

Psoriasis...
you won't stop me!

Overcome anxiety & fear of uncertainty



see psoriasis:
look deeper

NHS
Royal Free London
NHS Foundation Trust

Psoriasis... You Won't Stop Me

This booklet is part of the Psoriasis... You Won't Stop Me series: six booklets designed to help people with psoriasis recognise and manage the feelings and emotions that are often associated with the condition. The booklets have been produced by the See Psoriasis: Look Deeper collaboration and authored by experts in dermatology and psychology who have supported many people with psoriasis. The booklets have also been reviewed by people living with psoriasis.

To view all the booklets in this series and to find out more about See Psoriasis: Look Deeper, visit www.seepsoriasislookdeeper.co.uk. Other titles in this series are:

- Overcome your embarrassment
- Say what you feel
- Feel good about yourself
- Overcome social isolation
- Overcome your need for acceptance & approval of others

Not all people with psoriasis feel all or any of these emotions, and so only use those booklets that are most relevant for you. Whilst these booklets may help, if you feel unable to cope, it is important to make an appointment with your GP.

For more information please contact the Psoriasis Association.

About the authors



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About this booklet

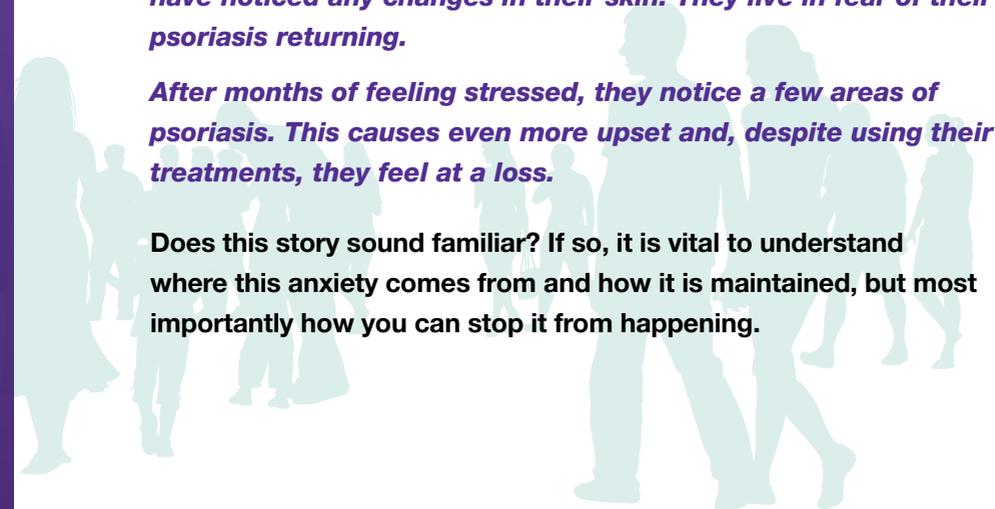
People who feel anxious mainly believe that something bad and beyond their control is coming soon and they will not be able to cope with it. People with psoriasis often fear a flare-up and their psoriasis getting out of control.

For example:

A person with psoriasis has had many flare-ups since their diagnosis five years ago. Despite it being six months since their last outbreak, it still preys heavily on their mind that it will happen. This means that they check their skin thoroughly every day, repeatedly ask others if their skin looks 'ok' and take every opportunity to catch their reflection. If they are unable to do this they become extremely stressed about whether others have noticed any changes in their skin. They live in fear of their psoriasis returning.

After months of feeling stressed, they notice a few areas of psoriasis. This causes even more upset and, despite using their treatments, they feel at a loss.

Does this story sound familiar? If so, it is vital to understand where this anxiety comes from and how it is maintained, but most importantly how you can stop it from happening.



Dealing with illness

Having a medical condition can make you more in tune with your body's sensations and changes. Although psoriasis is treatable, because it is not completely curable you may feel vulnerable about the possibility of your psoriasis returning even if it has totally cleared whilst on or after treatment. The chance of it returning can feel like an ongoing threat and make you feel anxious.

Unhelpful information from the media

The internet and the media can influence the way we perceive things, including our skin. The media publish unrealistic images of beautiful individuals with perfect, flawless and glowing skin and place a strong emphasis on this being *desirable* and *normal*. This is echoed throughout society. People with skin conditions such as psoriasis are rarely portrayed in the media in a positive light. Also people in the public eye who have psoriasis often try to hide it and are reluctant to talk about it. Given this, it is unsurprising that people with psoriasis often feel ashamed, not normal and that they should keep their psoriasis hidden.

It is important for you to be aware of the influence of the media and how it promotes lack of acceptance and to challenge this! Remember negative experiences can increase your sense of vulnerability.



