

Connecting Minds

Season 1 Episode 1 : Body Image Show Notes

Useful links:

Bodywhys Ireland: <https://www.bodywhys.ie/>

Psychological Society of Ireland: <https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/>

PSI Special Interest Group in Eating Disorders: <https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/groups/Special-Interest-Group-in-Eating-Disorders->

USI Mental Health Website: <https://mentalhealth.usi.ie/>

USI Mental Health Social Media: <https://twitter.com/MentalHealthUSI>

Sources of Help & Support for your mental health: <https://mentalhealth.usi.ie/i-need-help/help-in-a-mental-health-emergency/>

National Office for Suicide Prevention: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/nosp/>

Tue, 4/20 12:01PM • 29:09

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

eating disorder, robyn, people, disorders, eating, laura, person, disordered eating, poor body image, body, struggling, friends, realise, college, males, habits, home, thoughts, stigma, body image issues

SPEAKERS

Laura Walsh, Sarah Hughes, Robyn Barlow

Sarah Hughes 00:11

You're listening to connecting minds, the student mental health podcast, brought to you by the Union of Students in Ireland. Hello, and welcome to season one, episode one of connecting minds. I'm your host, Sarah Hughes. I'm very excited to bring you this brand new podcast. Today we're going to be talking about body image and eating disorders. And I'm delighted to welcome Laura Walsh and Robyn Barlow as our guests to talk to us today. Laura is masters student studying psychology and has been a Youth Advisory Panel member for Bodywhys since 2019. She's presented on a few Bodywhys panel webinars this year and hopes to contribute positively to body image and eating disorder awareness. Robin is a member of the Psychological Society of Ireland and a member of the PSI special interest group in eating disorders. Robyn completed her undergrad in education and psychology in Mary Immaculate College, and is currently completing her MSc in clinical and developmental neuropsychology in England, where her master's dissertation research focuses on disordered eating and autistic traits in males. You're both very welcome to the podcast. Thank you so much for coming along today.

Laura Walsh 01:15

Thank you,

Sarah Hughes 01:17

Laura can no worries. Laura, can you tell me a bit more about the work that you do with the Youth Advisory Panel for Bodywhys?

Laura Walsh 01:25

Yeah, no problem. So I joined in 2019, because I kind of wanted to get more involved with anything to do with psychology, I've been really kind of interested in raising positive body image around, especially in young girls in Ireland. So I joined Bodywhys and what we do is we help Bodywhys come up with tailored webinars and workshops and media for young people around Ireland, and we kind of work on what best wording to use for those young people. And so for example, we worked on creating a new website, with Fiona Flynn, who's the development officer for the panel in Bodywhys. We worked with her to create various different leaflets, and kind of resources for young people in Ireland. And we created a whole new website for that, and I spoke on that platform. And then we did a few other webinars as well. So we've kind of just been trying to positively influence body image and help young people kind of realise that their their body shouldn't be as big of an issue as they make it.

Sarah Hughes 02:41

Fantastic. I think it's really important that there is that youth input into any work that affects youth. And so I think it's really fantastic that Bodywhys has that Youth Advisory Panel. Robyn, can you tell us a bit more about your research that you're doing at the moment?

Robyn Barlow 02:56

Yeah, of course. So for my research, like you mentioned at the start, I'm looking at autistic traits and disordered eating patterns of disordered eating and behaviour, specifically in males. And so the reason kind of why I want to look at it in males is that eating disorders are typically associated with females. But when you look at the research, it actually says that it's because there's a stigma surrounding it, that males do you know, you can't have an eating disorder if you're male, or it's more to do with muscles, rather than weight loss and things like that. That's why I wanted to look at it. And then I suppose, because my master's is in neuropsychology, that's where the autism is coming in. So, or the autistic traits. So just to see if there's a relationship between higher autistic traits and patterns of disordered eating.

Sarah Hughes 03:48

Yeah, I think that's there's two key parts there. I mean, you're absolutely right, there is such a stigma specifically relating to meals, and eating disorders. And then as you say, there's that additional layer if the person also is on the autistic spectrum as well. And so it sounds like it's a really fascinating piece of research that you're doing. And so we're here today, largely to talk about body image and eating disorders. And I wondered if you guys had thoughts on what kind of things can impact on our body image?

