

Communicating with confidence

Part 2: Handling other people's reactions



Changing
the way you face
disfigurement

This guide aims to:

- **Help you to understand in more depth how you may feel and react in social situations**
- **Give you ways to practise communicating more effectively and confidently**

We also highly recommend you read the guide [Communicating with confidence, Part 1: Join the conversation](#)

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Does this sound like you?

Do you feel self-conscious or worried when meeting people for the first time? Are you nervous about social situations? You are not alone; many people feel this way. And having an unusual appearance may add another element to emphasise some of these uncomfortable feelings.

Many of the clients who have been in touch with Changing Faces have expressed these types of thoughts about meeting others:

- Worrying people are looking or what others think about their different appearance
- Wanting to feel more at ease with others, especially new people
- Feeling at a loss, clamming up and not knowing what to say
- Feeling on edge and worrying about being asked questions about their appearance
- Feeling ok until someone mentions their different appearance
- Feeling embarrassed and wanting to escape from the situation
- Feeling like they have to explain or not knowing how much to say
- Not wanting to talk about it.

Some of these may sound familiar to you – and you may have other concerns too.

When I am socialising and meeting new people, I don't mind initiating conversations but I am always waiting for them to ask what happened to me. It's not the question that puts me on edge, but my ability to reply without giving a detailed medical history or coming across as too self-involved that I'm most cautious about. *Mark*

Many people find that one of the biggest challenges of having an unusual appearance is unwanted attention. This may be staring, double-takes, comments and even unkindness. Understandably, this attention can be upsetting and intrusive. Mostly this behaviour is thoughtless; most people are just curious and don't mean to upset you – they forget to think about how you might feel.

Unfortunately, there are some people who stare excessively, laugh or say something rude – and a few will be very unkind. Some people may move away, look away or ignore you. See our guide [Living with an unusual appearance](#) for more information about this.

Changing Faces uses the terms 'unusual appearance', 'condition', 'looking different' and 'disfigurement', when appropriate. 'Disfigurement' is used in the [UK's Equality Act 2010](#) to protect people from discrimination. However, we recognise that disfigurement is not a term preferred by many people who are affected. Many people prefer, when describing themselves, to name their

condition, by saying “I have a birthmark” or “I have neurofibromatosis” or similar. If you would like more details, please see [Language](#).

In our guide [Communicating with confidence Part 1: Join the conversation](#), we explored how people communicate and ways to improve communication skills. Here, we will look in more depth at what may be happening for you and other people, and how to deal with the attention you may receive.

What is happening?

Trying to understand what is happening when you meet someone for the first time can help you to understand why you might feel awkward or worried.

SCARED

At Changing Faces, we use the acronym 'SCARED' to describe what might take place when two people first meet. It shows a range of feelings both people might have – and how this could make them act – creating a very difficult and uneasy situation for both people to handle.

Are you SCARED?

FEEL	→	BEHAVE
Self-conscious	S	Shy
Conspicuous	C	Cowardly
Angry / Anxious	A	Aggressive
Rejected	R	Retreating
Embarrassed	E	Evasive
Different	D	Defensive

Is the other person SCARED?

FEEL	→	BEHAVE
Sorry / Shocked	S	Staring / Speechless
Curious / Confused	C	Clumsy
Anxious	A	Asking / Awkward
Repelled	R	Recoiling / Rude
Embarrassed	E	Evasive
Distressed	D	Distracted

What happens next?

As being **SCARED** can create such a difficult situation, it's natural to try to avoid each other or turn away from the conversation. As someone with an unusual appearance, you may find you contend with this over and over - as a result, you may start to stay away from social situations altogether.

This is understandable – it solves the immediate problem. However, it means you are reducing your chances of meeting people, making friends or finding a partner. Like anything we avoid, it gets harder and harder. By not going out, your communication skills can become rusty and awkward. And you may miss out on the benefits of having good social interactions too, making you feel even more anxious or nervous, as you may constantly anticipate the worst.

We all learn by putting ourselves in new and, sometimes challenging, situations. And, sometimes, to develop new skills, we have to be brave and make ourselves face something we have been avoiding. Tackling social situations may seem hard – but, this can be improved by learning some skills and then trying them out, step by step. Changing Faces can support you.

Five helpful techniques for social interaction

Changing Faces has identified these five techniques to use in social situations:

EXPLAIN – **REASSURE** – **DISTRACT** – **ASSERT** – **HUMOUR**

This may sound too simple – and clearly some situations can be a lot more complicated. But, remembering the five techniques can be a quick and easy prompt when you are in a challenging situation – to remind you of ways to cope. Of course, each person will be different. Depending on the situation and your experiences, try them out and decide what works best and when to use it.

The techniques can be used for yourself and on the other person.

