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Overcoming social anxiety associated with skin conditions: A self-help guide

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Overcoming social anxiety associated with skin conditions: A self-help guide

What effect can skin conditions have on social confidence?

Many studies and personal accounts of people living with a variety of skin conditions testify to the fact that living with such a potentially noticeable condition can be associated with loss of social confidence or nervousness in social situations. Everyone likes to look their best when they are going out and having a skin condition may lead us to worry what others might think of us.

Whilst the vast majority of people will not notice your skin condition and if they do will get used to it quickly, unfortunately, some people's reactions can be intrusive. Sometimes this will be just out of curiosity but other times it may be out of rudeness. Not surprisingly, you may worry about social situations and this will be particularly true if you are finding it hard to accept the condition yourself.

Understandably, it can be tempting to cope with such worry by avoiding social situations and whilst this may keep you safe it also leads to isolation and further loss of confidence.

However, research indicates that people can gain confidence with the use of techniques as we'll describe shortly and go on to enjoy social situations.

This leaflet will take you through a 4 stage plan to help you build your confidence.

- **Stage 1: Understanding what social anxiety is**
- **Stage 2: Recognising bodily tension and self focusing**
- **Stage 3: Learning techniques to reduce self-consciousness**
- **Stage 4: Putting it into practice**

"I think it restricts you from doing things. It shouldn't but it does because you think that people are always looking at you".

"I think that people just blow things out of proportion and probably don't realise that the majority of people don't notice".

Anonymous quotes taken from Thompson et al. (2002). Living with vitiligo: Dealing with difference. British Journal of Health Psychology, 7, 213-225.

Stage 1: Understanding Social anxiety

Social anxiety can affect you in many ways:

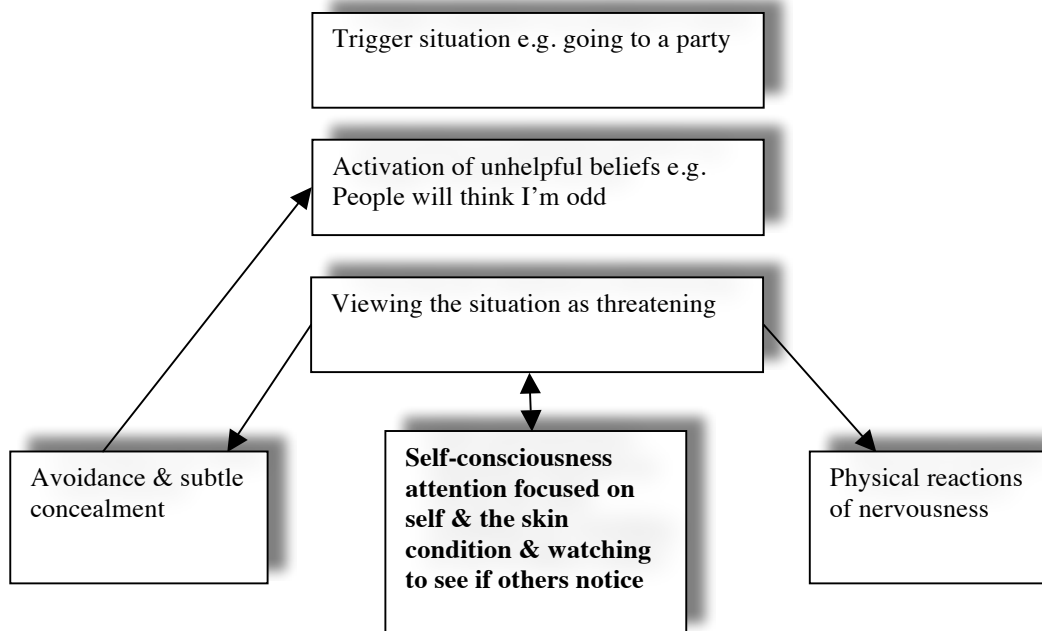
- in your **behaviour** i.e. avoiding social situations or/and concealing affected areas either with camouflage or with clothing or with other parts of the body

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- in your **feelings** i.e. feeling nervous or even embarrassed
- in your **body** i.e. experiencing tension and even panic
- in your **thinking** i.e. assuming others will judge you or fearing you will not know what to say.
Often your attention will become focused upon yourself

How social anxiety is maintained

A model showing how social anxiety is maintained in skin conditions (adapted from Clark &



Many types of situations can trigger you feeling anxious. When a situation (e.g. going to a party) occurs it activates particular beliefs and assumptions (e.g. that other people are critical or making negative social judgments). As a consequence the situation is perceived as threatening and interpreted as socially dangerous, giving rise to thoughts (such as 'people will think I am odd'). These thoughts provoke distress and anxiety. When this happens you may focus on yourself and become increasingly self-conscious about your appearance and your skin condition and watching to see if others notice it.

