

Living with confidence



Changing
the way you face
disfigurement

“The pressure to conform to society’s unrealistic idea of physical beauty is constant, but I find that by being happy with who I am actually prompts a more positive response from other people and they see beyond my physical appearance to the person inside. My body is where I live, not what defines me as a person.” *Alison*

This guide aims to:

- **Look at the meaning of an ‘unusual appearance’**
- **Explore the challenges of looking different and how to manage these.**

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What do we mean by an unusual appearance?

‘Unusual appearance’ is one of the terms Changing Faces uses when referring to the effect of any trauma, medical condition or treatment on the appearance of a face or body. This may mean:

- You look different or unusual
- You have scarring
- You look asymmetrical
- A part of you does not work in exactly the way it did or should.

Changing Faces also uses the terms ‘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](#).

Anyone can be affected by a disfigurement or an unusual appearance – at any time, at any age, from any background. You, or someone you know, may have been born with a condition. Or perhaps this was caused later, by an accident, an illness or from an injury due to a violent act or self-harm.

Only you can judge the impact of your condition. Your difference may be very visible to others, or, what some people call ‘minor’. Your condition may be visible on your face, or on your hands, or hidden by clothing on your body. Understandably, any type of unusual appearance may be important to you – and may cause you to feel upset, anxious, embarrassed or unconfident.

A note about anxiety and unusual appearance:

Some people experience difficult symptoms of anxiety. This is a ‘fear’ response, creating the instinct to ‘fight or flight’ (ie: run away), including:

- Physical feelings, such as a pounding heartbeat, sweating, feeling faint, nausea, chest pains, not able to breathe, shaking, blurred vision, jelly legs
- Feeling constantly frightened, panicky, very stressed out or on high alert
- Feeling powerless, out of control, of being about to die or go mad

If you experience these feelings, some of the techniques below may help. You may also consider visiting your GP or speaking to us at [Changing Faces](#).

For some conditions, there are medical or surgical measures that make a condition less noticeable; however, it is rarely possible to remove it completely.

Many people learn to live and cope with their condition. Although, it is not always easy and it may take time, at Changing Faces, we can [help you](#) to live a confident and positive life.

What if I am really not coping?

There are some people who struggle greatly to come to terms with their unusual appearance. If you are experiencing any of the following:

- Finding it very hard to cope, eg: feeling very distressed, depressed, anxious all the time and not able to go out or progress with your life
- Feeling very traumatised, unable to sleep properly or concentrate, having nightmares or flashbacks (especially of the incident that caused your condition), avoiding things that remind you or might make you anxious
- Struggling a lot with an 'imperfection' of your body (or part of it), feeling like it doesn't belong to you or it is fundamentally 'wrong' for you.

You may need more specialist or long term help. Please contact [Changing Faces](#) to discuss how to get help, talk to your GP or access information on www.changingfaces.org.uk.

You are not alone – facts and figures

Over 1.3 million people have a disfigurement to their face or body in the UK – that's one in 45.

Around 540,000 people have a facial disfigurement – one in 111. Of these:

- 92,000 have congenital/birth conditions like birthmarks, cleft lips/palates
- 66,000 from accidents such as burns and facial scars
- 40,000 from cancer-related disfigurements, from surgery for skin cancer
- 25,000 have disfigurements to or around the eye
- 100,000 have facial paralysis including from strokes
- 220,000 have skin conditions like psoriasis, vitiligo and acne.

Every year, 415,000 people in the UK are born with or acquire a disfiguring condition to their face, hands or body.

Meeting the challenges

“As well as living with this syndrome, coming from an intimate, small nuclear family and huge extended family, and have always had amazing friends, always been surrounded by love, I lived with extreme sadness. How can someone surrounded by so much love have felt so sad and isolated? Because I was the only person I knew with a facial disfigurement, in my school, within my place of worship, within my huge Italian family, out of all of my friends, I was the only one.” *Nadia*

Looking different can be very challenging. However, although it can take time, evidence shows that many people manage to cope successfully.

Some of the specific challenges are explored in more detail later, with suggestions on how you might be able to manage these situations, including using the techniques described below.

Five helpful techniques for social interaction

Changing Faces has identified these five simple techniques:

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 – reminding you of some ways to cope. Of course, each person will be different. Depending on the situation and your experiences, you can try them out and decide what works best for you 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> , <i>“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</i>	Reassure the other person, eg: <i>“It doesn’t hurt”</i> , <i>“I am fine with it”</i> or <i>“It’s ok, I’ve had it all my life.”</i>

	<i>they don't know what to say."</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.

