Coping With Psoriasis Stigma

by ANGELA FINLAY

Saving Face in Social Situations

Itchy, red, flaking patches of skin tend to stand out, and that can make things pretty difficult for psoriasis sufferers. Beauty is an aspect of modern culture, and society certainly has ideas of what belongs and what doesn't; if you look different or ill, you can be made to feel like an outcast, and that will affect every corner of your life.

You can't cure your psoriasis, but just as you can treat your symptoms, you can treat the interactions that surround them. Learn how to adjust your responses for more comfortable socializing, and what you can do to reduce psoriasis stigma and the damaging effects it brings.

Plan for Uncomfortable Confrontations

The more you know about your condition, the better you will be able to handle embarrassing moments, and the quicker your family and friends will begin to sympathize with the reality of your psoriasis.

Learn the mechanics behind your body's autoimmune response, including why and how your skin overproduces skin cells, so you can clearly relate that info if the situation arises. When you're able to communicate easily and intelligently, more people will listen; losing your cool will only make things more uncomfortable for everyone.

Of course, not every situation will warrant a lecture, or allow for a long-winded response. Having an arsenal of stock answers will help you get through these uncomfortable (and insensitive) comments and questions quickly, without getting impatient or feeling worse about yourself:

Is it contagious?

Probably one of the most common questions, but also the most bothersome for the psoriasis sufferer. The best way to handle the query is with a straightforward, "No, it's a genetic condition not an infection." Genetic conditions aren't threatening to other people, and so they'll be relieved to hear that your visible symptoms aren't communicable.

Is it safe to be intimate?

Psoriasis commonly affects the genitals, and although it can feel itchy and look serious, it's still perfectly safe to be intimate. However, it's completely understandable for your partner to be wary, and you should take the opportunity to discuss how the symptoms will and won't affect the experience. Don't dance around the matter; be clear, open, and inviting with your partner.

Do you bathe enough?

To the non-sufferer, psoriasis can look like a bacterial infection or dirt build-up, especially when it affects the scalp

and ears. While most people know better than to question somebody's grooming, there's a chance you'll meet an outspoken person who asks the hurtful question.

You can either shut them down with, "I'm afraid I don't have the time to explain it to you," or emphasize the fact that it has nothing to do with cleanliness. Just try not to lash out with a long-winded response designed to make them feel terrible – that's bound to land you in a heated and defensive conversation.

Next page: seeking support, and tips for increasing your confidence.

Seek Some Support

Having to explain yourself to others can be tedious, and the repetition may chip away at your self-esteem. You'll need to find a way to relieve that stress, and restore your confidence before you fall into an unnecessary bout of anxiety. Support groups are fantastic places to gain insight into your condition, share treatment options and success stories, and lift your mood with healthy camaraderie.

Your doctor is another important source of support, but some patients find that the stigma is strong on the medical side, too. If your doctor tells you that you'll just have to learn to live with your psoriasis, it's probably time for a second opinion – or another doctor.

There are lots of treatment options out there, and more advances in psoriasis medication every year, so consult with some other dermatologists before you settle for a pessimistic diagnosis.

Warding Off Negative Comments

You can't always hide your psoriasis, and you shouldn't feel you have to, but there are ways to lessen the visible impact. Regardless of how expertly you divert attention, a couple of techniques can help you increase your confidence and maybe ward off some unsavoury reactions:

Be Color Conscious

Knowing what to wear for psoriasis (and what not to wear) can help draw attention away from red, scaly patches and flaking skin. If you have psoriasis on your scalp, some flakes are bound to fall on your shoulders, no matter how diligent you are with the comb. Wear light colours, or shirts with a small, repeated pattern to camouflage the specks.

You may not be able to cancel out your red patches entirely, but you can help diminish their appearance. A good rule of thumb for any sort of blemish is to avoid complementary colours: red patches on your arms will appear even brighter next to vivid green sleeves, since green is opposite red on the color wheel. By the same token, you can use certain colors to highlight other features and draw the eye away from your psoriasis.

Flaunt Your Confidence

If you act healthy, people are likely to perceive you as healthy. That means you should keep your head up, wear a smile, and share your positive energy. Try not to hide behind your psoriasis plaques – you have many other excellent features, and when you carry yourself with confidence and self-acceptance, the people you meet will notice your shining demeanor rather than some rough patches of skin.

Don't Stress

It may be easier said than done, but trying not to stress out over how your skin looks will help in the short term and in the long term. For one, the more distracted you are about your skin, the more attention you will draw to it.

Secondly, stress is a leading cause of psoriasis flares, and will almost always make symptoms worse. When

you’re out in public, try to keep yourself distracted with happy music, a good book, or anything else that will keep your mind off your psoriasis and on more positive topics. If people stare, remind yourself that it’s their problem, not yours.

Conclusion

Many psoriasis sufferers agree that handling tough social situations becomes much easier with time, and you’ll probably develop your own way to deal with different sorts of inquisitive personalities. In the meantime, lean on the people who care enough to understand what you’re going through, and build your emotional defenses with the help of their love and support.