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Building confidence in social situations: A guide for people living with a skin condition, including scars



We live in a world where appearance is highly valued. Yet is it really the most important thing to us in our friendships and our relationships? The answer to this is almost certainly not. We are much more likely to value care, love, support, having fun and shared experiences. However, in a world where the media is obsessed with the way people look, it is understandable that we all may worry about our appearance at times.

The aim of this booklet is to help people with a visible skin condition and / or scar to feel more confident in social situations. This may involve learning to deal with your thoughts about the way you look, but also ways to manage the reactions of others.

We hope you find it useful and we will value any feedback you give us.

Andrew Thompson and Madeline Pasterfield

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Acknowledgements

Elizabeth Allen, trustee and principal tutor (1996) for the British Association of Skin Camouflage; author of *Cover, the principles and art of para-medical skin camouflage* (published 2010) as well as many published articles on this specialism on behalf of the charity.

Kerry Montgomery, Psychological Wellbeing Practitioner (IAPT).

Krycia Saul, Qualified Camouflage Practitioner, graduate and member of the British Association of Skin Camouflage.

Many thanks to those above for comments made on a previous draft of the leaflet.



Building confidence in social situations: A guide for people with a skin condition, including scars.

Introduction

Living with a skin condition can affect how confident a person feels in social situations. These situations could include going to the pub with friends, going to the local shop or when at work. However, this is not always the case and, though it can take time, many people are confident and comfortable around others. Many have learnt specific ways of dealing with the reactions of other people and have also learnt how to cope with their own feelings. In this booklet we'll share some of those techniques.

Whilst many people may not notice or comment on a skin condition or scar, unfortunately some can be rude and say hurtful things, ask personal questions or simply stare. We also know that people with a visible skin condition and / or scar may become worried about what others might think. This can cause anxiety, which may lead them to avoid social situations.

Meet Anna.... We will follow Anna's story throughout this booklet to illustrate some of the information and suggestions we make:

Anna is a 34 year old woman who has Vitiligo which affects her face and hands. She was bullied at school and since then has always worried about what others think about her appearance. This has affected how confident she feels in social situations, particularly when meeting new people. Anna has a few friends from school, but often finds excuses for not going out with them. Until recently she worked as an administrator for a small business, which suited her, as she did not have to meet many people. However, the business went bankrupt so she lost her job. Since then Anna has spent more time at home. She is feeling more and more nervous about being around other people, which is affecting her confidence in finding a new job.

The following section describes how, if a person worries about what others think of their appearance, this can lead them to feel less confident in social situations. It is possible to overcome such fears and to become more confident as the quotes below show. It is not always easy to do this and that's why we are sharing some techniques that can help with this.

"I don't feel no different, I know I might look different...I don't let it bother me, I never have done, I can't turn clock back...you've got to live with what you've got, I'm still here alive and kicking"

"You've got the scars, you're still the same person, I mean it never stopped me doing any{thing}..... I went to college, had boyfriends like we all do"

Anonymous quotes provided by people living with visible scarring (from Thompson, A. R., & Broom, L. (2009). Positively managing intrusive reactions to disfigurement: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of naturalistic coping. Diversity in Health & Care, 6, 171-180)



Section 1: Understanding worry about appearance and how loss of social confidence develops

When a person is anxious they react in four main ways. They have *physical reactions*, *negative feelings*, *worrying thoughts*, and these influence their *behaviour* and how they respond. Some typical reactions are described below:

Physical reactions – e.g. blushing, heart racing, sweating, shaking, butterflies in stomach, dry mouth.

Feelings – e.g. embarrassed, anxious, nervous

Thoughts – e.g. “Everyone will stare at me”, “people will laugh at me / talk about me”, “I won’t know what to say to people”, “My skin condition is really obvious”.