What if your speech, vision or expression is limited?

- You may need to stress your meaning more, by using your body language
- Use the tone and pace of your voice to give more meaning or explain
- If you can, make eye contact and show your facial expressions
- Emphasise by adding hand gestures
- If your condition affects your speech, as well as trying to talk as slowly and clearly as possible, it may help to say something like, 'Please listen carefully as my speech is not very clear.' Let people know you don't mind repeating yourself. Also, writing things down may be useful too.
- If your condition means you are concerned that people cannot read your expression or your smile easily, or you find it more difficult to make eye contact, you may find showing them your whole face may help – and look them in the eye as best you can – this will still add meaning. And remember, we usually smile with our whole face and eyes, not just our mouth.

There is a lot more information on social and communication skills in our guides [Communicating with confidence Part 1: Join the conversation](#) and [Part 2: Handling other people's reactions](#).

Unwanted attention

The challenge

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; many 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.

Dealing with this day in day out can be difficult and may mean you often feel:

- Judged or criticised by others
- Embarrassed and ashamed
- Anxious and panicky
- Angry and defensive
- Different and noticeable
- Lonely and cut off from other people
- Sad and depressed
- Worried and scared
- Unconfident

You may get to the stage where you assume you will be treated this way by everyone – and you may end up expecting to always feel bad when you go out in public.

It's understandable you may want to avoid uncomfortable or difficult situations. You might think it's unfair you have to make all the effort. However, avoiding going out is likely to limit your life. You may become very anxious about it, making it even harder for you to face social situations.

Managing it

Understanding why

- Technique used = **EXPLAIN** – **REASSURE**

It can help to try to understand why people stare – and this will help you to explain the staring to yourself. Not everyone will have met someone with your condition before – and most of us are naturally curious when we see something or someone different. People often look longer than

usual without realising they are doing this, to make sense of what they are seeing. People might stare or double-take or turn away because they are surprised, uncomfortable or unsure how to act.

Most people are not being 'deliberately' hurtful. Remembering this may reassure you. Maybe you could think of a time you were interested, shocked or surprised by someone's different appearance – it's possible you were also curious and looked for longer than usual.

"Dealing with starers... years back, myself and a friend were going home from school on the bus and there was a guy from another school who kept staring in our direction. To make him aware that I had noticed, I said to my friend that when this guy gets off we should wave and smile at him... which we duly did. I thought it was a good way of being friendly whilst hopefully giving him something to think about." *Mark*

Be prepared

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

You can't stop how other people act, but by preparing in advance, you can anticipate some people's reactions and manage the way this affects you more positively, using the techniques. It will take a bit of time to find out what works for you – try out different approaches, see how successful they are and adjust next time if necessary.

Think of things you might say to yourself to explain other people's behaviour. And find something to give you more confidence and reassure you. This could be a short phrase or motto, for example:

"I am fine"

"I look different and that's ok"

"There is more to me than how I look"

You might like to think of some distractions in advance too. How about some of these:

- Do a repetitive task, like counting or reciting a poem
- Try to control your breathing (eg: breathe in for a count of three – and out for a count of three).
- Think about a recent holiday and visualise yourself being there
- Think about something or someone you like – something to make you feel happy or that makes you smile
- Listen to music or the radio on your headphones

- Hum or whistle a favourite tune under your breath.

Prepare before you go out or go to an event. Think about the situation beforehand. How might people behave? How might you respond? Think about how you will act, what you might say, how you might say it and your body language.

You will find more information about this is in [Communicating with confidence: Part 1: Join the conversation](#) and [Part 2: Handling other people's reactions](#).

Preparing in advance will help you feel in control and more confident – and you will probably find that people will respond more positively to you too.

What can I say?

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

You might want to prepare a variety of responses. You can then judge when to use these, depending on the situation and your mood that day.

For instance, if people ask the question, “What happened to you?”

