Psoriasis and Isolation

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Avoiding Isolation With Psoriasis

Living with psoriasis, you are subjected to a great deal of criticism. The criticism comes in many forms including misunderstandings, confusion and the ignorance of the people that surround you. Fear of this criticism and judgment from other means psoriasis and isolation can easily go hand in hand.

Some people find the stress, frustration, worry and fear of dealing with mistaken beliefs too great to endure. Rather than working to advocate for the disease and raise awareness, they withdraw.

Rather than finding ways to cope with others, they isolate. The thought is that interacting with people has become too negative and harmful, and because of this they choose solitude with the goal of reducing negative experiences.

It's not such a bad idea. After all, if you want to avoid the undesirable elements of the outside world, the safety and security of your house is a great place to be. But problems begin to arise when you consider that life is not only about avoiding the bad – it is also about pursuing the good.

If you don't pursue positive aspects in your life, you will be resigned to a life of neutrality with neither highs nor lows.

Assessing Your State

Before deciding how you need to proceed, check in with yourself. Thoughts, feelings and behaviors of isolation are related to a range of mental health disorders like major depression, generalized anxiety and agoraphobia (a fear of open spaces).

Symptoms typically fall on a spectrum of intensity where some isolative tendencies are normal and expected. As symptoms move down the continuum passed the middle and towards the higher side, the experience will be more atypical and pathological.

Using your self-monitoring skills to note the impact of isolation on aspects of your life will allow you to know the severity of your symptoms and what action, if any, is needed to improve your state.

- **Work life –** How has your work been affected by your isolation? Has your employer noticed any changes in your performance? Have you missed days or attended consistently for weeks and months? If you are not working, has isolation played a role? Do you make excuses about lack of work available when isolation is the real explanation for your unemployment? Rate the impact of isolation on work from zero to 10.

- **Social life –** Everyone needs social connections to reduce stress and find supports in life. Do you have as many friends now as you did before your symptoms? Do you see your friends often? Do you look for excuses and reasons to get out of gatherings? Does the thought of being in a social situation trigger unwanted feelings? Rate the impact of isolation on you social life from zero to 10.
- **Family life –** Is your mom worried about you? Have you been missing family functions that you previously attended? Have you been avoiding your own children? Remember, you can isolate yourself even if you are living in the same home as your family. Lack of connection is a form of isolation. Rate the impact of isolation on your family life from zero to 10.
- **Community life –** Do you leave your home? If you do leave home, how anxiety-provoking or stressful is your experience? Do people tell you that getting out more would do you some good? When is the last time you took a walk in the park or had a conversation with a stranger in the grocery store? Rate the impact of isolation on your community life from zero to 10.

Next page: changing the way you think, and putting those thoughts into action.

Preparing Your Mind

If you rated the impact of isolation in your life at high levels, begin to take action. A fantastic first step is to begin changing the way you think. Changing your mind can be quite difficult, depending on how ingrained the isolation has become, but even the most negative thought patterns can change.

Self-talk is the conversations you have with yourself during the day. If you say, “Good job” to yourself, that is self-talk. If you say, “You stink,” that is self-talk, too. Positive, optimistic self-talk makes you feel better, and negative, pessimistic self-talk makes you feel worse.

To prepare your mind you have to change your self-talk. Here’s how:

- **Track your thoughts.** Begin by paying attention to the things you say to yourself. What do you say about staying at home? What do you say about your psoriasis? Knowing your thoughts gives you the information to change them.
- **Judge your thoughts.** Being judgmental of others is a risky plan, but judging your own thoughts is useful as long as you retain objectivity. Look at how your thoughts influence your feelings and behaviors. Thoughts that focus on the hazards and threatening aspects of leaving the home will keep you stuck. Likewise, thoughts that emphasize an unrealistic safety of being at home do the same. Challenge yourself to consider other points-of-view. Perceptions that support isolation support depression and anxiety. Thoughts that illustrate the good that comes from leaving your comfort zone combat mental illness. Decide what thoughts help you and what thoughts hurt you.
- **Change your thoughts.** Once you make your decision between the helpful and hurtful thoughts, actively work to put more thoughts that are positive in your mind. The process is simple. You can set alarms on your phone or create visual reminders in the house to encourage positive thinking. For example, put a sign on the refrigerator that says, “Staying inside makes you feel worse.” With repetition, you will be more likely to change the momentum of your thinking to be more positive.

Preparing Your Body

Since isolation changes your behaviors, you have to work on your body as well as your mind. Changing your thinking is valuable but cannot compare to the power of changing your behaviors.

You cannot think your way out of isolation. You must act. Here’s how:

- If you have been changing your thinking than you have begun the planning stage. Think about the goals you have for life after isolation. What would you like to accomplish? Who would you like to be around? Where would you like to go? Setting these goals will motivate you and give you direction for your energies. A person without goals is like a boat without a rudder: directionless. Believe that you can achieve your

goals and that psoriasis will not stand in your way.

- Preparation for your body includes working to find and practice relaxation techniques that calm your body. Ending isolation or avoiding deeper levels of isolation produces anxiety as your mind works to convince you that the outside world is scary and dangerous. Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is a wonderful option since it directly targets the physical tension common in times of stress. PMR works by tensing and relaxing sections of your body to build relief. Calming your body will aid your mind in reducing anxiety.
- Go and do. Taking the first step out the door is literally the most important step. Isolation tells you that no good can come from leaving. Each step reminds you of how pleasant the world can be. Along the way, you will note the opportunities for positive experiences. These will begin to offset the barriers you might have. Do not focus too much on what you do at the beginning. The process of leaving is more important than what you do. Plan to get out for just a few minutes initially. During subsequent trips, extend the time, distance and activity to expand your comfort zone. Add phone calls to friends as a way to increase your social contact.

Conclusion

Isolation is a real problem for people with psoriasis. Start by assessing your level of isolation to identify how badly you require change. Working to change your mind and your body will set the stage for success. No man is an island. End the isolation today.