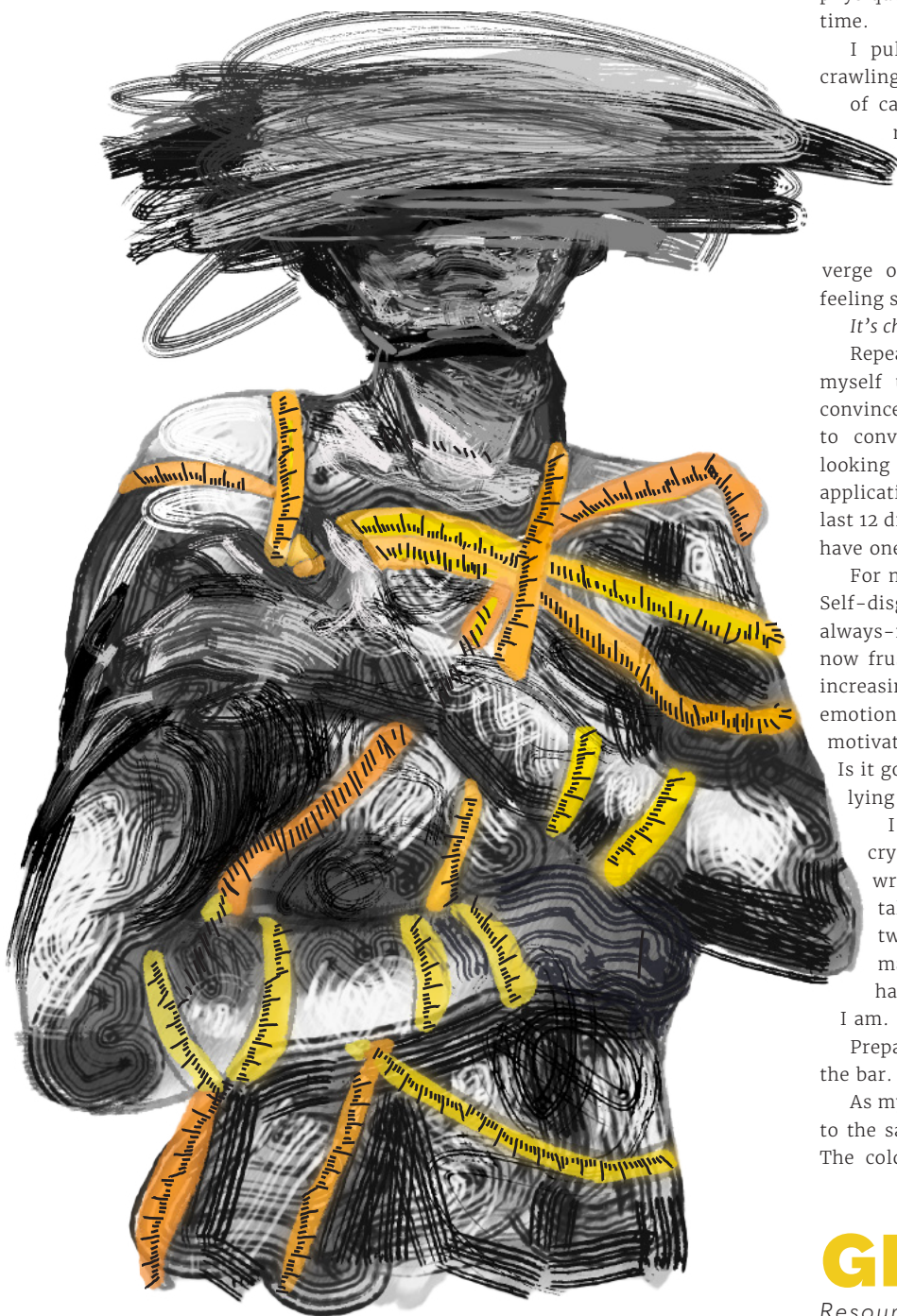


IN HIS HEAD



A staffer's story on how he struggled with and learned to manage his body dysmorphia



I PUT AN overflowing scoop of Ryse Baja Blast pre-workout containing 390 mg of caffeine into my Bucked Up shaker bottle and vigorously mix. I get into my car and crank the volume up, waking up my neighbors with the roaring bassline of “No Hands” by Waka Flocka Flame on my way to lift copious amounts of vulcanized rubber.