1. You might decide to say, *“I’d rather not talk about it. I’m sure you can understand.”* – this is perfectly reasonable and a short, firm reply is fine.
2. Or, you might choose to offer a brief, simple response and then distract them by moving onto another subject. For example *“It’s just my birthmark. I like your shirt – can you tell me where you got it?”* This also distracts the person from asking about your appearance.
3. You may give a more in-depth reply and invite further discussion. For example, *“It’s just my birthmark. I’ve had it all my life. It doesn’t cause me any problems although I have to take extra care in the sun.”*

When people stare, you could try the following:

1. Look back, smile and hold the other person’s gaze briefly. Most people will smile back and then look away.
2. For more persistent ‘starkers’, look back and hold their gaze whilst raising your eyebrows as an acknowledgement that you’ve noticed their staring.
3. Ask, *“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.
4. Or you could use humour, *“You seem to find me fascinating!”*
5. If the person continues to look, you could try being assertive, *“Can you please stop staring at me? It’s very rude.”*

Be assertive and use humour

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

Using assertiveness and humour will very much depend on your mood and the situation. These can be used more lightly, as in the examples above. Or, assertiveness and humour can be very handy on the rare occasions you may need to deal with unkind comments.

1. Sometimes, it may be best just to walk away, particularly if you feel threatened or concerned. This is still a way of asserting yourself, by showing the person you are in control and have decided not to respond to them. (This might leave you feeling very upset or angry – try talking to a friend or someone you trust to get support and to help you feel better.)
2. At other times, you may feel strong and safe enough to respond with an assertive reply that disarms the person. You might say:

“Do you enjoy being rude to other people?”

“I don’t like the comment you just made”

“I heard your comment and it wasn’t nice”

3. Or, you can use sarcasm and humour:

“Is that the best you’ve got?”

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

“Hilarious – I’ve never heard that one before!”

“I had an accident. Funny, huh.”

“I just happen to have a birthmark”: “I went for a browse round the local shopping centre after work and became aware that I was being followed. I managed to round up on the person following me – I then asked very loudly if there was something I could help them with – or were they a store detective? The lady concerned said, “Ooh my daughter wants to know what is wrong with you!” I said, “I just happen to have a birthmark and would suggest in future that if you see someone that looks a little different you are not quite as rude as you have been with me, as sometimes situations like this can be stressful, and also if your daughter wants to know, then your daughter should ask me. If you want to know what is wrong with people then your best approach is to ask them directly”. *Linda*

It is perfectly acceptable to use these options, and they can be especially helpful if you feel there are no others available. These responses can show up or embarrass the other person. Like Linda, you need to be feeling confident and in control. It is important to keep control of your own feelings and try not to be aggressive, angry or unreasonable to the person. This will help you to feel in charge of the situation and will keep you safe.

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

For more ways to practise managing unwanted attention, see our guide [Communicating with confidence Part 2: Handling other people's reactions](#)

Society and body image

The challenge

Our 'body image' is the way we see ourselves physically and how this affects the way we think. Society's fascination with celebrity and looks has narrowed our definition of beauty and attractiveness. We are exposed to many images and messages which link 'good looks' to success or emphasise physical 'perfection'. These messages are communicated in adverts, films and other media, and are often taken for granted by many people.

Even though images are often enhanced by airbrushing, clever lighting and photography, many of us still find it difficult not to judge ourselves against them. We all rely on others' opinions to a greater or lesser extent and this contributes to how we view ourselves.

Our 'body image' changes all the time, but feeling that we are expected to look 'perfect' the entire time can affect our body image – and make us feel bad about ourselves. And, if, on top of this, you have been teased or bullied about how you look, your body image may be poor – and you may feel unaccepted, unconfident and ashamed.

Managing it

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

“Learning to be comfortable with your appearance is the first step. Once I accepted that my disfigurement was never going to change I was free to concentrate on the things over which I did have control – my personality, my sense of humour, my clothes and being a kind person.” *Alison*

Trying to live more positively with your condition is a step in the right direction. Try to explain to yourself and feel reassured by:

- Keeping a balanced attitude – remember a lot of what we see in the media, on TV and at the cinema is not 'real'
- Recognising your strengths – for example: What are you good at? What do your friends and family like about you? What do you like about yourself?
- Seeing yourself as a whole person and thinking about how you come across in all ways, rather than focusing negatively on your difference
- Working positively to enhance your body image, eg: give yourself permission to enjoy clothes, accessories or make-up if you want to

- Researching body image in literature or journals
- Finding out about different cultural views of attractiveness
- Try to stay positive - see more below, under Having a Positive Attitude.