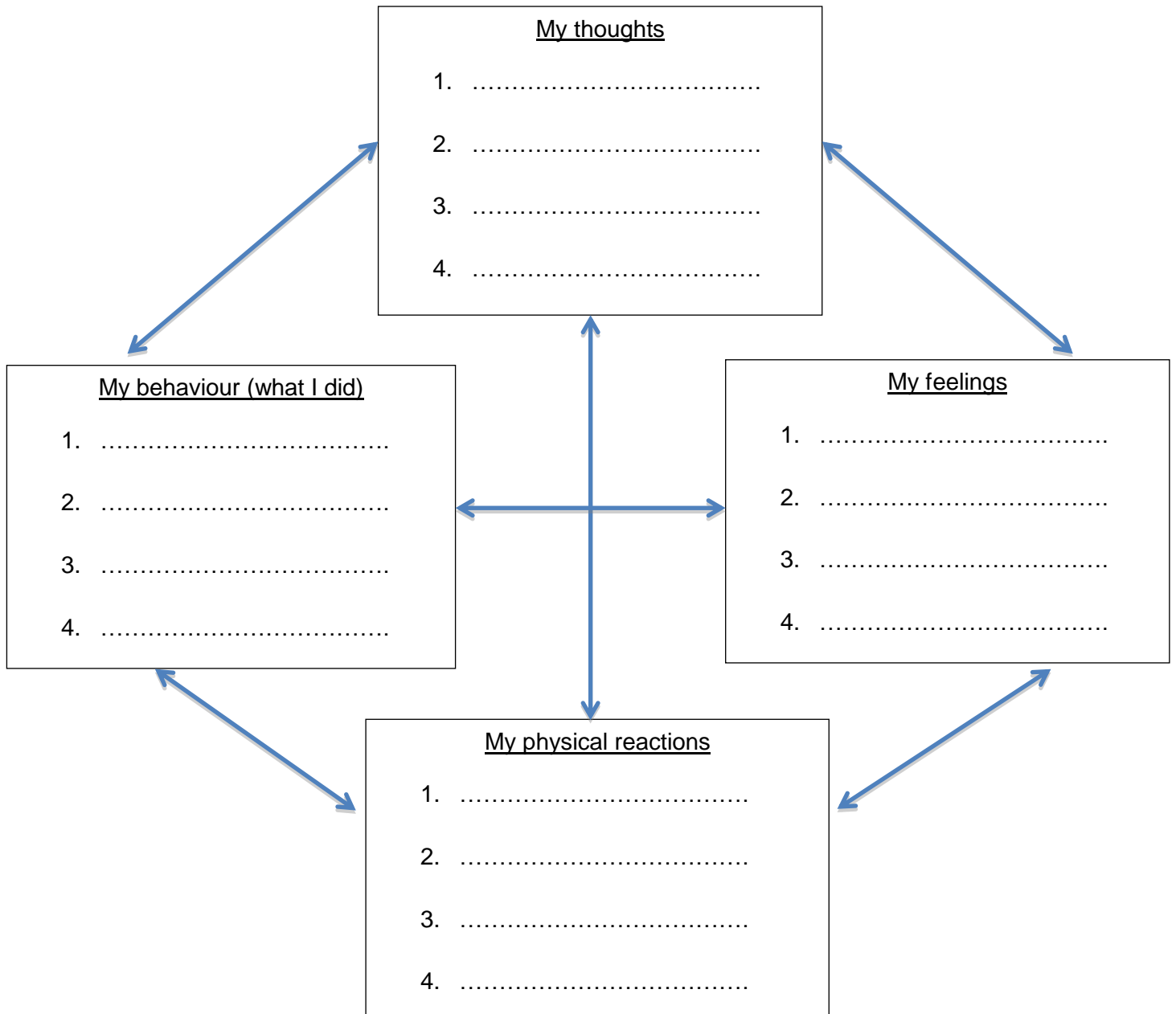
Behaviour – e.g. avoiding social situations, keeping quiet and avoiding conversation, concealing the condition.

Everyone is different so it is helpful to get to know your own specific thoughts, feelings, reactions, and behaviour (or coping styles). Our reactions and thoughts are so automatic that we often accept them as being true reflections of what is going on. Noticing your own reactions and beginning to see how they might be linked is an important step towards regaining your confidence. This is something we will return to throughout the booklet.

