

When People Stare

BY BARBARA KAMMERER-QUAYLE, MA

While in the secure cocoon of the burn center, most burn survivors experience extraordinary social support and acceptance. After discharge and return to their familiar community and social activities, they may feel surprised, shocked, or completely overwhelmed as they meet the curious looks and inquisitive eyes of strangers.

Before a burn injury, most of us passed through stores, restaurants, sporting events and social occasions with minimal interest from others. Now, if our burns are visible because of their location or the way we choose to dress, all of that has changed. The probability of someone staring at us exists in many social situations. No one is truly prepared for this intense public attention. The trick is to continue doing what we want and going where we choose even if people stare. It is realizing and deciding that we will control our lives not be controlled by what we imagine others think about us.

THOUGHTS + BELIEFS = ATTITUDES ABOUT APPEARANCE

From the time we are children, we develop our thoughts and beliefs about appearance. We possess a complex set of beliefs about what appearance means in our life. These beliefs are the result of our thoughts and influences such as parents, teachers, friends, magazine ads, movies and television shows. Our beliefs range from thinking that “looks are the ultimate characteristic to embrace for a happy and successful life” to “looks are relatively unimportant to the value of an individual’s life fulfillment.”

When one’s appearance has been altered by a burn injury, it complicates and sometimes threatens our existing thoughts and beliefs about appearance. The

important thing to remember is that most burn survivors do eventually accept the alteration in their appearance, incorporate their changes into a healthy body image, and go on to live successful lives. This often takes time, support, self-love, and learning new behavioral skills.

STARING: A FACT OF LIFE

Staring is part of human nature. Heads usually turn to look at teens with tattoos and body piercing, people with hearing-impairments signing, those using wheelchairs, and individuals wearing exotic ethnic costumes. Even the obese frequently gain prolonged visual interest. It is a reality of life that looking different gets attention. On the one hand it is “what’s so” and on the flip side it is “so what.” Staring has



Barbara Kammerer-Quayle interacts after a seminar.

power and meaning only to the degree that we give it meaning and power over our lives.

Most people stare because they are unfamiliar with burns and feel compassion and concern, while others are curious. To a smaller degree, some stare because they are overwhelmed by such a traumatic injury, and the fewest stare because they are rude.

WHAT WE SEE DEPENDS ON WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

The way we choose to interpret and perceive stares will influence our ability to cope with stares. If we focus our attention on staring and interpret and perceive stares as evil and mean, that will be our experience. If we diminish the importance of staring and interpret stares as a mild “inconvenience,” that will be our experience. Our interpretations and perceptions either defeat or enhance our social success.

According to Thomas Cash, PhD in *The Body Image Workbook*, it is flawed thinking to assume that because others notice you it means that they will dislike you. Cash states that “friendliness, kindness, and conversational skills” are “more influential than whatever might be different about your looks.” How many people have you discarded just because they had some physical imperfection? Probably none.

In Cash’s view, what is true is that “you are the one noticing what you don’t like about your appearance.” Other people usually do not care because they are thinking about other things. The first six to nine months after my own burn injury, I continually “looked” to see if people were “looking” at me. Staring became my primary concern and did not allow me to live in the moment nor be totally present to those who were with me. Other burn survivors have reported the same behavior.

Cash also points out that “first impressions don’t always last” and “our initial reactions to someone’s appearance are not frozen forever in our minds.” A person may focus on a burn survivor’s appearance initially. I consider this pretty normal. When I meet another burn survivor for the first time, I often take a few minutes to “get used to” the new and unique skin patterns I am seeing. After having established a relationship, burns become less significant and personal traits such as intelligence, humor, integrity, and sensitivity are among the most defining characteristics. Frequently I forget which side of the face, which hand, or exactly where the burns are located.

People often remember us because of our difference. I have found this has more advantages than

disadvantages. People in markets, businesses and restaurants who remember you from a previous visit are usually welcoming, friendly and helpful when they see you again. It is more empowering to be remembered as a friendly, warm person who happens to have a facial or body difference rather than someone angry, fearful and uncomfortable with himself.