Low self-esteem

The challenge

If someone has a lot of negative experiences, they may end up with low self-esteem – frequently feel pessimistic and not able to see anything positive about themselves. When someone's self-esteem is very low over a long period of time, they may feel like they don't know who they are any more and very unconfident about everything. When someone has higher self esteem, they feel good about themselves and are able to recognise their strengths and achievements.

Earlier disfigurement

If you were born with an unusual appearance or acquired a disfigurement early in life, you may have low self-esteem, especially if you were teased or bullied. You may find it hard to feel confident or positive about yourself.

Later disfigurement

If your different appearance came later in life, you may have low self-esteem as a result of all the change this brings – in the way you feel about yourself as well as the way people react to you. You may feel like you don't recognise yourself or that you don't know who you are any more. Many people also experience a strong sense of loss added to this.

Our faces and voices are particularly important to our identity. Any change to your face is especially likely to need a longer period of adjustment. However, some people find a change to their body equally difficult. And, if someone's looks were highly valued by themselves or others, this may also have a big impact on how they feel and think about themselves.

Managing It

- Techniques used = **EXPLAIN – REASSURE**

It can take a bit of time and practice to change the way we think.

1. Try to recognise the thoughts that make you feel bad about yourself and challenge them with something good.
2. What do you like about yourself? List your good points – are you caring, clever, funny, artistic, patient, sporty, good at your job, good at cooking, a good listener / friend / partner? Do you give money to charity? Do you have good dress sense, lovely eyes? Try anything you can think of!

3. List your achievements – these may be exams or qualifications, things you have done at work – or at home, it may be related to a hobby or social event... anything you are proud of or that you have worked at.
4. List all the people who love you – your family and friends.
5. Try to stop comparing yourself to others. Tell yourself something like:

“I am a funny / clever / interesting person.”

“I like myself.”

“I am ok.”

“I deserve love.”

“I deserve happiness.”

“I am just as important as anyone else – my thoughts and opinions count.”

6. Be kind and reasonable to everyone – including yourself!
7. Accept that you have limitations like anyone else. Sometimes we can overcome them. And sometimes not. We all fail – and it is ok.
8. Spend time with positive people, ie. those who make you feel good.
9. Doing positive things, ie. the things you enjoy and find satisfying.
10. If you have an experience that you think did not go so well, write down all the positive points, including how you acted.

See more below, under Having a Positive Attitude.

Remember the things listed above when you feel bad – use them to explain to yourself and to reassure yourself. Go over them again and again to help challenge your negative thinking.

Dealing with low self-esteem can be hard – talking to a [Changing Faces Practitioner](#) may help you get there more easily.

Having a positive attitude

The challenge

Often we are not aware of how we think – or how this affects the way we act. We all have expectations and make assumptions about the world around us. What we have experienced in the past can affect how we see things in the present. This may make it harder to live more positively with an unusual appearance.

Worrying about your condition and how other people respond may mean that, over time, you become pessimistic and expect things to go badly. This may mean you act in a negative way. For example, when you are at a party, you may think, *“No-one wants to talk to me because I look different.”* This may mean you don’t end up talking to anyone – not because you look different, but because you do not look like you want to talk and people don’t know how to approach you.

“Remaining positive... is the best path to take”: “I have found remaining positive challenging at times but can honestly say it is the best path to take. My disfigurement has made me feel inferior, unloved, inadequate at times and it is difficult to replace these feelings with positive ones particularly if you’ve had negative experiences. Over the years I have also learnt that my disfigurement is a small physical part of me so I make sure that when I go out I take care with the rest of my appearance. I make sure my hair looks nice, that my clothes are presentable and I wear accessories. I find a pretty scarf or a chunky necklace distracts attention from my face.” *Alison*

Managing it

- Techniques used = **REASSURE**

We can’t stop thoughts coming to mind, but we can learn to recognise negative thinking – and try to challenge it. Learning to be more aware of your unhelpful thoughts will help you to see them for what they are – negative. Once you can do this, the thoughts may become less powerful and have less influence over you. To help you feel even stronger and more confident, try coming up with a positive thought instead, for example, *“People are interested in me for who I am.”* It will take practice, but when you think a negative thought, make an effort to replace it with a positive thought. Use some of the suggestions under Manage it for the previous two sections on Society and body image and Low self-esteem.