Laura Walsh 04:20

Well, I definitely think the media is a big play. And that's one thing that Bodwhys has been discussing a lot over the past few months and especially more photo related media, such as Instagram, and even before Instagram became a thing the media such as magazines, etc. Like we've all seen the ones where they talk about different celebrities' weight loss or weight gain, and they're all on the front cover saying look at this horrible person with their stomach out on a beach or something like that. And now it's just kind of transformed over to Instagram and platforms like that. And I think a lot of commentary on those websites can definitely lead to a more negative body image.

Robyn Barlow 04:59

Yeah, and I think then kind of how you perceive yourself as a person how you think your body looks. So, we've all at some point, you know, we've been our worst enemy when it comes to our bodies, and we can tend to focus on what we might call our flaws. And this negative kind of glass half full view of ourselves will then influence our self talk. So like the thoughts that we have in our head, and then just end up completely over focusing on these flaws and not realising the amazing things that our body's doing. Like the functions every single day that our bodies actually do for us. And then kind of confidence wise, depending on how confident you are, you might compare yourself to your peers, or your idols or kind of social media is huge at the moment. So influencers and, and then that will impact on how you see your body in comparison to theirs as well. So for like the models, for example, or on Instagram, and you can airbrush pictures, you can even airbrush and filter videos, so those people don't even look like themselves. So the whole down the rabbit hole of comparison can definitely impact your body image.

Sarah Hughes 06:07

I think that's you touch on some really interesting points there both of you both in terms of how it can be something internal to yourself and out in the world out there as well. And then also, Laura how you kind of reflect on how, you know, it's this changing with the times thing, whereas it used to be magazines, and now everybody's online, it's kind of followed us there. And even though there is that kind of discussion now about, you know, everybody knows the filters are a thing and all that kind of thing, it still has followed us into that online space. And for somebody who might have poor body image, but maybe listening to this, they're not really sure how that is coming out in their day to day lives. Can you give maybe some examples as to how that might have an effect on somebody if they do have poor body image?

06:57

Yeah, I think going back to what I said about how you need to take a step back and realise the things that our bodies actually do for us. So we wake up every morning, we walk, we go to college, we use our brain to learn we interact, communicate with our friends, join sports, we learn musical instruments, languages, how to use software. And these are all really hard things to do. And they're all things that our body does for us, irrespective of how our body looks. So kind of what I want to really drive home though is that when you're like 30, 40, 50, 60 years old, right? And someone says to you, tell me tell me about your college experience, you're not going to turn around to them and say, Oh, well, I successfully managed to stay UK size 12 or I successfully managed to stay in my Levi's. You know, you're gonna remember the laughs that you had with your friends, the memories, like you might even remember,

potentially something you learned in your course. Right? If you're lucky, but just really try not to let the fact you had to buy a bigger pair of jeans maybe or you your biceps weren't big enough or you had to double chain when you laughed. Try not to let them ruin this opportunity that your college years actually give you. Because you just come away from college with the best memories and I'm sure I'm not just speaking for myself here either.

Laura Walsh 08:17

Oh, yeah, I think that's really important. And I think that especially now, since college is online, people might be more self image aware. And because we're constantly looking at our face, through Zoom, all the time, it can kind of be a bit, um, traumatising, at times just to keep looking at yourself the whole time because you're kind of picking out your flaws every little bit. And what it's yeah, just to bring home what Robyn said like we're not going to remember in a few years that we had, like a double chin during Zoom. You're not gonna really the remember that. And it's important to kind of take home, the good parts about college and not nit pick up the slight defaults we may have because that's what makes everyone interesting and not if we were all the same. It's like, kind of boring.

Sarah Hughes 09:18

Those are absolutely true points. And I think you pick up on a good point, Laura, where you're saying, because we're all online now we're kind of we're staring at our own faces all day long when we're in zoom classes or when we're online. And I think, you know, it can be quite, it's not easy, but it can be a thing that happens when you're in the moment of feeling a negative way about yourself. It can feel like it's the most important thing in the world. And it can be hard to get that kind of that perspective about how like you say how you looked in that zoom call or on that night out isn't really going to be the big thing that you look back on, as you say 10, 20, 30 years down the line. Do you think that COVID has impacted these issues in any particular way for people?

Laura Walsh 10:09

Well, I think like, it's definitely impacted kind of our self perceptions because we're constantly staring at each other. And especially if you're having a conversation with your friend in real life, you wouldn't be looking at yourself. But over them, it's kind of like you're constantly staring at a mirror 24/7 hours of the day, which we wouldn't normally do. And we kind of, we will probably notice our features a lot more from this constant staring at ourselves. While if I was just having a conversation with my friends in the coffee shop, I'm not going to be looking at my details. So definitely does have an impact on probably on like college students as well, maybe even first year students where they haven't even gotten a chance to interact with people in their own peer group, em, in the normal circumstance, it might be harder for them.