Think of the last time you felt uncomfortable in a social situation and fill in the boxes below, with *your own thoughts, feelings, physical reactions, and behaviour (for example, coping styles or simply what you did)*.



Figure 1: An example of how I currently cope and feel in social situations:



The boxes in figure 1 are connected because there is a link between what you *think* about a situation, what you *feel*, and what you *do*.



Here's an example of one of Anna's experiences:

Recently Anna decided to go into town to buy some shoes. Even before she left she started to worry about what the other shoppers would think about her. When she got there it was more crowded than she expected. Anna started to have thoughts like "people are staring at me" and "people are thinking that I'm a freak". This started to make her feel really anxious and worried. She noticed that her heart was racing and she began sweating. This made her feel worse as she was sure people had started to notice. Eventually, it got too much for Anna and she went home before getting what she needed.

What can get in the way of building confidence in social situations?

1. *Avoiding situations* – many people say that they hardly ever go out or they avoid situations which involve being around other people. This 'better safe than sorry' strategy may reduce anxiety in the short term but it also keeps the person stuck in a vicious cycle and prevents them from living life to the full. They remove the opportunity to discover if the situation is perhaps not as bad as they had expected. They also may not find out if they can in fact handle the comments of others without losing their temper or feeling embarrassed.

2. *Only going out with other people* - Some people are able to go out, but only if they are with someone they know, for example a friend or family member. This can help with anxiety in the short term and allows them to get out of the house. However the downside is that this may lead the person to become dependent on others and takes away any chance of finding out if they can manage on their own.

3. *Concealment strategies* – Some people cope by hiding their skin condition or scar, for example by wearing long sleeves, scarves, skin camouflage or changing their hairstyle. This can be helpful as it allows the person to go out without being self-conscious about their appearance, thereby reducing anxiety. It will also mean that the condition or scar is less noticeable which could reduce the chances of getting negative reactions from others. However, concealment may not help the person deal with the underlying fears of being negatively judged by others. These are methods of reducing the likelihood of attracting negative reactions from other people whilst also building self-confidence. It is generally accepted that skin camouflage, for example, can be a vital tool during the early stages of a person's rehabilitation and adjustment to their altered image.

4. *Avoiding eye contact or taking part in conversations* - Sometimes when people are around others they will avoid talking or making eye contact. Doing this can make a person feel safer and less anxious and may be a way of not really being involved in what's going on. However, the downside is that these behaviours can keep anxiety going and denies the person the opportunity to face their fears, which may boost their confidence long term.



Section 2: Beginning to change unhelpful thoughts.

You have already listed a number of anxious thoughts that you can sometimes have. We know that when people worry they have negative and unhelpful thoughts which keep their anxiety going. Examples of such thoughts are “*I won't know what to say to people*”, “*people are laughing at me*”, “*people are looking at my scar*”, “*I'll make a fool of myself*”.

List any more examples of unhelpful thoughts you've had about yourself or about what others will think of you:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Noticing thinking patterns

When people feel anxious, their thoughts can often follow unhelpful patterns. Understanding which sorts of thinking patterns you can experience is a useful step in beginning to change things.

Below are some common patterns experienced by people who are anxious in social situations, please tick those that apply to you and add any of your own examples below:

- Predicting the future* – When people are nervous they may jump to negative conclusions about things that may or may not happen in the future. Such as “*No-one will talk to me*”, “*Everyone will stare*”. Possible alternative thoughts include: “I can't be sure that what I'm worried about will happen”, “Maybe things will go better than I expect”



- Mind reading* – People may worry about how others will see them, they might assume what they are thinking, for example, “*They’ll think I’m ugly / diseased*”. Possible alternative thoughts include: “I just don’t know what they are thinking”; “They will more than likely be thinking about their own stuff”.
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-

- Discounting positives* – When thinking back to social situations they have been in, a person may focus on the negative and the things they think went wrong rather than what went well. For example, “*They won’t be interested in me*”. Possible alternative thoughts include: “The situation/job is actually going well”; “They are listening to me”.
-
-

