What Not to Say to Someone With Psoriasis

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Tips to Help You Navigate This Tricky Subject

For the millions of people who suffer from psoriasis, the social repercussions can be as uncomfortable as the itchy, scaly, painful patches of skin that define the disease. Since psoriasis is often pretty difficult to hide, and a flare-up can drastically change your complexion, sufferers tend to attract more than their fair share of long stares.

It can be difficult to know what to say to someone with psoriasis. Do you simply ignore their symptoms? Do you ask what's wrong? If you're wondering how best to proceed, the good news is you're on the right track with your good intentions. Here are some responses to avoid — and how you can revamp them — to help anyone with psoriasis feel more at ease, and keep the conversation comfortable.

Phrases That Are More Insensitive Than They Seem

When it comes to visible health conditions, some things are just better left unsaid. After all, simply pointing out a difference in appearance will only highlight the fact that there *is* a difference, and that it matters to you. Of course, there are more subtle pitfalls to avoid, too.

Most people with psoriasis have fielded certain questions again and again, and depending on their level of patience, your innocent query could push them past their breaking point. Do yourself (and your conversational companion) a favor and avoid these phrases:

"Is it contagious?"

You could be forgiven for your fear, but this is one of the most infuriating questions to hear. Psoriasis may bear some resemblance to a rash, but it cannot be caught from contact with another person. Even if you were to touch the plaques, you would not be affected. Your chances of contracting psoriasis are tied to your genetics, not your present company; the condition tends to run in families, though it can pop up at any point in life.

"I'm sure you'll beat this soon."

Offering support is great, but it's best to get your facts straight before unloading a hopeful message. Incredibly optimistic statements that aren't grounded in fact are a bit of an insult: not only do they make light of a serious situation, but they figuratively put pressure on the one with psoriasis to overcome their problem. Unfortunately, psoriasis can't be "beaten," although it can be controlled with a careful, resourceful approach.

"I know how you feel."

Clearly, your intentions are good. You want to show your sympathy and offer some reassurance to make them feel more comfortable. But at the end of it all, unless you've struggled with the many physical and emotional issues of psoriasis, you really don't know how it feels to live with the condition. In turn, this statement is

misleading, and can lead to disappointment or misinformation.

“I can hardly tell.”

Anyone living with psoriasis knows how the condition affects their appearance. Sure, their self-image may be a bit distorted (most people are pretty hard on themselves), but they can tell when their plaques and red patches are visible to others. Stating the opposite will seem phony, and that insincerity can be hurtful and awkward.

Next page: three more phrases that could make a friend with psoriasis uncomfortable, and the best ways to support a friend with psoriasis

Phrases That Are More Insensitive Than They Seem

“You don’t look sick.”

Even if you’re being completely genuine, don’t assume that you know how someone else is feeling based on what you see. Psoriasis doesn’t always show up in fierce red patches on exposed skin – sometimes it hides in covered areas, or in the case of psoriatic arthritis, targets the joints underneath the skin.

The truth is that psoriasis discomfort can go far beyond a nagging itch, and just like other chronic conditions, the pain and distress can affect every corner of your life and personality.

“I’ve heard that __ can cure it.”

Whether you have a relative who claims to have cleared up their psoriasis, or you came across a recent article about a newfound tonic, think twice before you pass on that information. In reality, psoriasis is a complicated autoimmune disease, and there is no known cure. Trust that the person you’re talking to has heard all about the whole range of home remedies, and your suggestion will likely sound a bit silly. Believing you can help more than their doctor is arrogant and just plain frustrating.

“You should change your diet.”

This one follows in the footsteps of the “helpful remedy” tip. While many people do have food allergies that can manifest in a skin rash, psoriasis is not provoked or cured by diet. Some foods can cause inflammation (wheat, dairy and red meat are leading examples), and some psoriasis sufferers find that they can make things worse, but there’s no evidence to suggest that a special diet for psoriasis will have any positive affect on symptoms.

How to Respond With Care and Sympathy

It may be a difficult subject to discuss, but that doesn’t mean you have to ignore your friend’s struggles with psoriasis. In fact, you can take the opportunity to lend some much needed support and good humor — as long as you approach the issue tactfully.

Wait until they bring it up. If you’re not quite sure what exactly to say, don’t say anything at all about their psoriasis until they mention it. It shouldn’t be too difficult — there are plenty of more insightful and productive topics to throw out there — and that leaves the control with the psoriasis sufferer.

If and when they bring it up, gauge their tone and expectation before you respond: are they looking for advice? Seeking sympathy? Or perhaps they just need to vent a bit? You can avoid a lot of hurt and awkwardness by forming a thoughtful response.

Compliment their style. People with psoriasis may not be able to hide the evidence completely, but they probably put some effort into how they present themselves to the world. Instead of saying you can hardly notice their plaques, steer the discussion into honest and positive territory. A specific compliment on their outfit, a piece of

jewelry, or hairstyle will make them feel good about what they *can* control, and that will boost their self-confidence.

Try not to compare. It's natural to want to connect with your friend, but aligning their condition with something you're more familiar with won't help *their* situation at all. Instead, admit that you don't share their particular symptoms, but you're quite happy to learn more about psoriasis and lend a hand or an ear wherever you can. Honor their personal struggle — they'll appreciate the honesty.

The worst thing you can do is assume you understand the whole situation, but unfortunately, that's all too easy to do. Take a breath, think through your responses, and err on the side of caution. Psoriasis is already tough enough for a person to handle, so do your best to lighten the burden with grace and genuine compassion.