TECHNIQUES	Yourself	The other person
EXPLAIN	Explain to yourself why something may happen, eg. If a person asks a question about your condition, tell yourself, <i>“this person is curious about me”</i> or <i>“he has not seen my condition before”</i> .	Explain your condition to the other person, to help them understand, eg. <i>“It’s just a scar”, “I have something called vitiligo”</i> or <i>“My face is different, but I am just the same as anyone else.”</i>
REASSURE	Reassure yourself, eg. <i>“I am ok.”</i> or <i>“This person does not mean to ignore me – they are looking away because they don’t know what to say.”</i>	Reassure the other person, eg. <i>“It doesn’t hurt”, “I am fine with it”</i> or <i>“It’s ok, I’ve had it all my life.”</i>
DISTRACT	Distract yourself in a difficult situation by thinking about something else, eg. count to 100, say the alphabet backwards or think about something that makes you feel good.	Distract the other person by talking about something else, eg. <i>“The food here is great, isn’t it?”</i> or <i>“Who do you know here?”</i>
ASSERT	Assert yourself by showing you are in control – either walk away or make a short statement, eg. <i>“Please stop staring at me.”</i> or <i>“I didn’t ask for your opinion.”</i>	The other person is most likely to be embarrassed or surprised. Even if they are not, walking away shows you are in control.
HUMOUR	Use your sense of humour to either lighten the situation or put the other person in their place, eg. <i>“You seem to find me very interesting.”</i> or <i>“Wow – you’re so clever!”</i>	The other person may laugh or respond in light of the humour... or be embarrassed.

We have highlighted these techniques in the sections later, to help you to think about using them in specific situations. There is more information about coping with looking different and the reactions you might get in our guide [Living with an unusual appearance](#).

Of course, this can be very exhausting, so it's important to give yourself a break from new people and situations sometimes. Try to be honest with yourself, though, and ask yourself if avoiding going out is becoming a habit.

Handling others' reactions – three key questions

1. What if I'm asked about my disfigurement?

At some point, you are likely to be asked about your unusual appearance. Of course, how we feel changes from day to day. So, you might want to prepare some responses beforehand and then choose the one that matches your mood at the time.

Work out how much you want to say

- Technique used = **EXPLAIN** – **DISTRACT**

"I don't talk about my disfigurement apart from a short sentence explaining what it is if anyone asks - I've had it all my life and there are far more interesting things to talk about. I know I find it boring after the initial concern if a person just talks about various hospital stays, treatment etc." *Alison*

Think about this in advance – how much do you want to say about what happened to you? You can choose how much detail suits you. Your answer may depend on your mood, the context of the situation and who you are talking to. As an example, here are a few ways to respond to a question about burns scarring:

Tell them you do not want to discuss it at all:

"I'd rather not talk about it. I'm sure you can understand."

A short, clear response, answering but also saying this is the end of the subject:

"I was burned when I was younger. It was a long time ago and I don't talk about it much now."

Offer a brief, simple response and then distract the person by moving onto another subject:

"It's just burn scarring from an accident I had a long time ago. I love it here, don't you? It's such a nice place."

Indicating you're at ease with the subject, but encouraging a more general discussion rather than a personal one:

"I was burned when I was younger, but fortunately smoke alarms have greatly reduced the number of injuries like mine."

Giving more information and saying that you are happy to discuss more personal details:

“I was burned when I was younger, and I am going in again soon for more plastic surgery. It’s very interesting. They are going to take a graft from my leg...”

You can adapt the above into your own words and find the statements that work for you. You may need to try some out and practise in different situations, but eventually, these will be easier to say. Changing Faces **can support** you towards feeling more confident with this and there are some **exercises below**.

Most people will be happy with a very brief explanation and will take their lead from you. Remember, on the whole, people are simply curious or interested, exactly as you would be yourself. Also, people may be unsure whether to ask or not – and not want to seem as though they have ignored your condition or avoided talking about it.

Introduce the subject yourself

- Techniques used = **EXPLAIN** – **REASSURE** – **HUMOUR**

If people do not ask you straight away, you may choose to bring up the subject yourself. This can give you more control over the situation – and may relieve any worry you could have when you are waiting to be asked. Again, you can choose how much you want to say and how personal it is:

You may like to give a small amount of information to indicate it is okay to discuss your condition:

“You have a wonderful tan! One of the problems with my condition is that you have to stay out of the sun.”

If you are feeling confident, you may like to be light-hearted, inviting the other person to ask about you:

“I see I’m getting the usual interested looks from the people at the bar. No doubt they’re admiring my style!”

A particularly good strategy if you are likely to meet people again is to give more personal information, whilst also complimenting other people:

“I’m having a good time tonight. Often, I find these events difficult because my appearance can attract unwanted attention, but everyone here seems very nice and friendly ...”