- Taking things personally* – If a person is anxious in social situations they might assume that other people’s behaviour is directed towards them. For example, if someone says something, they assume it’s their fault. They might even feel that they are somehow responsible for other peoples’ behaviour. For example, “*I’m not surprised they are ignoring me, I shouldn’t have come out looking like this*”. Possible alternative thoughts include: “Well, I don’t think much to their manners!”; “They are just being curious, it’s not personal”.
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- Self-criticism* – A person may be their own worst critics. People who are anxious can get into a self-bullying pattern and have negative thoughts about themselves such as “I’m weird”, “I’m a freak”, “I’m boring”. Possible alternative thoughts include: “Everyone has something different about them”; “I’m putting myself down needlessly”.
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Once you have identified an unhelpful thought or thinking pattern, the next step is to challenge it. Challenging your unhelpful thoughts can lead you to identify more helpful alternatives, which can help reduce your anxiety. This can be done by asking yourself various questions:

- What is the evidence for and against this thought?
- Have I had any experiences that suggest that this thought may not be true all the time?
- Am I falling into an unhelpful thinking pattern? For example, am I jumping to conclusions? Or am I taking things personally? Or...?
- What would I say to a friend who was having this thought?
- What would a friend say to me if I told them that I was having this thought?
- Is there another way of viewing the situation?
- Whose responsibility is it that they behaved in that way?

Challenging our thoughts can take practice. It may help if you take one thought at a time.

Using your answers to the above questions, can you now think of specific alternatives that you can use when you find yourself having these thoughts again. Think of answers that you can believe in, it's about developing realistic, more caring alternatives.

Write your alternative thoughts below and form a plan to use these as replacements:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.



The thought diary

Use the form below to try and capture your thoughts and feelings as they happen (or shortly afterwards). Once you've done this for a while, use the form to help you begin to replace unhelpful thoughts with the more realistic and caring alternatives you have identified. This will be more successful if you form a plan to use a specific replacement thought when you experience a certain type of negative thought. Practice this processes as often as you can.

An example, using Anna's shopping experience:

Situation Where were you, what was going on?	Emotion What did you feel?	Unhelpful thoughts and thinking patterns – be specific	Can you use an alternative, more helpful thoughts	Did using an alternative thought change the emotion? Yes/No
Shopping in town centre	Nervous, anxious	"People are thinking I'm a freak" - Mind reading	"I can't know what others are thinking, they're probably thinking about what shop to go in next"	It reduced a bit



Thought diary. Use this form to record your progress in replacing unhelpful thoughts and thinking patterns

Situation Where were you, what was going on?	Emotion What did you feel?	Unhelpful thoughts and thinking patterns – be specific	Can you use an alternative, more helpful thoughts	Did using an alternative thought change the emotion? Yes/No



Section 3: Breathing and Relaxation

Slow down your breathing

When people feel very anxious, their breathing often gets faster. This can lead to over-breathing, which tends to make people feel dizzy or odd which then makes them feel more anxious. If you notice this happening, it can be helpful to concentrate on slowing down your breathing.

Try taking deep but natural breathes, breathing in for a count of 3 and then breathing out for a count of 3. Whilst you are doing this try to focus only on your breathing and simply notice and let go of any thoughts or images that come into your mind.

Try to keep your breathing at a regular rhythm for at least fifteen minutes.

Relaxation

When people are stressed or anxious, their muscles often tense up. Relaxation exercises can be a good way to reduce overall tension. One technique is progressive muscle relaxation.

Please note before beginning this exercise: if you have a physical injury or health condition that affects your muscles it may be best to seek advice from your GP or Physiotherapist.

Set aside 10 – 15 minutes. Make sure you're in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable. Try to keep your breathing slow and steady.

The idea is to tense and relax a number of your muscle groups. Do this gently and do not continue if it feels painful. Notice how your muscles feel when they are tense and when they are relaxed. Hold the tension in the muscle for around 5 seconds and then release for 10 seconds.