SO WHAT DO I DO?

One of the biggest social challenges that burn survivors face is how to respond to someone who is staring. You cannot control why people stare. You can only control your response to it. People respond to stares in a variety of ways. Warm responses connect us to people and help us feel socially competent, comfortable and rather proud of our capability.

I never advocate handling staring with an angry response. Anger at others frequently hurts most the person who is angry. When one responds with anger is it usually out of fear and says more about you than the person staring. There are times when you or a protective family member may want to lash out verbally at someone staring. Being verbally abusive does not reflect well on you or your family and may leave you feeling frustrated, resentful and bitter inside.

BE POSITIVE, DIRECT AND CONFIDENT

My most effective response to someone staring is direct and simple. Stand up with straight posture, look directly into the person’s eyes, smile, and with a friendly tone of voice, say, “Hi, how’s it going?” or “Hi, great day, isn’t it?” Looking at the person and speaking to them shows social awareness and self-confidence. When someone staring discovers a comfortable and confident response, they are sometimes surprised and often a little embarrassed about staring. Remember you are in control not the person staring. Become conscious of your own behavior.

If eye contact, smiling AND speaking seems like too much at first, simply look ‘em in the eye and smile! In a practical sense, a smile lifts the spirits and increases one’s energy. Energy and warmth radiate from faces wearing smiles. People who smile at others have advantages in forming relationships because a smile often dispels the fears and apprehensions of strangers. It sends a message of being approachable and at ease. A smile also diminishes the visual intensity of scarring and skin discoloration.

Eye contact is an extremely important communication tool. The appropriate use of eye

contact is one of the most frequently noted characteristics of socially successful children and adults. Eyes connect people when they communicate. This holds particular importance for burn survivors with a facial difference whose lack of eye contact may be interpreted negatively. When a person continually looks to the side, looks down, or otherwise avoids eye contact, the message communicated is that he lacks confidence.

Another alternative is to simply ignore the person who is staring and go about your business. Sometimes this will be the case due to fatigue or feeling that staring is not bothersome.

PRACTICE RESPONDING

Learning and practicing new ways of responding to stares may feel awkward at first. Practice how you will respond before staring happens to increase your confidence when it does occur. I practiced in front of a mirror wearing my pressure mask and garments until I felt comfortable doing it in public. “Act as if” until it becomes as natural as speaking to a friend.

MORE IDEAS

Changing Faces, a support organization for people with facial differences, suggests other strategies such as saying:

“I would prefer it if you did not stare at me.”

(assertive, simple)

“Does my face bother you? It doesn’t bother me?”

(confident, assertive)

“You should see what I look like on a bad day!”

(confident, humorous)

A young woman who was burned as a child reports a creative approach to staring. She and her friends made “business cards” for her to give to kids and adults

who stare. They state her name, how she was burned, and that she’d be happy to answer any questions they have. One young man reports that if he’s in a crowded place he simply looks back at the person staring. They usually look away and go on.

HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS CAN HELP

It is helpful for health care professionals to discuss staring with burn survivors and their families before discharge. They need to know that some people will stare and become aware of specific strategies to use in public and in social situations.

Although learning to interact socially when people stare can present challenges, meeting this challenge confidently and graciously brings great rewards and personal pride in your character, courage, inner strength, and spirit.

YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES - GO FOR IT!

Cash, T. (1997). *The Body Image Workbook: An 8-step Program for Learning to Like Your Looks*. New Harbinger Publications, Inc. Oakland, CA.

Partridge, J. (1990). *Changing Faces: The Challenge of Facial Disfigurement*. Penguin Books, London.

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This story is an excerpt from The Phoenix Society’s *Burn Support News*, Summer Edition 2001, Issue 2. *Burn Support News* is a quarterly publication that contains articles on the emotional, psychological, and social aspects of burn recovery.

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