Coping With People’s Reactions to Psoriasis

by ERIC PATTERSON

Dealing with Others

Psoriasis has a way of bringing more negatives to your life. When you study your body, you track the changes with disappointment. You warily wait for the next flare and predict its location and severity. Dealing with psoriasis and its impact on you is a demanding job.

There is another task to complete, though. You also have to cope with the reactions of others around you. When it comes to psoriasis, friends, family and even complete strangers on the street can impact your experience. An odd look from a passerby can raise your anxiety. A misinformed reaction from a coworker can create some annoyance. A cruel comment from a loved family member can trigger rage and anger.

Since psoriasis makes it challenging to deal with yourself as well as others, you need a two-pronged approach. If you only deal with your own views or only on the feedback from others, there will be a gaping hole in your coping strategy. An approach that addresses your own self-esteem while finding new ways to combat the unwanted attention and ignorance of others will go far to improve your life and overall well-being.

Dealing with the Inside

Psoriasis and high self-esteem are not mutually exclusive. With effort and consistency, your self-worth can exist independently from your psoriasis. This means that even when flares are more obvious and problematic, you can continue feeling strong and confident in your own skin. Here’s how:

- **Seek out acceptance.** Self-acceptance is such a profoundly important step towards self-esteem, but feelings of denial, sadness and anger stand in the way. Without acceptance you cannot have confidence. People with psoriasis often avoid mirrors and their self-image becomes more negatively distorted. You may begin to imagine that your psoriasis is actually much worse than it appears to others. Standing in front of a mirror is an appropriate intervention to familiarize yourself to your actual appearance. By doing this often and for longer periods, you will desensitize yourself to your skin condition. Having accurate perceptions reduces denial and creates progress towards acceptance.
- **Find separation.** Now that you are moving towards acceptance, make efforts to acknowledge that psoriasis does not define you. If you had diabetes, would you be “the diabetes guy”? No. Psoriasis is not you. It is only a part of what makes you a unique individual. You are a fully functioning person that is multidimensional. You are a parent, a child, a friend and coworker and a church member that so happens to have psoriasis. Your diagnosis does impact your life but no more than the color of your eyes or your style of dress.

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Dealing with the Inside

- **Pat yourself on the back.** Chances are good that you have been focusing too much time and energy on pointing out of all the things you dislike about yourself. It has branched out from psoriasis, and now you are overly critical about many aspects of your life. Putting effort into complimenting yourself will begin to slow the momentum that hurts your self-esteem. If you are not used to doing so, giving yourself a compliment will feel odd and uncomfortable. Don't let this sensation deter you. List as many positive aspects of your appearance, personality, skills and abilities as you can while avoiding words that diminish their significance. You may find yourself being stuck on beginning the process. If this is the case, seek information from trusted supports to see what they think about you.
- **Be surrounded by supports.** Supports are not only useful for helping you think of compliments, their benefits are many. Being around positive people and having positive experiences boosts your confidence and mood tremendously. Be active in making plans and starting new relationships. Part of increasing the positives is reducing the negatives. If people or situations in your life leave you feeling worse, instead of better, look to modify. Too often, people subject themselves to poor relationships and poor experiences because they believe they can do no better. Do not let psoriasis lead you into this trap. Not every situation will be changeable but you can likely improve your experience with limited work.
- **Walk the walk.** The ideas above discuss you thinking differently or changing your surroundings. This tip is about changing you behavior. People with higher confidence and self-esteem typically present in certain ways that allow others to see and feel their esteem. They walk with a smooth stride. They have good posture and their head held high while making solid eye contact. When they speak, they use assertive communication that gets the message across smoothly. Certainly this is a product of confidence, but there is evidence to support the idea that carrying yourself in this way will actually improve confidence. Therapists call this "Fake it 'til you make it." Study confident people to learn their mannerisms and test them out in for yourself. You may be pleasantly surprised with the response you receive from others and how it makes you feel about yourself.

Coping with the Outside

Working on the inside first gives you a cushion that builds up your resources and protects you from any negative experiences you might have. Once you have done your work inside, it's time to look at the world around you. The people that make up that world will lack the sensitivity, education and experience needed to fully understand psoriasis. Choosing to be an advocate for psoriasis means that you are advocating for you. You spread the message that psoriasis is nothing to be feared or stared at. Want to coping with the outside world? Here's how:

- **Know you.** Becoming an expert about psoriasis means that you are armed with the needed information to answer any question someone could pose. You may be able to anticipate a question before it is even asked and preemptively address an issue. Increased education can also help to improve your self-esteem and identity by normalizing your situation. Realizing the struggles of others helps to make your own less detrimental.

- **Know them.** Explaining and describing psoriasis to people in your life is a frequent occurrence. It would be great if everyone was well versed on the topic of psoriasis, but so far, this hasn't been possible. Experiment with different responses in different situations to arrive at responses that feel natural and understandable. Try to find a way to match your personality as well as your audience. If you are comfortable being comedic, try to use humor in a way to break the ice while communicating your condition. A curious child staring at your arm will benefit from one explanation while an ignorant restaurant owner asking you to leave will require another. In either case, keep it short and simple. Too much information can confuse your message. Ask if they would like more information about it.
- **Know when to cover up.** Even when done well, providing education to others can still be exhausting and stressful. When you are getting dressed for the day, take inventory of where you are going, who's going to be there and your own levels of stress. If the situation or stress level makes you overly uncomfortable, consider opting for long sleeves or pants. At some point, everyone needs a day off especially when you r stress or the situation could do a disservice to the advocacy you have been spreading. Allow yourself a break and let the advocacy begin again tomorrow.

Conclusion

Coping with the negative attention and response from others begins in an unexpected place: you. If you are not in a good place with your own mood and self-esteem, there is no chance that you can defect the attention of others. From there, you can work to chance the negative attention into knowledge and acceptance by being an advocate for yourself and psoriasis in general. The good you do will help others. It is the perfect combination of a selfless and selfish deed.