

TEACHING COMMUNICATION (SOCIAL) SKILLS

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF APPEARANCE

- Explain how first impressions work. Appearance is important for a very short while, but other factors quickly come into play.
- It is important to remember that other aspects of appearance (choice of appropriate clothes, grooming, verbal and nonverbal behaviour (eye contact; smiling; posture, etc) are also very influential in the opinions formed by others.
- Explain that even if the patient has a visible difference, it is worth taking care/pride in other aspects of appearance (e.g. hair; clothing), otherwise others will assume the patient has written themselves off.
- Social skills are very powerful and will over-ride initial impressions quickly

MANAGING STARING & QUESTIONS



The goal here is to help the person accept that if their appearance is unusual, others will be curious. Others are likely to stare, ask questions, appear uncomfortable or even avoid the affected person.

This is likely to be because they are unsure about how to respond, or afraid of embarrassing either themselves or the affected person. Help the patient understand these responses & help them to acquire the skills to deal with these reactions effectively (e.g. taking the lead when the other person is uncomfortable).

ANSWERING QUESTIONS

- Patients may find it helpful to develop some answers to common questions about their appearance/condition, as this helps them to feel more in control of communication....(Clarke et al 2013)
- The response should fit the person's own style
- Having a variety of possible responses (a 'repertoire') on the tip of their tongue is good as then the patient can 'tailor' the response

ANSWERING QUESTIONS: EXAMPLES

Factual reponse:

- *It's a condition I've had since birth. It affects my appearance and*

The 'Close Down':

- *It's a long story. I'll tell you about it sometime.*
- *Thanks for asking.....but I'd rather not talk about it if that's OK with you...*

Switch of focus:

- *It's a long story. I'll tell you about it sometime. The traffic is terrible today isn't it....*

Using humour:

- *The great advantage about having an unusual appearance is that everyone remembers you*

MANAGING STARING

OPTIONS

- A calm, firm stare back
 - Aggression is rarely helpful!
- Respond with a question
 - *Have we met before? You seem to be trying to remember who I am* (Clarke et al, 2013)
- Distraction
 - Read a newspaper or book to interrupt the staring
 - Do a 'shoe review'. Scan the shoes of those around and decide who is wearing the most expensive shoes or trainers
- Visualisation
 - Imagine the other person shrinking or dressed in pyjamas



PRACTICE!

MAKING THE FIRST MOVE (TAKING THE INITIATIVE)

Being proactive in social situations increases confidence and a sense of control. You can suggest to the patient that they try...

- Walking positively into a room and introducing him or herself to other(s)
- Opening a conversation rather than waiting for others to start
 - *Do you live nearby? How did you get here? I came by bus.....*
 - Discuss the latest football match or sporting event
 - Use an aspect of someone else's appearance as a topic of conversation
 - *I really like the shirt you are wearing.....*

- Casually introducing the topic of the ‘difference’ before any questions are asked
 - *You’ll probably notice I have a condition which affects my face.....the great advantage of this is that people tend to remember me.....*



Encouraging social support



Acceptance by family and friends and social support from loved ones is vital. Suggest to partners ways they can help the patient.

- Being open and willing to discuss appearance issues can help a partner negotiate their own feelings.
- Focusing on personal qualities and reminding their partner (the patient) of the reasons they love and admire them can help boost self-esteem.
- Providing reassurance and showing that they don't have a problem with / accept their partner's changing appearance.

Encouraging social support



- Providing support in social situations, talking about any concerns they may have about an upcoming event and suggesting ways to help.
- Being helpful, asking their partner for suggestions of how they and their friends can help.
- Sharing any intimacy concerns, offering reassurance that they and their partner can work together to find new ways to express their love and affection

Encouraging peer shield activities



- Friends/family members can act as a ‘shield’ on return to normal social activities/school/work. Friends adopt a strong caring attitude to shield the patient from appearance-related criticism and comments. E.g., answering difficult questions about the cause or consequence of an appearance-altering condition on behalf of their friend
Williamson, H., Harcourt, D., Halliwell, E., Frith, H. & Wallace, M. (2010). Adolescents’ and parents’ experiences of managing the psychosocial impact of appearance change during cancer treatment. *Journal of Paediatric Oncology Nursing*, 27 (3), 168-175.
- In the oncology literature the benefits to young people of having a peer shield are well-documented, and this could apply to other specialty areas & adults too.
- Health professionals who have the opportunity could encourage this support from patients’ friends and family.

Support from schools



- Some argue that interventions may single out students from their peers and potentially reinforce negative stereotypes (Diedrichs, P. C., & Halliwell, E. (2012). School-based interventions to promote positive body image and the acceptance of diversity in appearance. In N. Rumsey & D. Harcourt (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of The Psychology of Appearance* (pp. 531-550). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- However, with patient consent (& a sensitive approach and mutual goal-setting between HP & patient) schools can be encouraged & guided to successfully support students who have had an appearance-altering condition or injury. Williamson, H. & Wallace, M. (2012). When treatment affects appearance (book chapter). In N. Rumsey, & D. Harcourt (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Psychology of Appearance* (pp. 414-438) London, UK: Oxford University Press.
- UK oncology nurses offer visits to schools to provide information on the support needs of the patient, speak to classes or whole schools to dispel myths & explain condition and appearance-altering affects.
- Schools can also encourage 'peer-shield activities'

Support from schools



Some examples of good practice:

- *Changing Faces* have a school service: telephone and face-to-face contact with student / school staff, postal information, classroom and teaching modules that offer advice on social skills, bullying, building self-esteem
- *Outlook* (UK hospital-based unit) provides a summer school for adolescents to help the transition from primary to secondary school with role plays, games, artwork & exploration of ways to cope with new social experiences and difficult situations on the school playground.
- Another strategy is to promote an inclusive school environment that is accepting of diversity in appearance (see module 4)

Families need support too



- It can be difficult for partners/family/friends to deal with their own reactions and distress surrounding changes to their loved one's appearance and physical abilities – just as the individual needs someone to talk to, so do partners
- Family members who are shocked or distressed when they see a patient's altered appearance can increase patient distress. Prepare significant others for impending appearance changes and discuss how it may affect them and their loved one.

Williamson, H & Wallace, M. (2012). The psychology of appearance: the future. In Rumsey N and Harcourt D (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of the Psychology of Appearance*. London: Oxford University Press, pp 414-438

- Encourage partners to share concerns and challenges with you or a trusted friend or family member (see **activity on intimacy issues**).
- Consider support groups
- Refer for higher level support if necessary

Validating and Normalising appearance concern



If patients share their worries here are some do's and don'ts on how to respond

Do.....

- Reassure that concern about appearance is normal.
- Explain that psychological adjustment can be slower than physical healing.
- Ask if there are specific issues that they find difficult.
- Offer the chance to talk to you or a colleague.
- Answer questions and provide condition-specific literature.

Validating and Normalising appearance concern



Don't.....

- Say that they look fine to you.
- Say that there are lots of people who have 'worse' disfigurements.
- Say they are lucky or should be grateful that the treatment has worked.
- Suggest they are silly or making a fuss about nothing.
- Tell them there is nothing else anyone can do.