Robyn Barlow 11:03

Yeah, and I think change of routine is a big one as well. So we were all kind of just taken aback. And we were all sent home from college this time last year, actually. So for people who really like routine in their lives, COVID is just totally turned that on its head. So for example, gyms have closed, restrictions on outdoor movement, when you're if you're in lockdown, you're you're moving less anyway. And then add on to what we were seeing mostly in lockdown one about people doing all these home workouts and baking all the time and getting so many steps in every day and seemingly coping absolutely fine.

But it's like with social media, you're only seeing a fraction of their day a fraction of their lives. And you're most likely not seeing the influencers or the celebrities or even your friends who maybe aren't putting up when they're struggling, for example, because it's hard to be vulnerable like that, especially. So you're just seeing the fraction, the A1 part of their day. So I think that's definitely affecting people.

Sarah Hughes 12:12

Yeah, I think our worlds have definitely gotten a lot smaller because of COVID. And I think as well, Robyn, what you mentioned about, you know, change in routine is a really big factor as well, I mean, we know, you know, the research tells us that the the age group that tend to be students, at third level are the group that are at the kind of the peak age for developing eating disorders. And part of that is because there's that transition either just from school into college, but also maybe living out of home for the first time having to manage their whole lives by themselves for the first time. So add in to that the changes brought about by COVID, it's, it's even more heightened. And so we know that there are a lot of people who have poor body image issues, or maybe don't have the greatest relationship with food, but it wouldn't necessarily be at the level where they could be diagnosed with an eating disorder. Now, that's not to say they're not, you know, at risk for that. But can you kind of talk us through both of you if you can, em, you know, what the relationship is between body image and disordered eating or eating disorders, and when it might tip into that more kind of clinical diagnosis stage.

Robyn Barlow 13:29

Yeah, and so I think, like I was saying earlier, how you perceive your body, or how you think your body looks, can influence your subsequent behaviours. So for an example, if you're planning on going out on a Monday night, and for whatever reason, you don't think you look great in your outfit, or your shirts not sitting in the right way or anything, and it ruins your night for some reason, or if you don't go out on that night because of how you think you look, and all that. And then if you're planning on going out on, say, the Thursday night, and you might, the days before Thursday, you might change your behaviours. So you might cut back on food intake, water intake, you might increase your exercise, you might go to the gym, on the day, they're planning on going out with the thought that in your head, this will make you look better on on the Thursday night. So then, what this can do then is it might become a habit. And then if people compliment you, or they say, Oh, you look great, you know you are just looking, you're glowing, right? This will encourage and then maintain those unhealthy behaviours that you did. So you keep doing them. And then this can lead to like a negative pattern of behaviour and potentially it can lead to disordered eating. And then I think where it comes becomes to be a clinical eating disorder or a diagnosable eating disorder is when kind of say for anorexia, it's like severe restriction, intense fear of, of gaining weight. You don't realise how serious your low weight is, and then there's also bulimia, so that's where you might binge eat, like, eat a lot of food at a time. But then you do these compensatory behaviours. So you might purge or use laxatives, or do excessive exercise. And then probably the third most common one is binge eating disorder. So again, you have these bingeing periods. But instead of the compensatory behaviours, you just have this overwhelming sense of guilt. And just disgust in yourself that oh, my goodness, I can't believe I just did that. So there is a fine line between the bad habits that you're developing and then, you know, developing an eating disorder, I think like you said earlier adolescence and kind of the college age/ young adult is, is the prime age for developing these habits.

Laura Walsh 15:45

Yeah, and I think like that tipping point definitely comes in if there's no like early intervention, like if that person is just allowed to do those habits, like first, they might cut down by a certain amount, and then they see that it's working. And it's like, it's helping, like they get this little bit of joy from that result. So they'll start to cut down more and do the same habits but more extreme. And if no one around them notices that or if they don't seek notice that change as a bad thing in itself, it will just get worse. So definitely, early intervention is definitely a good help. The person not may not be diagnosed with an eating disorder, per se. But if that early intervention doesn't come. They probably would be within the next while.

