

LOOK Feature

body dysmorphia for years. "A couple of years into our relationship, Ben was adamant that he had gained lots of weight. I hadn't noticed anything, but he became suddenly self-conscious about what he wore. He'd take his clothes off at night and look in the mirror for ages. 'Does my face look fat at the moment?' he'd ask. I was so worried by his negativity. He was the slimmest guy I'd ever been with, and yet he'd start new diets all the time. Being hungry makes him a bit tetchy, and I have to spend ages reassuring him that he looks good if we're going out. He thinks it's because he was overweight when he was younger, but he says he still got attention from girls then, so I can't see what the issue is."

But experts say it isn't as simple as acknowledging you're attractive, as the roots of BDD lie in perfectionism. "You obsess about an aspect of your body excessively and it provokes certain behaviours," Dr Sinclair explains. "For example – having plastic surgery, hitting the gym to bulk up or to slim down, avoiding food or spending hours in front of the mirror. In severe cases, sufferers can't even leave the house. It's a vicious circle because 'perfect' doesn't exist, so you can never win."

And it's not just our boyfriends who are affected. Sam Claflin, who plays pretty-much-naked Finnick Odair in *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*, recently brought male BDD some much-needed publicity when he revealed that he worries about his appearance all the time. "I'm seriously insecure about my body," the super-



Sam Claflin with new wife Laura Haddock

"There's an element of wanting to be Ryan Gosling with a perfect six-pack"

toned actor admitted. "I'm not someone who'll take my top off on the beach. I'll wear a vest. My wife [actress Laura Haddock] calls me manorexic. I do seriously have issues. She thinks I'm getting so skinny, but I look at myself and think I'm getting fat. It's the way the Hollywood [ideal] is thrown at you. There's an element of wanting to be Ryan Gosling with a perfect six-pack."

And Dr Sinclair isn't surprised. "You'll see men in adverts with perfect

bodies all the time," he explains. "There's David Beckham in his underpants and the message is: 'If you look like this you'll be successful.' BDD sufferers will follow certain steps to try and look this way, but when results don't happen immediately, they see themselves as a failure and the cycle starts again."

It's scary stuff, and Dr Sinclair explains that these anxieties come from deep-rooted feelings of low worth and fears of rejection. "BDD sufferers fixate on



Sam sans shirt as Finnick in *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire*



If you suspect someone might be suffering from body dysmorphia, visit Nhs.uk/conditions/body-dysmorphia



Writer Katie with boyfriend Ben, who she believes suffers from BDD

Does Your Man Have BDD?

If somebody you know is showing multiple symptoms (not just one) then they might be suffering from body dysmorphia:

- 1 Worrying more than normal about a minor problem.
- 2 Asking for constant reassurance, and *always* attending the gym.
- 3 Avoiding having photos taken, and making excuses not to go out.
- 4 Wearing heavy make-up (yes, even men).
- 5 Constantly covering up and trying to hide the thing they're worried about (e.g. wearing baggy clothes).

their bodies to fix their self-esteem without dealing with the core issues, and relationships can suffer," he says.

And Katie is well aware of that. "Ben looks exactly the same as he did when we first met, but these days he is so insecure that he's started going to the gym constantly, and even started the 5:2 diet. He talks about fasting all the time, and maintains that it fits in with his lifestyle perfectly. That may be, but it doesn't really fit in with mine. And it hasn't changed anything anyway – he still looks amazing and he's still unaware of it. When we go on holiday, he's always really reluctant to take his shirt off around the pool. I spend the rest of the day pointing out people who are bigger than him in the hope that he'll get some perspective."

The good news is BDD is treatable. Dr Sinclair suggests CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) and ACT (acceptance and commitment therapy) to help alleviate the symptoms. Sufferers can learn how to change their thinking patterns and concentrate on things they value to raise their self-esteem and get rid of unrealistic views of 'perfection'. As Katie says: "I just need Ben to understand that he's perfect as he is."