Avoidance



The fight-or-flight response to danger is natural. A very useful part of this response is for a person to focus on possible threats and how to avoid them. Unfortunately this response can sometimes be misdirected, which magnifies fear and negatively impacts a person's life.

Fear can lead to avoidance. Fear of a flare of your psoriasis may lead you to avoid social situations, only wear clothing that covers your psoriasis and even avoid others seeing your skin altogether by completely covering it at all times.



List below things you do to avoid exposing your psoriasis or dealing with fears that you have:

Challenge your thinking

Unhelpful assumptions are likely to negatively affect the way you think about your psoriasis, changes in your appearance, and how you interpret information from medical professionals. In general, people with anxiety tend to overestimate how serious their problem is and underestimate their ability to cope with the problem. They tend to ignore information that suggests things will not be as bad as they believe, for example they overlook previous flares that have been treated successfully or that their friends still care about them when their psoriasis is bad. As a result, all psoriasis-related experiences are viewed as a 'catastrophe' or 'worst-case scenario'.

Stop thinking the worst

Thinking the worst is at the heart of vulnerability. It can increase anxiety and prevent people from taking action when required.

Learning a less catastrophic way of thinking is like developing any skill: you simply need to practise. Use the following table to write down situations that distress you. Describe the situation and write down in detail your 'self-talk' in the thoughts column. Then, review your self-talk and see what is irrational or catastrophic about your beliefs. Finally, re-write your self-talk in a more balanced way and remind yourself of this new approach as *often* as possible.

| Situation | Thoughts | Alternative thought |
|-----------|----------|---------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Face your fears



It is important to take a look at your fears about living with psoriasis. Use the table below to think of the ways that you deal with your psoriasis, either by overprotecting yourself or avoiding situations. Then examine the probability of your fear occurring.

| Fear | Behaviour | How likely I feel this is to happen |
|------|-----------|-------------------------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Now start gathering information by discussing your feared event with your family, friends, doctor etc. You will notice that the realistic odds of your feared event happening are less than you believe. This is because your intuition, or how you feel, is wrong, because it is a result of your vulnerability.

Develop acceptance!

Accepting that psoriasis comes and goes is essential to an easier life. Whilst it is natural to want to have as few flares as possible this should not be to the detriment of your life.

With this in mind, think about the last time you had a flare of psoriasis. How long ago was this? What was happening at this point in your life? Did something particular happen prior to its onset? How did you know a outbreak was about to happen? Did you think you would be able to cope? What happened eventually?

Use the space below to jot down the answers to these questions:

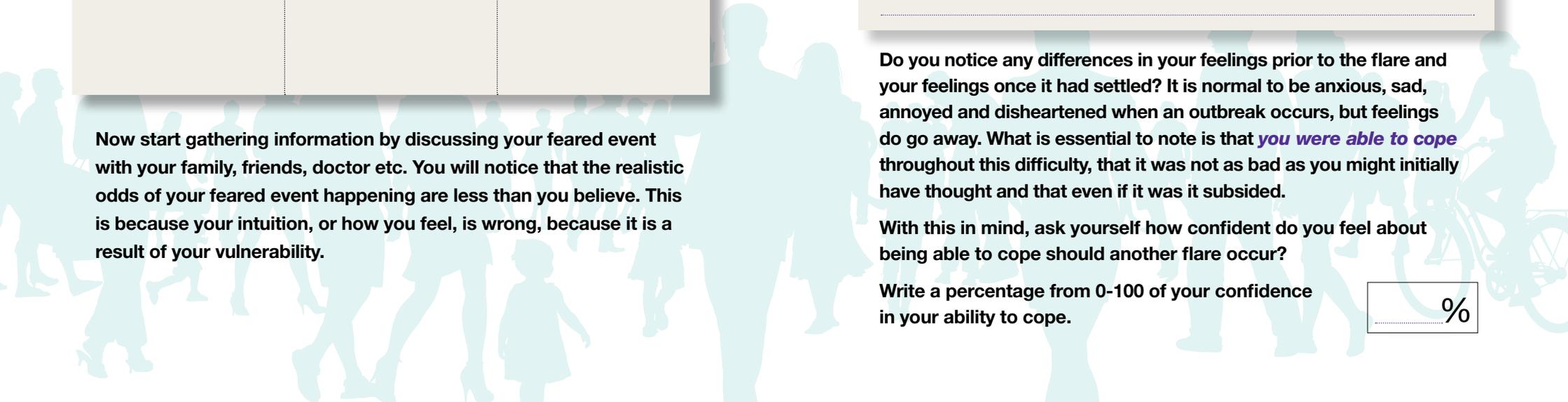
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Do you notice any differences in your feelings prior to the flare and your feelings once it had settled? It is normal to be anxious, sad, annoyed and disheartened when an outbreak occurs, but feelings do go away. What is essential to note is that *you were able to cope* throughout this difficulty, that it was not as bad as you might initially have thought and that even if it was it subsided.