Having a more positive attitude can make a huge difference. On the whole, we all respond well to positive people. This may sound over-simplistic – especially if your life feels like an ongoing battle.

It is true that this takes time and hard work. Changing Faces offers [support, advice and information](#) and you may find it helpful to talk to one of our Practitioners in more depth.

Feelings of loss

The challenge

Loss comes in many forms – the death of someone close to you or the loss of something you value, like your job or your home – or your looks and your body image.

Later disfigurement

If you acquire a disfigurement later in life, you may feel a strong sense of loss – of your previous appearance, but also your identity, of your health, relationships or work. It is common for people to be shocked by their new image when they see themselves for the first time, and for some time after. You may also be dealing with the trauma of an accident or of surgery.

Earlier disfigurement

There can also be a sense of loss if you were born with a disfigurement, or acquired it in early life. This is likely to be a loss of how you imagine life might have been if you didn't look so different. Some people imagine that life would have been much easier or they would have been more successful. You may find yourself blaming your disfigurement for things in your life that go wrong, or you are unhappy about. This may feel harder in periods of change or difficulty.

Managing it

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

You may need to go through the stages of the grieving process, including:



Although these are often referred to as 'stages', the reality is that people can experience one or more of these feelings at different times, and may go back and forth between them.

Some people find it useful to think of their different appearance as a loss – and feel that they need to face the stages of grief and move through them. It is important to look after yourself. If you feel shocked or angry or depressed... it is ok – these feelings are understandable. Give yourself time and, if you feel like it, you may find it helps to talk to someone you trust.

You might find it hard to believe that you will ever feel okay about your looks or yourself, but as grief progresses, most people slowly adjust and accept what has happened. This can take a long time and each person will be different. If you are having treatments it may take longer to feel better emotionally. A [Changing Faces Practitioner](#) (CFP) or a counsellor can offer you time and space to talk this through.

If you have difficulties sleeping, repeated flashbacks, struggle to concentrate and perhaps feel especially sensitive, you may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It would be advisable to talk with your GP for a referral to a suitable professional as early as possible or [contact us for further information](#).

Meeting new people

The challenge

When meeting someone for the first time, many of us feel a degree of apprehension or nervousness – most of us want to be liked and accepted by others. If you have an unusual appearance, you may feel more anxious, defensive or embarrassed about meeting new people – especially if you have struggled with unwanted attention or upsetting reactions. This may lead you to assume people will behave negatively towards you, before you have even met them. Or, you may feel awkward and try to cover this up by talking too much or being inappropriately humorous.

Feeling shy, wary or anxious about meeting people may affect the way you communicate. For example, you may introduce yourself in a whisper, avoid looking people in the eye or keep your head down. Unfortunately, not only will they struggle to hear you, people may also assume that you lack confidence and may feel uncomfortable speaking with you – not because of how you look, but due to how you are presenting yourself.

Some people may recoil at first, or make false assumptions about you, based on your appearance. This can be hard. They may assume that you're less intelligent, or you are not successful, or that you don't have a relationship or enjoy life.

“I am proud of the person I am...”: “I normally am quite able to cope with reactions and stares. I recently started doing a photography course. The tutor showed us how to hold the camera correctly, with the left hand, which for me is very difficult, as I have arthritis in both hands and am also missing the middle three fingers on my left hand from the first joint. When I explained and showed her my hand, she recoiled in horror. To be honest, it was very 'over the top', and it took her a good few minutes to 'recover her composure'. I carry a photograph on my phone of me on the day I was born... I was born with many conditions including a bilateral cleft lip and palate, the hand issue, missing my left big toe, hydrocephalus, a heart murmur, to name but a few! I plucked up the courage to show her. Her reaction was hellish. Her comment was, 'WHAT IS THAT? Oh my God, why would you have a photo of THAT?'
I replied quite casually, 'Because it's me!'
She then realised why my face was as it was and said, 'Is it because of a cleft thing?' I gave a VERY brief explanation of why I looked as I did in it and then changed the subject. The other two people in the class were totally the opposite – they were really lovely about it. I was amazed really that a photographer would show such 'horror' to me, as yes, I do look

different, but I am proud of the person I am, and how I've dealt with the health problems I have. Had it not been for my family and friends support, I may not have been so lucky.”

Linzie

Managing it

Assumptions

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

When people make false assumptions about you, one way to deal with this is to let the person know there is more to you than how you look. This could be done by starting a conversation, talking about things you are interested in or telling people about yourself. Later, Linzie (see box above) decided to write a letter to her photography tutor to say what she thought.

