

BODY IMAGE TIPS FOR COPING WITH SCARS

Important things to know:

You are not alone!

Most people who experience scars and changes to their appearance from an illness or injury will experience concerns about body image. This is common and to be expected. Please do not think you are alone in worrying or caring about the changes to your body. Be patient with yourself and recognize that it is normal and natural to need time to adjust.

How you feel about your body image is important and meaningful

Body image refers to ways you perceive, think, and feel about all aspects of your body. Most importantly, body image experiences are personal and private. They do not have anything to do with how others view you, only how you view yourself. Caring about your body image does not mean you are vain and superficial.

Concerns about body image can arise at any point

When you have an illness or injury that results in changes to your appearance, concerns about body image can occur right away or may not arise until much later during your recovery or survivorship experience.

Important things you can do:

Acknowledge your emotions

Difficult emotions such as sadness, grief, shame, embarrassment, anger, fear, regret, frustration, disgust, disappointment, and others can arise when dealing with body image changes. Being able to identify your feelings and get support to cope with them is important to your health and well-being.

Do not delay or avoid viewing your scars

The more you avoid viewing the parts of your body affected by illness or injury, the more difficult this can become over time. Avoidance of viewing your body will strengthen or reinforce the discomfort you have with your body. A few things to keep in mind:

- Viewing yourself and your scars is an important first step in your recovery
- Viewing your scars during early phases of recovery allows you to more fully appreciate improvements in your appearance that will occur over time

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Dim the lights

Harsh lighting in hospital and exam rooms is not ideal for viewing yourself for the first time after an injury or a surgery. If possible, dim the lights or begin with the lights completely off, working your way up to viewing yourself in full lighting.

Take a picture

If you are having difficulty with directly viewing yourself, ask a trusted friend or family member to take a picture of the affected body part. Viewing this picture before directly looking at yourself may further prepare you for viewing yourself for the first time.

Use a mirror

Begin by first viewing in the mirror an area of your body not impacted by illness or injury and then allow yourself to focus on the affected area. Some find it helpful to view the affected area in small sections. Keep in mind that mirrors come in different sizes. You can select a small hand-held mirror first to focus on a small area of your body and work your way up to a full-length mirror.

Use your sense of touch

We learn about the world and our bodies through various senses. Some may find it helpful to feel scars or affected body parts before looking at them. After making sure it is medically safe to do so, gently touch your scars as a way of learning about them and reconnecting with your body.

Practice relaxation

In order to help your body relax, practice some deep breathing or close your eyes and imagine being in a pleasant and peaceful place prior to viewing yourself. Other things to help you relax can include soft music or pleasant aromas.

Be compassionate

Be aware of what you are saying to yourself when viewing your appearance. Try to offer yourself the same compassion you would offer to a friend or someone else in your position. Showing compassion for yourself means trying to let go of harsh criticism and evaluation of your body.

Seek support

When you are ready to view yourself for the first time, consider whether you would like to be alone or with someone you trust. If you are struggling with your body image, communicate this with your loved ones and your treatment team. Utilize counseling services available to you, and ask your treatment team if you need a referral.

For more information and resources on body image care for cancer survivors, visit FingeretPsychologyServices.com.