

Knocking on the right door

Overcoming the fear of body dysmorphic disorder: Psychological support for what some may think are cosmetic issues

MONTREAL, June 28, 2010 — Getting a nose job to treat a mental health problem? Whitening your teeth to overcome a severe anxiety disorder? These are not exactly what one would call effective therapies. Unfortunately, these procedures are what people with body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) turn to in order to deal with their body-related concerns. The excessive use of and dissatisfaction with cosmetic treatments along with obsessive rituals and social isolation is what the Fernand-Seguin Research Centre of Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital is hoping to fight with a novel therapy to treat BDD.

BDD is not a well-known disease: it is characterized by a significant dissatisfaction with one's appearance, particularly with perceived flaws. Included in the category of obsessive-compulsive disorders, this mental health problem leads to ritual behaviours and social isolation. Although any part of the body may become the subject of these obsessions, those who suffer from BDD most often focus on their skin, eyes, nose, teeth, buttocks, stomach, hair or chest.

Kieron O'Connor, Director of the Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Tic Disorder Studies Centre at Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital, said that people coping with BDD seek out in particular plastic surgeons, orthodontists and esthetic professionals to alleviate their suffering. "However, what they really need is psychological support and assistance," said Dr. O'Connor, who also works in the Department of Psychiatry at Université de Montréal and the Department of Psychology at Université du Québec en Outaouais

It is precisely to help people struggling with this problem that Kieron O'Connor and Annie Taillon, a doctoral student in psychology, have developed a specialized and innovative cognitive behavioural therapy in collaboration with their team at the Fernand-Seguin Research Centre of Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital. "Our preliminary results are very promising," explained Ms. Taillon. "We observed a clear decrease in appearance-related fixations among participants and a reduction by more than half in ritualized behaviours. Nearly one third of the depressive symptoms associated with these fixations also disappeared."

The benefits of this therapy are very real; however, too few people dare to ask for help. By the nature of their illness, these patients are reluctant to go out in public, making a visit to the clinic a significant hurdle.

Kimberly is a woman who has indeed benefited from the program. Speaking under an assumed name, she agreed to talk about the scope of her daily suffering: "I was ashamed of going out in public; I avoided all social activities. When I heard about this research project, it was a great relief for me. Finally, there was an explanation for my problems and, above all, a solution! This therapy helped me break free of my fixations and go back to work. I highly recommend it! "

Although BDD has remained in the shadows, this disease is thought to affect over 350,000 Canadians, all of whom experience the same suffering and fears and turn to the same rituals and cosmetic procedures to avoid addressing the real nature of their illness. Nevertheless, these vain attempts to solve their problems reflect a true desire to end their suffering. Hair salons, dental offices, cosmetic surgery centres or ... the psychologist's chair? For people with body dysmorphic disorder, knocking on the right door is the true challenge.

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)

- Over 350,000 Canadians are estimated to suffer from BDD
- Specific populations: students (2% to 13.1%); clients of cosmetic surgery clinics (6% to 20%)
- Affects both men and women
- Rates of suicidal ideation (57.8%) and suicide attempts (2.6%)

Preliminary findings

Specialized therapy for a period of 20 weeks

- Average reduction of 46% in appearance-related fixations
- Average reduction of 53% in ritualized behaviours associated with these fixations (e.g., looking in the mirror, applying makeup, skin picking at the location of a perceived imperfection, etc.)
- Average reduction of 34% in associated depressive symptoms

We are always looking for participants for this study. Anyone interested may contact Karine Bergeron at 514-251-4015, extension 3585.

Fernand-Seguin Research Centre

The Fernand-Seguin Research Centre of Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital, along with its partners, Hôpital Rivière-des-Prairies and the Institut Philippe-Pinel de Montréal, is recognized by the Fonds de la recherche en santé du Québec. At the forefront of knowledge, it is one of the largest venues for clinical research in mental health in Francophone Canada.

Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital

Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital provides specialized and ultraspecialized services in mental health. A leader in its field, it develops knowledge through research, teaching and assessment. Louis-H. Lafontaine Hospital is a member of the Université de Montréal's extensive network of excellence in health. www.hlhl.qc.ca

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