“Sometimes, I show I am comfortable with talking about my condition, but try to open it up to a general discussion so that it doesn't become too personal. I don't mind discussing personal details but I'm acutely aware that not many people can relate to experiences such as mine.” *Mark*

2. *How do I deal with people staring?*

There is a difference between the inquisitive looks we all give each other when we first meet someone and outright staring; unfortunately, most people with an unusual appearance are all too familiar with people staring in curiosity or surprise. Staring can be difficult and uncomfortable, even distressing or offensive if it carries on.

Often people may not be aware that they are staring – or may be insensitive to how uncomfortable this can be for you. It is important for you to let people know that you are aware of their stares and how this makes you feel – and that you want it to stop.

Use expressions

- Techniques used = **ASSERT**
 - Look back, smile and hold the other person's gaze briefly. Most people will smile back and then look away
 - Look back, smile or nod to show them you have noticed - this may also break the ice
 - For more persistent 'starers', look back and hold their gaze whilst raising your eyebrows as an acknowledgement that you've noticed their staring
 - If the staring continues, frown to tell them you are not happy.

Say something

- Techniques used = **ASSERT – HUMOUR**

Ask a direct question:

“Can I help you? Do I know you from somewhere?”

This will potentially deter the observer from continuing to look, and make them aware of their behaviour.

Or make an assertive and simple statement:

“I would prefer it if you didn’t stare at me.”

If the person continues to look, try a direct approach:

“Can you please stop staring at me? It’s very rude.”

Or tell the person that the problem lies with them:

“My appearance seems to be bothering you. It doesn’t bother me.”

Or use humour to tell the person it is uncomfortable:

“You must remember me from before because you can’t take your eyes off me.”

It is possible to control a social situation where you find people are staring just simply by smiling or saying ‘hi’. I work in a shop and find that most people smile back, reply and actually realise that you are ‘normal’. Others will continue with what I consider to be hostile behaviour, which can be upsetting, but I just think what a waste of time they are! (Yes - we have opinions too!) *Alison*

How you respond will depend on how you feel at the time. At times, it may not bother you. At others, you may feel annoyed, upset or angry. Sometimes, you may feel like walking away. You can adapt the examples above into your own words. You may like to prepare several options in advance to help you deal with situations as they come up. Or you may find one type of response works for you and use this most of the time. It is up to you – at first, practise by trying different comments at different times. There are some **exercises below**. Also, a Changing Faces Practitioner **can help** you to identify what works for you.

3. How do I deal with people making comments?

You may overhear people making remarks about you. This might be thoughtless and tactless, rather than deliberate (but still offensive or upsetting for you). Other times, this may be deliberately said for you to hear. Some people may even make rude remarks to your face. This can be very insulting and hurtful. It might make you cross – and you might feel like being angry and rude back to them. Or, you might feel so upset, you don’t know what to say or do.

So... what can you do?

Walk away

- Techniques used = **ASSERT**

If the comment seems to be a direct confrontation or aggressive, sometimes it may be best just to walk away, particularly if you feel threatened or concerned. This can be powerful in itself – as it is telling the other person you are not going to bother to respond to their bad behaviour. This still might leave you feeling very upset or angry – you might want to try talking to a friend or someone you trust to get support and to help you feel better.

Use your expressions

- Techniques used = **ASSERT**

Generally, as with staring, the aim is to let people know that you are aware of the comment and that you don't like it:

- Give the person a firm look for around 1 second and look away again
- Look at the person and hold their gaze whilst raising your eyebrows to show you have heard their comment
- Look and frown to tell them you are not happy.

Say something

- Techniques used = **ASSERT – HUMOUR**

At other times, you may feel assertive and safe enough to respond with a reply that disarms or embarrasses the person.

Use sarcasm. You might say:

“Is that the best you've got?”

or

“Wow, how long did it take you to think that up?”

or

“Oh, you're so original!” or “How imaginative!”

Even if presented humorously or lightly, these responses can show up the other person or make them feel ashamed.

Or use humour to tell the person it is uncomfortable:

“I am blushing at all this attention I am getting from you!”

Make an assertive and simple statement about their rudeness:

“Do you enjoy being rude to other people?”

or

“I am upset by your nasty comment about my appearance.”

Tell the person that the problem lies with them:

“It’s just a birthmark... so don’t make such a fuss about it.”

or

“My appearance seems to be bothering you. It doesn’t bother me.”

Again, it’s useful to prepare in advance and to have a range of options to use. A quick, effective comment is good; and helps to avoid a discussion or even an argument.

“My ability to deal with questions, stares or general rudeness can vary from day to day depending on my mood or other factors.” *Mark*

For all three questions

- Techniques used = **EXPLAIN** – **REASSURE** – **DISTRACT**

Remember, the ‘explain, reassure and distract’ techniques can be used on yourself at any time if you are finding something difficult.

