

Tools to Handle Questions and Teasing

BY BARBARA KAMMERER QUAYLE, MA

After discharge from the burn center, a primary concern of many burn survivors and their families is the frequent questions asked about their appearance or their injury. Most of us are not accustomed to so much attention from strangers. Most people in our society are unfamiliar with burn injuries and have little experience with meeting people who look different. Many ask questions because they care and are concerned. I believe very few ask to be rude. Being bombarded with questions in public places may present moments of anxiety and dread for some. For others it is simply a chance to talk about their experience. Everyone's comfort level differs when it comes to people asking questions.

Questions may come from a curious child who suddenly blurts, "Hey, what happened to your face?" Concerned adults may exclaim, "Man, you must have been in a bad accident!" A compassionate elderly lady may comment, "Oh, I bet you have been through so much." Each of these situations seems to require a response.

The most uncomfortable part about people asking questions is that it is often in a public setting and in front of others who are also curious. Burn survivors frequently experience nervousness and physical symptoms when they first begin socializing. In the past when a stranger asked me about my burn, it was surprising, overwhelming and embarrassing for me. My heart raced, my stomach tensed, my throat tightened, and I somehow stammered out an answer. I began feeling like a social victim when I was in public. It became important to learn HOW to answer questions and feel comfortable.

BE PREPARED BY REHEARSING YOUR RESPONSES

A technique called Rehearse Your Responses (RYR) may help you to master the challenge of intrusive questions. We've all probably heard this

common question, "I hope you don't mind me asking, but what happened to you?" If you can handle this one, other questions can be easily managed too.

Begin by writing out a two or three sentence response to the above question. An example might be, "I was burned in a house fire several years ago, and I'm doing much better now. Thanks for asking." Another possibility is, "I was injured in a work accident, and I'm recovering pretty well. Thanks for your concern." Adding the sentence, "thanks for asking" or "thanks for your concern" brings a polite end to the conversation.

If someone wants to discuss the injury circumstances in more detail, calmly answer, "That's all I want to discuss about it today. Thank you for understanding." You are in control of the conversation, have responded in a friendly and polite manner, and can be proud of yourself!

Rehearse Your Responses to other possibilities such as "Wow, what happened to you?" "Golly, it looks like you were in a bad accident." or "What happened to your face?" RYR can make spontaneous questions less awkward.

As you RYR, you may want to practice with another person or in the privacy of your room in front of a mirror. As you practice, imagine how your posture, eye contact, and smile will look. Imagine your friendly, confident tone of voice and the calm and composed way you answer questions.

The RYR method is effective when we choose not to engage with someone in further conversation about our burn injury. We may want to tell people that we connect with on a deeper level more than a short version. Telling our story can be therapeutic and healing. It should be our right to decide when and who we tell.

While these are some suggestions, they are not the only responses. It is best to create polite, warm

sentences that you feel totally comfortable rehearsing and saying in social situations. For some this will be easier than for others. Everyone has a different set of social “abilities” and it may take some people a little longer to feel confident. Taking the time to create responses and practicing them are well worth it.

PARENTS ARE IMPORTANT ROLE MODELS

Parents of children with burns act as role models for appropriate responses to questions. If they answer questions warmly and calmly, the message to the child about his burn injury is more positive. When parents respond aggressively or angrily to a person with a question, the hostile tone of voice and words send a negative message to the child.

It is important to assist children with their responses. They require the tools and the time to practice. Children may need coaching with the language or the right words to use. Parents can help by sitting down with their child, recalling social situations when questions were asked, such as questions asked at school, and helping them to form their own responses. Then remember to RYR. This is an important part of the preparation for reentry back to school.

Children can learn to interact socially in a confident manner. Practicing RYR with a child can be set up like a game. Spontaneous questions asked while doing homework, eating meals, or playing outside are RYR practice opportunities. Surprise questions from family members give children a chance to practice responses in a safe environment while building important social skills. It is good to find a little humor in all of this and remind ourselves that we won't allow others to spoil our good times. Like stares, questions only have power over us if we allow it. When children can respond comfortably, they have the optimal opportunity to become more independent, secure, and capable.

TEASING CAN BE MANAGED WITH CONFIDENCE AND SKILL

Just as we need tools to skillfully answer questions, we also need tools to manage teasing. Children with burn injuries are sometimes teased and called names because of their scars, skin discoloration, physical limitations, asymmetry of features, amputations, hair loss, pressure garments, or tissue expanders. Parents and children need to know that teasing may occur. Parents can teach children how to respond to it BEFORE it happens and enhance the child's confidence in returning to school.