It may help to be aware of the assumptions you make. Think about how you feel in a new situation. Have you already decided how people will act or what they will say? By recognising the expectations you have, this may help you to put these aside and learn to approach people more openly.

“Faith in the goodness of people”: “I immediately assume people I meet from day-to-day make instant judgements, based solely on how I look. It is more often the case that the only person making any assumptions is me. Recently I did a charity bag pack at a local supermarket which involved meeting a lot of new people and without exception they were all perfectly pleasant while some were even up for a chat. That was proof enough to me if I put my faith in the goodness of people it will by and large be returned. To give yourself a chance at happiness, I think you need to give others a chance as well and don't let the ignorant few distort your expectations of everyone else.” *Mark*

Communication skills

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

Once you are talking, it's more likely people will focus on what is being said and how you say it, rather than how you actually look. Being able to communicate well goes a long way towards developing relationships, helping us to feel good in social situations and building self-confidence.

Interestingly, people respond more to how we say things as much as the content of a conversation. The tone of voice, pitch, and speed of delivery are very important. Speaking, **if you can**, in an audible, self-assured, even way will show people you are confident and open.

Body language

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

Body language makes up a big part of communication and how we see each other.

Understandably, you may feel shy or worried and this may mean you avoid looking people in the eye, cover your face, turn away or hide in a corner. Unfortunately, this may actually make other people feel awkward and unsure how to talk to you. On the other hand, confident and open people are generally appealing, regardless of how they look. If you walk into a room confidently, head up, shoulders back, look other people in the eye, smile – people will feel drawn to you and put at ease.

There is a lot more information about learning communication skills and how to improve your body language in [Communicating with confidence Part 1: Join the conversation](#)

Relationships

The challenge

Most people find relationships challenging at times. Having an unusual appearance may mean you find this harder, for instance:

- You may focus on your difference – and assume other people do too
- You may think your difference sets you apart from other people
- You may shy away from chances to make friends, date or meet a future partner
- If you've been upset, hurt or rejected by people in the past, understandably you may want to avoid this happening again.

You may think it's easier to keep to yourself – and steer clear of any potential pain or misery. But, you are also missing out on the chance to meet people – and to experience all the fun, the interesting things and the enjoyment that relationships can add to your life.

A change in your appearance may also have an impact on existing relationships. You may think your partner feels differently about you and you may feel differently about yourself. You may think that friends or family look at you differently. People in your life may also find it challenging to deal with other people's reactions – this might leave them feeling upset or angry or powerless.

Managing it

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

Many people find that having a good network of friends or family around them helps to provide support, and a sense of belonging and being accepted. And this is a two-way street; you too will provide your family and friends with support and love. Some people also find support groups or other social groups very helpful.

You may like to consider how you can extend your social network. The best and easiest approach is to think about what you have in common with other people. If you want to sing in a choir, go rock climbing, or learn a new language, by going and doing this, you'll be guaranteed to meet other people with similar interests. And, on top of that, you'll develop new skills, build your confidence and hopefully meet some new friends along the way!

Many people with an unusual appearance enjoy very successful personal relationships, whether this is dating, finding a long term partner, getting married or having children. You may need to work yourself up gradually to being brave and taking risks, but this may lead to better things too.

If you already have a partner, you may find it useful to explore some of the techniques described together.

There is a lot more information about relationships in [Intimacy, love and relationships Parts 1 and 2](#).

At Changing Faces, we know all this is not easy – but we can [support](#) you in working towards it.

Finding out about your condition

The challenge

Coming to terms with medical jargon and understanding what treatment is available can be daunting. Sometimes it can be hard to get the information that you ask for from your doctor or other health care professionals, especially if you don't feel very confident or assertive. People can sometimes feel like they are not in charge of their own situation or left in the dark and controlled by others.

Managing it

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

You may find it useful to gather as much information about your condition and the treatment options available. This can give you a sense of being in control of your situation. Research shows that if someone is involved in their treatment, they are able to make more informed choices – this means they manage their condition better and can explain things to people more easily when asked about it.

Information can be gathered in many ways, by talking to medical professionals, getting in touch with support groups or organisations and researching literature and websites (although make sure the websites you look at have a good reputation). [Changing Faces Practitioners](#) can't give medical advice or recommend treatment, but can help with talking it through, give you information and signpost you to places to find out more.