The more you focus on yourself and your skin condition the more self-conscious you become and the more threatening the situation seems. You may notice the signs of anxiety when in the situation and believe that other people have also noticed these symptoms. As you perceive the situation as socially dangerous or threatening you believe you have to keep safe by pulling down your sleeves, not giving eye contact or avoiding the situation altogether. It is only natural to keep yourself safe when you feel frightened or threatened. There are many ways of keeping safe but whether or not they succeed, they lead to the conclusion that without them things might have been worse. One thing feeds into another, which keeps the problem going.

You can learn how to overcome social anxiety. Dealing with any factor that contributes to your anxiety (e.g. your behaviour) will positively influence other factors (e.g. your feelings and thinking). For example, reducing the physical feelings of anxiety (such as sweating and experiencing tension) will reduce the worries you have about this (such as assuming that others will judge you) which will in turn reduce the feeling of anxiety and change the way you behave, helping you stay longer in the situation which made you anxious.

Once you start to do this you will find the people that value the real you, and your confidence will increase in leaps and bounds.

Stage 2: Recognising bodily tension and self-focusing

Recognising the situations where you feel tense and where you have developed a tendency to focus too much on yourself or your skin condition is a crucial step in building your social confidence. **Once you are aware of situations where you feel tense and are engaged in self-focusing, then you will be in a position to know when to use the techniques described in stage 3.**

Keep a note book or diary (like the one below) of social situations where you notice your thinking flips inwards and you are focusing on yourself and/or the skin condition. Also note the effect this is having on your physical body and emotions. Try and capture some of the specific details.

Everyone is different and the more you understand about your own anxiety the easier it'll be to overcome. Pay particular notice to situations where you use subtle avoidance or safety behaviours (such as pulling down your sleeves to cover a skin condition on your wrists or always turning your head one way so as to present your 'best' side). Keep the diary for at least two to three days or until you have several examples of your own.

Situation	Thoughts about my skin	Emotions	Bodily Sensations Over monitoring of these (Yes/No)	Over monitoring of other peoples' reactions (Yes/No)	Desire to leave (Yes/No)
e.g. out shopping and was busier than I expected	e.g. people are looking they are bound to notice it	e.g. I feel nervous	e.g. Yes I feel tense, stomach churning and I am worried others will notice me sweating	e.g. I'm looking at their eyes to see if they have noticed	e.g. Yes I did leave early without getting what I went for – I also kept my hands in my pockets when I was there – I don't want to go again on that day, it's too busy

Now make a list of situations where you noticed you were focusing too much on how you felt or on your skin:

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Now make a list of situations where you were focusing on whether others noticed the skin condition:

.....
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.....
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.....

Stage 3: Techniques to reduce self-consciousness

During stage 2 you will have probably noticed that there is a relationship between feeling tense, focusing on your skin, focusing on others noticing the skin condition, and how confident you felt. We will now look at two techniques to help to tackle these factors, which are likely to maintain your social anxiety as we discussed at stage 1. After learning both techniques you will need to form a plan to use them.

Technique one (*holding a relaxing image*) is aimed at reducing physical tension and redirecting attention away from thinking about the skin condition.

Technique two (*external focusing*) is aimed at reducing the tendency to look for others noticing the skin condition, and your own tendency to focus on it.

Technique 1: Holding a relaxing image

The crucial part of this exercise is to learn to picture a relaxing image whilst simply letting other thoughts or feelings pass through your mind – neither engaging with or trying to push them away. Prior to starting the exercise take a note of how tense you feel on a 1-10 scale, you can use this to judge whether or not the technique is working. Now think about a time when you felt at ease comfortable and relaxed contented and satisfied. Perhaps you can recall a holiday or a time with loved ones, or perhaps you can think of being in a special place (it might even be somewhere very everyday like a favourite chair at home). If you can't think of a specific time, think about in what sort of place you'd feel like this (perhaps on a beach, or in a meadow, or in a spa bath). Once you have thought of a place make a mental note of it for later use in the exercise.