EXPLAIN to yourself that most people are not deliberately being hurtful – people stare or ask questions because they are curious. People often look longer than usual without realising they are doing this. People might stare or double-take or turn away because they are surprised,

uncomfortable or unsure how to act. People ask questions to try to understand. Even people who make comments may be (badly) trying to find a way to deal with the situation. Helping yourself to understand may make some of these things a little less difficult. You might want to prepare a few phrases in advance and try them out, for example:

“This person is just curious about me.”

“This person is not meaning to hurt my feelings.”

“This comment is their problem, not mine.”

REASSURE yourself by finding a phrase or motto you can say in your mind to give you more confidence. For example:

“I am fine.”

“I look different and that’s ok.”

“There is more to me than how I look.”

DISTRACT yourself to take your mind off it. This could be a repetitive task, like counting, saying the alphabet backwards or reciting a poem. Or try to control your breathing (eg. breathe in for a count of three – and out for a count of three). You could think about a recent holiday and visualise yourself being there. Or think about something or someone you like – something to make you feel happy or that makes you smile.

3-2-1 Go!

As a simple, quick way to get you started dealing with unwanted attention:

3 things to do if someone stares at you

2 things to say if someone asks what happened

1 thing to think if someone turns away

It is important to stay in control of your own feelings; try to be assertive, not aggressive, rude or unreasonable back to the person. This will help you to feel in charge of the situation and will keep you safe. Getting some **support** from Changing Faces may help you to find ways to prepare responses in advance. Try out some of the **exercises below**.

Practising your communication skills

Practise regularly

Learning to manage a conversation is a skill. Like learning any skill, it takes practice. People who are good at conversation have most likely had a lot of opportunity to develop their communication skills. Learn by watching and listening to these people. Practise regularly – go to social events and try out the techniques described here and test out your prepared answers. If you think you might not remember, it may be good to write them down at first.

The more you practise, the more you will feel confident and at ease in social situations. Try some of the **exercises** below.

Think about what works

Take notice of the things that work for you. Each time you use one of your answers, think about how it went. If something doesn't work on more than one occasion, try to think why. How might you approach it differently? Could you change the wording? Or would one of your other answers have been better?

Give yourself time

If you feel communication and social events have been a struggle for you, it is natural it will take time to develop your skills. Try to be patient, and reassure yourself if things seem to go wrong. Confide in friends or family about difficult or challenging times, and listen to their support and advice. Try reassuring yourself that things might go better next time. Although it might seem difficult at times, it is worth persevering. The more positive social experiences you have, the more confident you will feel.

Changing Faces can offer **support** to help you improve your skills. Talk to one of our Practitioners or attend our workshop **Reach Out**.

Summary

- Think about what is happening – are you SCARED? Is the other person SCARED?
- How much do you want to tell someone else about your condition?
- Introduce your condition yourself
- Use your expressions and body language to communicate how you feel about stares and comments
- Prepare answers to deal with questions, stares and comments
- Practise your skills
- Monitor what works – and what doesn't work
- Give yourself time.

4. Give more information and show that you are happy to discuss it:

Re-think the scenario as if you were to introduce the topic yourself. What might you say? Give a few examples.

SOMEONE STARING

Your eldest child has just started school. You arrive to collect him early. Several other parents are there – you become aware that one mother is staring at you.

What might you do and say? Try to think of three kinds of answer, varying your reaction. Remember, this is someone you are likely to come across many times and you need to be able to meet her without embarrassment in the future.

1. A simple response indicating that you would like her not to stare:

I would do:

I would say:

2. A response indicating the problem lies with her:

I would do:

I would say:

3. A humorous response:

I would do:

I would say:

Think about a person staring who you are unlikely to meet again. What could you say?

If the person continued staring, how might you be more assertive?

What if the person staring is someone you meet regularly? What could you say?

SOMEONE MAKING A COMMENT

You are at the cinema. You see your friends waiting by the ticket office. You wave and begin to walk towards them. As you do so, you overhear someone else make a remark about your appearance to the person standing next to them.

What might you do and say? Try to think of three kinds of answer, varying your reaction.

1. A quietly confident, but simple response:

I would do:

I would say:

2. A slightly firmer response:

I would do:

I would say:

3. An assertive and very firm response:

I would do:

I would say:

Although the first simple response may be more comfortable, having a few assertive and firm responses up your sleeve may help you to feel more confident: Write down two more firm responses:

1.

2.

Supporting and advising

Changing Faces offers information, advice and support to children, parents and adults with scars, marks or conditions that affect their appearance.

Informing

We work to improve policy and practice in organisations. Through staff training and consultancy we help to create fair and inclusive environments.

Campaigning

We campaign for social change. We aim to promote a society in which people are treated fairly and equally.

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This guide is also available, on request, in plain text and on CD

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Changing
the way you face
disfigurement