Yes, I’m going to the gym for the fifth time this week. But not to get stronger — it’s because I can’t bear the thought of my chest being small. All I can think about is looking like my idols on social media.

Seeing Shizzy Lifts, Alex Euebank or Max Taylor — all bodybuilding social media influencers — have amazing muscle mass while still retaining toned physiques makes me feel skinny and fat at the same time.

I pull into the gym parking lot. I feel ants crawling under my skin from the absurd amount of caffeine that the fitness industry convinced me would make me stronger. I throw Beats headphones on and crank up the screeching chords “Adele - Set Fire To The Rain [Hardstyle Remix]” on SoundCloud. With my eardrums on the verge of bleeding, I open the doors to Genesis feeling strong enough to flip a car over a skyscraper.

It’s chest day, it’s the best day.

Repeating that phrase in my head, I position myself under the incline-press barbell. I try to convince myself that I’m fine. *I’m OK.* I attempt to convince myself that I’m mentally sane by looking past the homework, projects and college applications I need to complete, hoping I forget the last 12 dreadful hours leading up to right now. I now have one task: lift weights until my arms fall off.

For motivation, I turn to my pent-up emotions. Self-disgust, elementary school insults about my always-reaching-for-another-cookie build and now frustration that my weight on the scale isn’t increasing. Instead of trying to talk about my emotions, I bunch them together and use them as motivation to help me lift more. Does it work? Yes. Is it good for me? I tell myself it is but I know I’m lying to myself.

I know I’m lying because I lay in my bed, crying because the number on the scale is wrong. I know I’m lying because instead of talking to someone about my feelings I shove two fingers down my throat because I ate too many calories. I know I’m lying because I have nine burn marks on my arm that tell me I am.

Preparing for my workout, I load 185 pounds on the bar.

As my hands grip the bar, I let my thumbs recede to the same side as my other fingers: suicide grip. The cold bar digs into my callused hands, and I

push the bar up and down until my arms shake. The weight, the stress, the pressure of trying to impress my parents, and working every waking hour to please them forces me to drop it on the safety bars.

I take a deep breath and then look in the mirror. I see someone who shoves a cup of Greek yogurt down his throat in the morning when he isn’t hungry. It can’t be me, *right?* Four McChickens and a half a gallon of milk for dinner. Someone who would rather strain his body from physical exercise rather than talking about his feelings. *Is this what I’ve become?*

Take off 20 lbs and repeat.

155 pounds: “*When you hit failure your workout has just begun,*” I hear Bodybuilder Ronnie Coleman say in my head.

135 pounds: “*Who’s gonna carry the boats? Or the logs?*” Navy Seal David Goggins yells in my ears.

105 pounds: “*The only place to go from failure is to win,*” Bodybuilder Tom Platz tells me as I have to drop the bar on the floor to get it off me.

My chest is on fire, there’s not a single drop of strength left in me.

I look in the mirror again, and I see myself.

I see a person who has gained 20 pounds of muscle in the last year but has gone crazy while doing so.

It felt like I was in a spiral. I hated the way I looked, ate because I hated the way I looked and then tortured my body with excessive workouts because I hated what I ate — I couldn’t escape. I would spend hours looking in the mirror scanning my skin for any remnants of muscle growth, even rice-grain-sized stretch marks, anything to show progress.

I was surrounded by media that promotes completely unrealistic bodies that are made from high doses of steroids. How could my poorly-mixed protein shake mixes compete with that?

At some point between deciding to lose some weight and eating two Chipotle burritos for dinner, the gym became not just a fitness tool, but an addiction. No matter what I tried I couldn’t get away from it. My every thought would be a new workout to do or which protein powder I should buy next. I couldn’t separate life from the gym.

I’d delete Tik Tok, then I’d scroll through Instagram Reels. I’d delete Instagram, then I’d watch YouTube shorts. I’d delete YouTube, and then I’d see the note in my Notes app telling me my weight down to the ounce for the past four months. No matter what I did, I couldn’t escape the thought that I should be working out at every moment of the day.

I still lift any chance I get and drink energy drinks, but ultimately, I know stepping back from the gym grind society and its unrealistic body standards is what’s most healthy.

GET HELP

Resources to help with BDD

ocdaction.org.uk/resources/bdd-self-help-resources