- Find a comfortable place to sit. It can be helpful to close your eyes.
- Start by focusing on your breathing, letting other thoughts simply come and go through your mind, without engaging with them.
- Take nice even and natural breathes in from your stomach.
- Continue to do this for a few minutes. Don't worry if other things come into your mind just notice them and allow them to pass through, almost like traffic.
- **Now try to conjure up the image of the place you identified** – try to make it as real as you can by picturing all of the details.
- Continue to picture the sights associated with the place, and also notice the noises, feelings, and even the smells – try to make it as real as you can. Don't worry if your image fades or if other thoughts or images enter your mind, simply notice these and let them pass through, refocusing on your relaxing image.
- Think of the precise feeling associated with this image, perhaps the word is relaxed, chilled, mellow, or cool. Imagine this feeling spread through your body. Again if other things enter your mind simply notice them and allow them to pass through without engaging in them.
- Continue to stay with the image and then when you wish let it go and return your mind to the here and now.
- Now re-measure your level of tension on the 1-10 scale but don't worry if it hasn't changed much to start with – remember we all need to practice.

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Practice extending the time you are able to do this exercise for, aiming to be able to get up to twenty minutes or so.

In time you'll find that you will be able to use this technique in social situations where you have identified that you are overly focusing on your worries about your skin condition.

Technique 2: External focusing

The crucial part of this exercise is to learn to switch your attention externally whilst simply letting other thoughts or feelings pass through your mind – neither engaging with or trying to push them away. Prior to starting the exercise take a note of how tense you feel on a 1-10 scale, you can use this to judge whether or not the technique is working. As with technique one, we'll start with focusing on your breathing and then move to learning the technique.

- Find a comfortable place to sit. It can be helpful to close your eyes.
- Start by focusing on your breathing, letting other thoughts simply come and go through your mind, without engaging with them.
- Take nice even and natural breathes in from your stomach.
- Continue to do this for a few minutes. Don't worry if other things come into your mind just notice them and allow them to pass through, almost like traffic.
- Now try to focus on the external noises you can hear, try to hone in on just one (it might be a clock ticking, a computer buzzing, or traffic noise outside). Don't worry if your noise fades or if other thoughts or images enter your mind, simply notice these and let them pass through, refocusing on your target noise.
- Now try and switch your attention to another noise, singling that one out and staying with that. Again don't worry if your noise fades or if other thoughts or images enter your mind, simply notice these and let them pass through, refocusing on your target noise.
- Now try and switch your attention back to your original noise and stay with that one for a while.
- Now try to listen intently to both at the same time. Don't worry if your noises fade or if other thoughts or images enter your mind, simply notice these and let them pass through, refocusing on your target noises.
- Now re-measure your level of tension on the 1-10 scale but don't worry if it hasn't changed much to start with – remember we all need to practice.

Practice extending the time you are able to do this exercise for, aiming to be able to get up to twenty minutes or so.

In time you'll find that you will be able to use this technique in social situations where you have identified that you are overly focusing on your worries about your skin condition. You may focus on external noises in such social situations or you might try the techniques with objects – the trick is to not focus on the skin condition.

Ultimately, both techniques can be done anywhere without anyone knowing you are using them, but to start with you will need to learn them. There are three things worth stating before we look at you doing this:

1) as with learning any new skill, the more you practice the better you'll get!

2) things will not change straight a way and you will need to practice the techniques repeatedly. Do this initially at home and when you are not anxious

3) when practicing prepare yourself so that you can focus on what you are doing without being distracted (find a specific time and comfortable place)

Stage 4: Putting it into practice

Forming a plan to use either technique one or two will help you to translate what you have learnt into practice.

Looking back at stage 2 identify the situations where you were overly focusing on the skin condition and add them into the plan below choosing which technique you will use.

Choose your technique and then complete the blanks below:

For technique 1:

In situation.....(insert your situation) I will improve my confidence by thinking of(insert your relaxing image)

For technique 2:

In situation.....(insert your situation) I will improve my confidence by focusing on external objects or noises around me

Now go back over what you have written and say it quietly to yourself until you can repeat what you have written.

Now commit to using your new plan!

We are now at the end of the guide and we hope this self-help information will be useful to you. We have taken a three stage approach. Stage 1 was about understanding how social anxiety connected to skin conditions can be maintained to taking an overly internal focus on things. Stage 2 was about recognizing your own patterns of feelings and behaviours in certain situations. At stage 3 we looked at two simple techniques (holding a relaxing image and external focusing) and encouraged you to practice

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these and then to use them in the situations that worry you. Lastly, at stage 4 we looked at building specific plans to use the techniques.

It's now over to you, allow yourself time to learn, practice, and test out the techniques and remember to reflect on the times things go well!