It's natural to want to find treatments that will bring physical relief, improve the way you function or help you look how you want to. However, it is important to:

- Know all the facts
- Explore the risks
- Acknowledge the limitations.

It can be difficult if you have placed all your hope in treatment. Try to stay balanced and remember there may not be an answer - in most cases, it is rare for a disfigurement to be completely removed. This may make it easier to avoid disappointment or unhappiness with the results. Also, medical procedures are not necessarily the solution if you are struggling emotionally with your condition or finding it hard to adapt to it. You may need other [support](#) to help with this.

Family and friends may also feel that there must be a 'fix' – and may encourage you to have treatments. Being well-informed can help you to talk to them about their expectations too and it may be worth suggesting they get further support. Either way, it is your choice whether to have any treatment or not.

“I’ve always found that surgery disrupts my life too much”: “I haven’t had surgery for 16 years, and then it was only as a necessity, though other people seem to think that plastic surgery will give me a perfect face. I had countless operations between the ages of 5 and 14 and found it really hurtful in my 20s when a very ignorant work colleague asked if I’d ever considered plastic surgery! I’ve always found that surgery disrupts my life too much – missing school, having time off work, etc. My plastic surgeon thought it was great that I was happy with who I am, realised the limitations of surgery and said to me ‘if it isn’t broken don’t fix it.’” *Alison*

When considering treatment options, you might find it helpful to think about the following questions:

“What makes this the right option for me at this time?”

“Am I doing this for myself, or trying to please others?”

“What difference will the treatment make to my life? What will it enable me to do that I don’t currently do? How will this show? Am I being realistic?”

“Do I know and understand all of the risks as well as the benefits?”

“Do I know what to expect from the treatment? How long will the recovery process take? What will I look like after?”

“What alternatives, if any, exist?”

“Would it be helpful to speak with other people who have undergone similar treatment?”

Take it at your own pace

There is a lot of food for thought in the sections above. It can be overwhelming to think about doing everything at once and it takes time to build up your confidence. By identifying your concerns in a clear way, you may be able to approach them step-by-step, starting with what seems manageable and then building on that.

For example, if you find travelling on public transport very hard, start by taking a friend and travel in off-peak times. The next step may be to travel when it's busier or without your friend, until you build up to a level of confidence where you can approach this on your own or in busy periods.

“SMILE”: “I thought I would share the strategy that I made up for myself when I was in my teens - SMILE.

S = speak – for me it's the most important way to let my personality override my disfigurement.

M = mix – take up a new hobby, go out, meet people – it's hard but worth it.

I = ignore all the magazines, celebrity culture which promote the idea that if you're not beautiful you live a wretched life – it's just not true. Magazines have always been full of these supposedly 'beautiful' people.

L = live. There are many occasions when I could just have closed the door and never gone out again but it would not have been a life. Having a life however hard initially is really worth it in the long run – it has taught me so many valuable skills in handling other people and my disfigurement.

E = eye contact. I always maintain eye contact with whomever I am speaking to. It helps me to be more assertive, to show that I'm comfortable with my appearance and also to show that I'm listening to the other person.

And above all do SMILE – it has broken down many barriers for me.” *Alison*

Summary

- Gaining the confidence to live positively with an unusual appearance requires effort, practice and a positive attitude
- Your disfigurement, and how you feel about it, is personal to you
- You are not alone – one in 45 of us in the UK has a disfigurement
- Explain – reassure – distract – assert – humour
- Although some may stare, most people are curious rather than unkind
- Being prepared and thinking of things to say in advance can help
- 3-2-1 Go!
- Keep a balanced attitude, recognise your strengths and enhance your image of yourself. Learn to like yourself for who you are
- Give yourself time and space to work through feelings of loss
- It is understandable to feel apprehensive when meeting new people. Try to present yourself confidently, smile and hold your head up high
- Many people with an unusual appearance enjoy very successful personal relationships
- Try to wait and see how people respond to you, rather than expecting them to be negative
- Gather information about your condition and any treatments
- Don't pressure yourself – approach your concerns step-by-step
- Many people learn to cope and go on to lead very fulfilled lives
- [Changing Faces](#) offers support, advice and information.

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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Please contact Changing Faces for further details of sources used.

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Changing
the way you face
disfigurement