With this in mind, ask yourself how confident do you feel about being able to cope should another flare occur?

Write a percentage from 0-100 of your confidence in your ability to cope.

| |
|--------|
|% |
|--------|



To help improve your ability to cope should you have a psoriasis flare-up, use the table below to record your experiences, emotions and thoughts.

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| Date of psoriasis flare-up | e.g. <i>1st Sept</i> | | |
| What will happen during the flare-up? How will you help to reduce it? What does it make you feel? How bad will it be? | e.g. <i>It will be very bad as it might spread, becoming visible, itchy & sore. Medicines can possibly help me. I feel sad, scared & unhappy as I know I won't be able to cope.</i> | | |
| How certain are you of this? And your ability to cope? (Rate from 0-100%) | e.g. <i>Certainty = 90% Ability to cope = 5%</i> | | |
| What actually happened? | e.g. <i>It wasn't so bad, I could hide a lot of it and the topical treatments and tablets helped.</i> | | |
| How much of my original prediction was true? (Rate from 0-100%) | e.g. <i>20%</i> | | |
| What have you learnt? | e.g. <i>I catastrophised my thinking and expected the worst from myself.</i> | | |
| How confident do you feel coping next time a flare-up occurs? | e.g. <i>50%</i> | | |

Let go of your focus on psoriasis



Stop to think about what you tend to focus on when you are feeling anxious about your psoriasis. Take a moment to list particular situations or areas of your body that you become increasingly aware of when you are worrying about your psoriasis.



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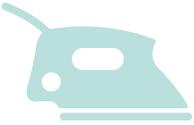
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When we are focused on our psoriasis, our attention is taken away from everyday activities and even from important tasks. For example, have you ever found it hard to focus on a work project or even just read a book because your mind kept wandering back to your worries or your psoriasis?

Learning to retrain your attention is an important step in overcoming your anxiety.



Shifting your attention



There are two ways you can shift your attention - a simple one involves practising sustaining it whilst engaging in everyday tasks, and the other involves a more formal mindfulness practice.

Mundane task attention training

Take a moment to think about some everyday mundane household or work related activities that you engage in where your mind might wander frequently, for example doing the dishes, ironing, gardening, typing an email. Write these below so that you can refer back to them when planning your attention training:



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Pick one of these tasks for your first attention training, and record the task and when and where you do it. Each time you notice your mind wanders off the task, shift your attention back to it by focusing on the details of the task; the sounds, the smells, the light, the colours etc. After you have finished your attention training, rate how much of your attention was self-focused versus task-focused and think about what you have learned from the activity.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be used as a letting go activity where you choose to notice but then let go of distressing thoughts, emotions or physical sensations. Remember this is not a quick fix, it is not easy and requires daily practice.

You can learn more about mindfulness on the Mental Health Foundation website.

Relaxation

An important trigger for psoriasis is stress. Many people describe their psoriasis flaring during or after periods of stress. Relaxation techniques help us to disengage from stress and worry.

1. Engage in slow, deep, relaxed breathing.
2. Slowly start tensing your right foot as tightly as you can. Hold this for 8 seconds.
3. Now relax your right foot. Notice how it feels?
4. Continue your deep relaxed breathing.
5. In turn, repeat step 2 and 3 with each part of your body, moving progressively up the body until you reach your face.

Remember psoriasis is a common skin condition. It is not something you chose; do not suffer alone!



About See Psoriasis: Look Deeper

See Psoriasis: Look Deeper is a collaboration made up of The Psoriasis Association; Mental Health Foundation; Dr Sandy McBride, Consultant Dermatologist, Royal Free Hampstead NHS Trust; Professor Christine Bundy, Professor of Behavioural Medicine, Cardiff University and Toby Hadoke, actor, writer, comedian and psoriasis patient.

The aim of the collaboration is to look beyond the physical aspects of psoriasis and recognise the bigger life impacts associated with the disease, including emotional wellbeing and quality of life.

The collaboration's ongoing work continues to raise awareness of the full impact of psoriasis and provide helpful resources for both patients and healthcare professionals.

For more information, please visit www.seepsoriasislookdeeper.co.uk

For more information and help contact:

Your GP

The Psoriasis Association* **Telephone:** 01604 251620
Online: www.psoriasis-association.org.uk
For under 21s: www.psoteen.org.uk

Mental Health Foundation* **www.mentalhealth.org.uk**

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