that previous understandings of BDD have been confusing for clinicians and patients alike. The medical community has a poor understanding of their condition and there are very limited treatments currently. Adding this [research](#) to the literature will help give clinicians an improved insight into how BDD develops and is maintained."

Professor Rossell has also found that there are difficulties in distinguishing between BDD-associated deficits and those associated with OCD or eating disorders. She says a coherent framework could help generate clear and consistent behavioral patterns to guide future treatments.

"BDD is not narcissism or vanity, it's a serious mental health disorder that we estimate affects about 2% of Australians and can lead to other

mental health disorders, uninformed cosmetic procedures or even suicide."

"We only have an emerging understanding of the disorder and there are limited treatment options currently available. Importantly, we have a major shortage of clinical staff who can understand and treat the disorder in existing [mental health services](#), so further research and resource development that uses these new findings associated with [visual processing](#) is a crucially urgent next step."

More information: Toni D. Pikoos et al, A hierarchy of visual processing deficits in body dysmorphic disorder: a conceptual review and empirical investigation, *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/13546805.2024.2326243](https://doi.org/10.1080/13546805.2024.2326243)

Gemma Virgili et al, A systematic review of visual processing in body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), *Psychiatry Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psychres.2024.116013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2024.116013)

Provided by Swinburne University of Technology

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