Sarah Hughes 16:36

Yeah, I think it's definitely something that you know, you don't suddenly just wake up one day where you didn't have an eating disorder yesterday and now today you have one, it's definitely something that kind of, it kind of evolves over time. And I think one of one of the key difficulties with people accessing help early, as you say, Laura, is that you do initially get that sort of, oh, people are complimenting me, they tell me I look better. So therefore I feel better. So this feels like it's a good thing, and not a bad thing. But then Robyn, as you say, because it becomes a habit, it keeps going on and on, and becomes more negative over time. And I think, you know, it's so embedded in our society, you know, things like there's constantly, you know, you see ads for gym memberships, even now at home, you know, do you sign up to this at home fitness regime? Now is the time to get into shape before summer as if there's any issue with the shape that anybody currently is. And so, would you Laura, I want to address this particularly to you, because you're involved with Bodywhys, if somebody had concerns and they got in touch with Bodywhys, what, how might that go for them?

Laura Walsh 17:49

Bodywhys would have a lot of support groups for people that are have body image concerns, or people who have been diagnosed with eating disorders, a lot of them are online support groups and chat groups, that they can just talk to other people that are kind of feeling a similar way to them, but in a supportive environment where there is someone else there to monitor the chat and make sure it's not negative and a lot of positive. And also, I think they're great information service where if the person did need more help than what Bodywhys could give, they can direct them in a way so that they can get the better help.

Sarah Hughes 18:25

Yeah, and I do know that Bodywhys have recently relaunched their website. So they do have lots of new resources up there. And I know they also have some good stuff on you know, if you think maybe a friend or a family member is somebody you're concerned about around this area, you know, with advice on maybe how they can approach the conversation with them, and that and because I think that oftentimes it's it's the people around the person that maybe notices that there might be something going on before the person themselves, maybe realises that it's, it's at that kind of problematic end of things.

Laura Walsh 18:57

Yeah, definitely. And it's how you word that to the person as well. Because if the person's in that stage where they feel quite good about their their results, they might be quite annoyed at the fact that

someone's trying to get in and kind of ruin that for them. And so I guess the resources are good in the way where you can, you can find the right thing to say, without making the person feel bad at the same time.

Sarah Hughes 19:24

Absolutely. And Robyn, would you have any other tips in terms of what somebody could do if they are somebody they know might be impacted by either poor body image or eating disorder issues?

Robyn Barlow 19:37

I think personally, having a solid friend group is really important. So an open conversation, open dialogue between your friends and if you notice anything different in the behaviours of your friends, you know, reach out to them, ask them are they okay? Give them every opportunity to come to you and say, Look, you know, I'm kind of struggling with my weight or I'm, I'm really finding it hard to control x, y and z. So that kind of as a friend, but also, if you're the person that's struggling with disordered eating, or a potential eating disorder, again, use your friends, it's okay to be vulnerable and reach out and ask for help. You know, there's a reason that there's psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, it's because people need help. So there's, it comes back to the stigma, again, around mental health, like, it's like with physical health, if you'd a broken leg, you go to the doctor, if you're having trouble with your mental health, do something about it, definitely. Because if it if it goes untreated, or if you just kind of push it under the carpet, it will get worse. 100%. So definitely reach out and ask for help.

Sarah Hughes 20:43

Yeah, and I think it's important, particularly, for students to remember, we understand that sometimes certain forms of help can involve having to pay for it, which students might struggle a bit with campus college, is college campus services are there to help you there's the campus GPs, the nurse, the on campus counselling services, they might not be specialised to deal with eating disorders, but they can certainly provide you with initial support and help you figure out the the best support that's available for you. And I know that this, this area, in particular is an area that, like you said, there is a lot of stigma around it. And a lot of that comes from there being myths or misunderstandings about the general area, are there any of those in particular that you wish you'd really, really wish could be dispelled?

Laura Walsh 21:34

Well, some myths are that, like, only slim people are the ones with the eating disorders, and it's not, like tailored to every kind of weight. Whereas you never know, by someone's size, whether they're struggling with an eating disorder or not, or whether they're struggling with body image issues or not. Like it's not down to weight. And I think that's one myth we definitely kind of have to get rid of. And another thing is that Oh, like, why, why can't people just eat normally, if they have an eating disorder it's a mental illness, it's not something you can easily get over it by just eating, that is just one part of a very long journey. It's a lot of mental health, as well. And I think they're kind of two myths that are very still ingrained in society. And I think it's why, there's a lot of stigma around it, because they'll see someone and they'll think they look like normal size. Why are they talking about body image struggles? Or they might see, like, a quite fit looking person, or slim model style looking person? And they'll be like, Why do that? Why does that person? Why is that person speaking out about their body image issues? Like,

whereas it's, it's not tailored to one body size, anyone can have body image issues, and anyone can have an eating disorder.