Arranging a School Reentry Program for the entire school educates the student body and faculty while decreasing their anxiety and fears. The program may also decrease the amount of teasing that occurs because it increases sensitivity to the child. Children need a tool belt filled with a variety of verbal tools that can be useful in challenging social situations. Just as responding to questions is a learned skill - responding to teasing is also a learned skill that takes thought and practice.

According to Dr. Susan Porter-Levy, there seems to be a rule among bullies that says, “If I get the response I want, I'll feel more powerful.” If the person teased gets mad or upset or cries, then “I'm bigger, stronger, more popular; therefore, I feel better about myself.” It stands to reason, states Levy, that if the bully does not get the response he wants, then the name calling will not achieve the desired result and will not be worth doing. If the person doing the teasing ends up feeling embarrassed, put off guard or surprised the chances are he will stop.

Parents, teachers, and counselors frequently tell children to ignore teasing. This is one response to use. Dr. Levy believes that always ignoring teasing commits children to non-action and may teach them to discount and suppress their feelings.

Another method of dealing with teasing is instructing children to tell the teacher when they are called a name. When children need protection, says Levy, they should always know they could request an adult's help, but telling is often ineffective. Using this as the only method for managing teasing confirms the belief that children are incapable of dealing with the problem themselves and could further distance them from their classmates.

TOOLS FOR HANDLING TEASING

I would like to discuss several tools that children can place securely in their tool belts and bring out for use at the appropriate times. These tools must be learned and practiced just like the equipment we use for sports, art, cooking, and building.

The first tools in the tool belt are behavioral skills that clearly communicate pride and confidence. If children present themselves as victims and act like victims they will often be treated like victims. Straight posture, keeping the head and shoulders up, eye contact with classmates, a strong and friendly voice and a smile all convey confidence. These tools may need to be practiced in front of the mirror and with family members to gain self-assurance.

Scott Cooper in his book *Sticks and Stones* examines non-violent ways for children to cope with a variety of situations and confrontations. He is a parent who wrote the book because of the struggles his own children faced in dealing with ridicule, teasing, and other conflicts. It is a valuable resource for parents, children, health care professionals, and teachers.

One technique Cooper advocates is the Power I which is the use of I statements. In a clear, confident tone, tell people what you want such as “I want you to stop doing that,” “I want you to leave me alone,” or “I want you to stop teasing me.” This technique may or may not stop the teasing.

If teasing continues, the Mighty Might technique can be useful. When another child teases, stay calm, and whatever they say simply respond, “You might be right.” With each statement made, repeat in a passive manner “You might be right” like a broken record-over and over. If the child is persistent, they should finally just give up because all of the fun is taken out of the teasing. People tease to get a reaction. They want to provoke anger, tears, and sadness. The Mighty Might does not give them the response they want and takes all of the fun out of it.

Another strategy Cooper suggests to respond to teasing is The Shrug. The child simply shrugs her shoulders and says, “I don’t care,” or “So what,” either aloud or to herself and then walks away. Give no eye contact to the teasers and look bored with their actions. This strategy requires verbal and internal self-discipline to mentally, physically and emotionally shrug off teasing.

Though Cooper offers many ideas, the Reverse Tease can be fun and effective for adolescents. This technique uses playful, sarcastic humor to respond to teasers. It can take the form of, “Oh, you are so kind,” “Why thank you very much,” “You know my dream is to be just like you,” or “Oh, you’ve noticed I’ve been burned; aren’t you a genius?” There are many creative and funny responses to practice for children gifted

with a natural wit. This technique should not be used with teasers who are mean or might want to hurt you physically.

The final technique Cooper recommends is the Disappearing Act. Some people are dangerous bullies and want to do physical harm to others. If teasing cannot be handled with learned strategies and it escalates to the point they feel threatened, children need to disappear from the scene. They must go where there are adults who can offer protection. It is also time for parents to intervene with the school administration or parents of the bullies.

Questions and teasing are a small part of our journey as burn survivors. We need to practice handling these situations before they occur. Family members and those who work in burn care can be helpful mentors by encouraging us to rehearse our responses to difficult situations. A burn injury is only part of who we are and will only limit us if we allow it. As we become confident in our responses to staring, questions and teasing we grow and build inner strength and pride.

RESOURCES FOR HANDLING TEASING AND QUESTIONS:

Sticks and Stones 7 Ways Your Child Can Deal with Teasing, Conflict, and Other Hard Times by Scott Cooper.

How to Handle Bullies, Teasers and Other Meanies by Kate Cohen Posey.

You Can Do It video distributed by the Phoenix Society 1-800-888-2876.

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