Feet	Wiggle your toes up and down
Calf muscles	Pull your toes up towards you and back down again
Thighs	Tense and release thigh muscles
Buttocks	Tense your buttock muscles and then relax
Stomach	Tense your stomach muscles then relax them
Hands	make hands into fists and then release
Arms	Bend your arms and tense your upper arms and then bring your arms straight again
Shoulders	Pull your shoulders up towards your ears and then back down
Chest	Take a deep breath in and out
Forehead	Raise your eyebrows and then lower
Mouth	Open your mouth like a yawn and then close it

When you have finished this exercise, be sure to give yourself a few minutes before getting up.

It is important to practice this exercise as often as you can (daily if possible) so you can get to know how your muscles feel when they are tense and more relaxed.



Section 4: Tackling avoidance

We mentioned earlier that when people are anxious in social situations they often use patterns of behaviour that will make them feel safer, such as not going out or avoiding conversations with strangers. These strategies can help reduce anxiety in the short term but the downside is that the person never gets used to these situations. They also do not get the chance to discover if they would have coped with the situation better than they imagined. Avoiding a situation once makes it feel more difficult to try again the next time. This keeps the cycle of anxiety going and can hold people back from developing confidence in social situations.

The best way to increase your confidence around other people is to get used to being in such situations, slowly but surely. Although doing this will initially make you feel more anxious, if you stick with it then your anxiety will gradually reduce and you will feel more comfortable. Then, if you are faced with a similar situation, you are more likely to believe that you will be able to cope.

Step 1

Make a list of social situations. These could be situations that you are avoiding at the moment (such as going to the pub, going to busy shopping centres), things that you manage to do but that make you feel very anxious (such as getting the bus to work), or things you are only able to do if you use a coping strategy (such as only going shopping with a friend). Write ideas in this box (don't worry about filling in the predicted anxiety level column at this stage).

Situation	Predicted anxiety level
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	



Step 2

Some of the situations you have listed in the box above will make you feel very anxious, and some may feel slightly easier to cope with. For example, you may find going to the local shop to buy milk easier than going to your office Christmas party. Therefore step 2 is to order your situations from the easiest to the most difficult. Firstly, using the box above, write down how anxious you would be in that situation out of 100 (100 being highest anxiety). Write this number in the 'predicted anxiety level' column. Then use the list below to put the situations in order. Start with the easiest at the bottom and the hardest at the top.

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....
- 5.....
- 6.....
- 7.....
- 8.....
- 9.....
- 10.....

Some examples from Anna's list:

	Predicted anxiety level
Most feared: <i>Going to a party and making conversation with people</i>	<i>95%</i>
<i>Meeting friends in a busy bar</i>	<i>80%</i>
<i>Go to local shop to buy bread</i>	<i>50%</i>
<i>Meet a friend in a quiet café</i>	<i>40%</i>
Least feared: <i>Going out for a walk with a friend when it's quiet</i>	<i>25%</i>



The next step is to tackle the least feared situation on your list. Practice this regularly until you notice that you feel more comfortable. The idea is then to work up your list slowly but surely. It often helps to make a specific plan of when you are going to try an item on your list using a diary or planner.

Remember:

- There is no rush; stay at one stage of your list until you feel confident to try something more difficult. Keep rating your anxiety out of 100 and perhaps wait until you get down to 40 out of 100 before moving onto the next step.
- Keep practicing. This technique works best if you try to work towards something each day
- It is normal to experience some anxiety when working your way up your list. Anxiety can also go up and down so you may feel less anxious and then suddenly feel more anxious again. Don't worry about this, just try and keep up regular practice and gradually things will become easier.

Building confidence: making eye contact and showing interest in others

When people feel embarrassed or nervous they often avoid eye contact and become very focussed on what they are saying or not saying! These things can be picked up by the people they are with. Others might then assume that the person is not interested in them, or rightly assume that they are anxious but without understanding why. Either way it may increase the risk of the conversation ending early.

Here are a few tips:

1. focus on the other person, ask about them,
2. show that you are listening by nodding or smiling every so often
3. try to maintain some eye contact.

At first this might seem unnatural, almost like 'acting'. That's fine, with practice, and as your confidence grows, you'll find responding in this way becomes more natural.



