This book describes a form of manualised therapy for working with people who fit the diagnostic criteria for Body Dysmorphic Disorder. The manual was constructed by the three authors, all of them highly knowledgeable in the field, and also experienced therapists, and based on an uncontrolled pilot study on 12 individuals, that they had carried out (Wilhelm, et al., 2011), followed up by a single randomised controlled trial (RCT) (Wilhelm, et al., 2014).

Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) is quite a difficult disorder to ‘treat’ and naturally, as a guide to practice, this is not a smooth and easy read, even though, according to the authors, it is designed for therapists with at least one year of general psychotherapy experience and additional familiarity with Aaron Beck’s type of CBT (Beck, 1995, 2011). The results of their pilot study were encouraging, especially with regard to behavioural outcomes, although the participants’ BDD-related beliefs did not change significantly.

One could therefore argue that, at this stage of research and development, it was rather premature to publish a manual that is highly prescriptive and intended for relatively novice therapists. For example, it was not (and is still not) known which components in their modular approach are effective. In any case, one wonders whether the manual represents how the authors really practiced, or whether it was a rational reconstruction of their practice. Some of their recommendations are contradictory, for instance, to use the “flexible, flowing techniques of motivational interviewing” when resistance is encountered, but – at the same time – to follow the highly structured agenda-setting ethos of cognitive therapy, which allows so many minutes for each listed activity. The authors also advise against lecturing and overt persuasion, but their “educational module” looks exactly like lecturing to me, and the examples they provide of snippets of dialogue to illustrate their techniques seem rather artificial and unconvincing.

The conceptual model of BDD that the authors adopt is essentially that it is just the result of holding distorted beliefs; they are less interested in the origins, or why these beliefs persist. The core therapeutic approach is therefore to use a compilation of: CBT (cognitive-behavioural) techniques; exposure to avoided situations; prevention of repetitive rituals; mindfulness practice; and perceptual re-training. The criterion for success is conservative; a 30% reduction in ‘symptoms’ – maintained for 6 months – is counted as a successful response.

In the more recent study (Wilhelm et al., 2014), twenty-two sessions of manualised therapy provided by non-expert (but supervised) therapists was compared with a 12-week (delayed therapy) waiting list control group. Although at the 12-week point, the therapy group was not significantly better off than the control group, at the completion of therapy over 80% of the therapy group had reached the 30% reduction of symptoms criterion, and
they then maintained their improvement for the required six months.

As the authors note, the intensive training and expert supervision would be hard to replicate in any community setting. This is certainly my impression, having worked with a small number of clients who would meet such BDD diagnostic criteria. The manual is undoubtedly a useful source of knowledge about the problem and a valuable pointer to techniques that can be helpful. It is liberally supplied with worksheets, evaluation tools, and other information. For this reason, it is probably a worthwhile purchase for anyone taking a serious interest in the field. However, in non-expert hands and without supervision, I am doubtful that the success achieved by the authors could be matched.

References

Reviewer
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The Emergence of Somatic Psychology and Bodymind Therapy: Critical Theory and Practice in Psychology and the Human Sciences
Barnaby B. Barratt

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From the cover: “Somatic psychology and bodymind therapy examine the body and the mind as a whole, emphasising the reciprocal relationships between the two. This branch of psychotherapy focuses on the body, body language, emotional expression, psychosomatics, and sexuality. Somatic psychology is challenging the contemporary scene, shaking up our understanding of what it means to be human and how to heal human suffering. This book guides us to consider what life might be like when we relinquish the mind/body dichotomy. For example, what therapy means when we acknowledge the functioning of memory in every tissue of our embodiment.

Rooted in the ancient holistic disciplines or energy sciences, and becoming established in the work of early psychodynamic pioneers, this new discipline, with the current growth of its bodymind methodologies, draws from phenomenological philosophies, depth psychologies, and from the latest neuroscience. This unique text explores both the remarkable history and the contemporary burgeoning of somatic psychology, and addresses the theoretical challenges that must be met if it is to realize its impressive potential.”