Robyn Barlow 22:58

Yeah, and I think that goes for gender as well, or biological sex, I think that it's not just females, males also struggle with eating. And that's something that we have to wrap our head around and males have to, you know, accept that they can also have eating disorders and disordered eating. But as well, I think some people who don't understand what it is, is that they think it's just a form of attention seeking. And do you know, for some people who restrict their eating or, or have an eating disorder, they engage in these behaviours, because they hate attention, or because they have anxiety around weight and body image. And like Laura said, there's so much more going on, you know, in their in their heads and psychologically, that it's not as simple as as attention seeking. It's, you know, it's I think it's kind of a cruel thing to say that people with eating disorders are just attention seeking.

Laura Walsh 23:53

Yeah, I think a lot of the way, a lot of the time, it's more of a form of coping, rather than a form of attention seeking, they kind of just, they, they usually have a lot of stuff going on in their life that they don't know how to deal with. And the only thing they can control is the food.

Sarah Hughes 24:11

Yeah, I think those are some really, really kind of prevalent myths, and that you hear time and time again. And I think, if people understood, like you're saying, what's really going on when people have these these issues that, you know, more people would probably be open to reaching out for help when they're struggling. And so just to finish up, I have two final questions that we'll be asking everybody who comes on the podcast. And the first one is what is the one thing that you wish all students knew about body image disordered eating eating disorders?

Robyn Barlow 24:46

I think for me, like coming from the psychology side. I'd love for everybody to know that recovery is possible. And just because you're thinking of your body negatively now or you're not happy with how you're looking now doesn't mean you, you'll never be happy. And I think that you can get better and you will get better. And there's so many amazing people out there who speak about their journey to recovery. So clearly, it is absolutely possible.

Laura Walsh 25:16

Yeah, I'd definitely have to say that I agree with Robyn there, the recovery is definitely possible, and you're not going to have those thoughts forever, it's not going to be someday, and you're not going to have to struggle with your weight and think about food and think about all those and fitness and getting in the same routine every day. Like, it's not going to be your life, that's not going to be the be all and end all like you are going to end up living a life without those thoughts.

Sarah Hughes 25:43

I think that's a really, really good message to put out there. Because I think particularly when students are suffering or whenever anybody is suffering, the fear is this is how it's going to be forever. And

where, and particularly with an eating disorder, With the right help, and with the right support, absolutely, recovery is possible. And then finally, what is your own main form or your preferred form of self care?

Laura Walsh 26:09

I have a lot depends kind of on the day, like I have a list of stuff where I would definitely like I have a list of stuff. And I love to watch Disney Plus, like that is my go to like any form of like Wanda Vision and all the Marvel things are just like great for my self care whereas if I'm looking for something a bit more calming, I tend to do a lot of colouring because while it keeps my hands active, doing something, and it keeps kind of my mind clear, and I can actually focus on thoughts that I'm having, like kind of it just depends on the day. And it depends on whether I want something a bit more mind kind of, to like, focus less on my thoughts or focus more on my thoughts. So if I want to focus less, I kind of go towards the tv shows and the Marvel. If I want to focus more on my thoughts, I go to something more like calming, like colouring or playing on my Nintendo Switch or to something a bit more chill.

Robyn Barlow 27:12

I think for me, I am trying to do, for lent, I'm trying to do more steps. So I started by listening to different podcasts. And then from podcasts, I bought some books from people who are guests on the different podcasts that I listened to. So kind of self development books and podcasts and helping me to learn about me and who I am and learning to understand my behaviours because I have to live with myself for the rest of my life. So I may as well understand myself.

Laura Walsh 27:45

They are both Sorry, I think self care is so tailored. But there are so many different options out there for each person.

Sarah Hughes 27:54

Yeah, absolutely. I agree. And I think those that's demonstrated between what you've both said, like you've both said, things that work for each for each of you, but are quite different at the same time. Well, Laura, Robyn, thank you so much for coming along. And being part of our very first episode. I really appreciate it. I think you've given us some really great insights into the whole area of body image and eating disorders and all of that. So thank you so much for coming along.

Laura Walsh 28:20

No problem. Thank you.

Robyn Barlow 28:21

Thank you.

Sarah Hughes 28:23

So thank you for listening to today's episode. Connecting Minds is made possible thanks to funding from the National Office for suicide prevention. If you have any comments or questions about today's episode, the podcast or the work USI are doing on student mental health, please feel free to contact us details of how to do so are available in the show notes. sources of support are also included in the

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