Section 5: Dealing with comments and reactions from others

Unfortunately, people with a visible skin condition and / or scar may experience genuinely intrusive, negative or even rude reactions from other people. Generally, it's better to give people the benefit of the doubt and assume that they are being curious.

Nevertheless, being asked something personal such as 'what happened to you' or 'what's that?' can be upsetting and frustrating, so planning answers in advance can be really helpful. Dealing with comments in a confident way shows you're not worried by what's happening and the conversation will generally soon move on.

Here are some examples of what you could say if asked about your skin condition or scar – practice saying some of these with a smile whilst pretending to make eye contact:

Things you could say to move the conversation on:

"Oh it's a long story, too long to go into now. I'll have to tell you another day"

"It happened a while back, but I'd rather not go into details now, what do you think to the news that... / I like your boots where are they from?"

You could give precise information:

"It's just a birthmark/skin condition"

"It's a skin condition called X it is not contagious"

"It's a scar from an operation/accident I had when I was little; I'm used to it now"

Dealing with staring

Sometimes just looking back and smiling at someone can stop them from staring: people often smile back! If not you could say something like *"Can I help you?"* or *"Do I know you from somewhere?"* – practice saying this in a calm and curious way that will point out to the other person that you know they are looking. Try not to do it in an aggressive manner, although understandably you might feel annoyed!

Using humour can help to defuse the situation, you could try something like:

"Thank you for staring, it's quite distracting though, I've completely forgotten what I was going to do!"

Or if you feel able to be a bit more direct you could say:

"If you could stop staring that'd be great, it's quite distracting!" Again try to say this in a joking or straight tone.



Dealing with negative remarks

Sadly people with a visible skin condition and / or scar may experience people making negative remarks about their appearance. It may be that the best and safest way to deal with this is to ignore them or *walk away* from the situation, as confrontation is often unhelpful and uncomfortable. Do remind yourself in such situations that the other person's behaviour isn't typical of how everyone acts and is best forgotten. This sort of behaviour would most likely be seen as rude by anyone who'd observed what had happened.

If you feel it's safe and appropriate to say something you could try:

"I'm sorry if it bothers you, but it really isn't very polite to point it out"

"That's a good one, I've never heard that one before!"

Again practice saying these comments in an assertive yet light-hearted way so as to defuse the situation and not escalate it. When in doubt hold your head up high and simply walk away remembering who has the moral high ground.

Summary

- **Get to know your own thoughts, feelings, physical reactions and behaviour.**
- **Notice your unhelpful thinking patterns and challenge your anxious thoughts.**
- **Use relaxation and breathing techniques to help calm you down.**
- **Reduce avoidance by tackling situations that make you feel anxious.**

Concluding comments

It is not easy to develop confidence or to rebuild it when it has been lost or damaged. Remember it takes time for confidence to grow and changes to take place. The techniques in this booklet are tried and tested and can make a difference.

As with learning anything new, it requires practice and may feel unnatural at first. Start to form some plans now about what things you will think and say in specific situations.

Finally, if you feel that you do need additional support, speak to your GP or contact a support group who specialise in your skin condition or scarring. Contact details for some of these organisations can be found below.



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Changing Faces

UK-based charity giving support and information to people with disfigurements to the face, hands or body, and their families.

Call: 0845 4500 275 or 0207 391 9270.

Email: info@changingfaces.org.uk

Website: www.changingfaces.org.uk

British Association of Skin Camouflage (BASC)

BASC provides camouflage consultations within the NHS and private practice,

Email: info@skin-camouflage.net

Website: www.skin-camouflage.net

NHS self-help

A variety of self-help guides available to download: www.nhw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp

General advice on self-help therapy: <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/self-help-therapies.aspx>

Samaritans

Available 24 hours a day to provide confidential emotional support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

Call: 08457 90 90 90

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Website: www.samaritans.org

Get Self Help

This website offers CBT self-help information including downloadable resources.

Website: www.getselfhelp.co.uk



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Notes page:

Please use this page to make any notes related to the booklet that you might find helpful.