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Learning to live with psoriasis — coping mechanisms and programmes

Our understanding of psoriasis is increasing but as yet we have no cure for this once baffling disease. However, until a cure is found, there are many treatments, strategies and attitudes that can make life easier and less painful for psoriasis patients.

If you have suffered from psoriasis for a while, you probably know that stress can aggravate the condition. Avoiding stress is difficult for anyone living at the start of the 21st century but to make matters worse, psoriasis itself can heighten stress, creating a vicious cycle of flare-ups and increased tension. Also, once the cycle has built up momentum, it can affect your self-esteem and can even cause problems at work and in your social life. People who have dependence on drugs or who have alcohol addiction can be driven to use more, again worsening the psoriasis.

Luckily, there are several ways to avoid or minimize the stresses that life and psoriasis bring with them, and more stress-minimizers are being developed every day.

Stress reduction and psoriasis

There are several ways to ease the stresses psoriasis brings with it:

- ***Make your friends and colleagues aware of your condition, and let them know how they can help you through the tough times. If you don't ask for support, no one will know that you need it. Enlisting friends' support is helpful not only on a practical level, but also because it will make you feel less alone in your disease.***
- ***If you find that your psoriasis worsens at certain times of the year, avoid making big time commitments for those periods. Try to reduce the number of deadlines you face and don't plan large gatherings or social events at home. It is essential that you have sufficient time to unwind and relax during psoriasis outbreaks.***
- ***Don't rely on drugs or alcohol to lift you out of the depression that sometimes accompanies psoriasis. For one thing, while these substances might improve your mood temporarily, they may lead to even greater depression the morning after. Also, alcohol can be dangerous when taken in combination with some of the drugs used to treat severe psoriasis.***
- ***Start the day with pleasant thoughts and images. Imagine that your skin is going to improve and think about the positive aspects of your life. Picture yourself in a peaceful and tranquil setting, or listen to a tape of crashing waves or rain-forest noises. Relaxation tapes are available at many music stores.***

If you find that your psoriasis is stressing you out even with all of these exercises or that everyday stresses are making it worse, your first step should be to visit your dermatologist. Dermatologists can be supportive and helpful when dealing with psoriasis, and dermatologists have a lot to be positive about today. Many new treatments are available to control psoriasis and with correct use of these treatments, your psoriasis can improve maximally or clear for prolonged periods of time. Learning about these treatments may help you not only tackle the physical symptoms of your condition, but may also give you an emotional boost. Just knowing that help is on the way can be very helpful in itself!

Discussing your psoriasis and its effects with a dermatologist who understands them can go a long way to relieving anxiety, but more importantly, your dermatologist can recommend the stress-relief techniques that will work best in getting your psoriasis under control. He or she may refer you to a psychotherapist for talk therapy, stress reduction programmes and biofeedback. In addition to reducing the stress that can aggravate psoriasis, psychotherapy may help you to change your responses to the psoriasis itself. Working with a good psychotherapist, you will be able to learn new behaviour patterns that can enable you to cope more effectively with your emotional concerns and to control the effect psoriasis has on your

social interactions, rather than letting the disease control you.

Consider joining a support group

If you would like to discuss the stresses that lead to and come from psoriasis outbreaks, you may want to join a support group, instead of or in addition to one-to-one psychotherapy. In a room full of other psoriasis patients, you will soon discover that you are not the only person who is afraid or embarrassed to go to the beach. You will learn that there are others who feel awkward about exposing their skin, even to close friends and family. Most importantly, you'll learn that there are ways to overcome or minimize these negative feelings and pump up your self-esteem. The best support groups are usually led by a patient, doctor or psychologist who can guide all the members towards a more optimistic outlook, and support groups are most supportive when they meet frequently and are limited to about 10 people. Listening to a few people speak in a huge group might be marginally helpful, but group meetings are most effective when they are small enough for you to voice your feelings and concerns every time you meet and get individual feedback from the other members.

If you have alcohol or drug dependence consider joining a 12-step programme such as AA or NA to help overcome your addiction.

Psychotherapy support

As you discuss the stresses in your life with your psychotherapist or your support group members, you may learn first-hand what dermatologists have known for a while — often several weeks elapse between the time of the stress and the worsening of the psoriasis. You may have thought that there was no connection between life's little dramas and the state of your skin. But, when you come to see the cycle's pattern, it will be easier for you to break the cycle. For example, if you discover that having a fight with your parent, child, spouse or work supervisor always results in a bad psoriatic outbreak, you may have an extra incentive to find a more amicable way to settle your differences. If nothing else, recognizing exactly how and when stress affects your psoriasis will help you to find the relaxation techniques that help minimize the flare-ups if you employ them soon enough after the stress trigger.

Some of the techniques that may work for you include self-hypnosis, meditation and yoga. Major metropolitan centres have classes in all of these disciplines, and some psoriasis centres have support groups that can train you in these stress reduction techniques as well.

If these stress reduction strategies are not sufficient, you may want to consult a psychiatrist. Unlike psychologists,

psychiatrists are licensed to prescribe drugs, and there are many new drug therapies available that are designed to reduce stress and depression. However, let me stress that these drugs must be used under the continued guidance of a psychiatrist, because there are sometimes side-effects to be weighed against the benefits of the drug. Some of the medicines now available include fluoxetine (Prozac) and its relatives, which are antianxiety, antipanic and antidepressant drugs, and buspirone (Buspar), also an antidepressant. Your doctor or psychiatrist can tell you more about specific drugs and their respective pros and cons.

In the years I have been treating psoriasis, I have found that the patients who have been most successful in dealing with psoriasis, and by successful I mean in their attitudes as well as in their physical condition, share several characteristics. First, they have made peace with their psoriasis. This doesn't mean that they have given up on seeking treatments that work for them. On the contrary, it means that they have said to themselves, 'I have psoriasis.

I will not be ashamed of it or limited by it, either socially or professionally. Since I cannot change it, I will accept it and continue to treat it as best I can'.

This leads us to the second main characteristic: the most successful patients are persistent in their treatments. It can become quite discouraging for patients to live through so many new psoriatic eruptions, especially after relishing the freedom of being clear for a few weeks or months. Unfortunately, this is often the nature of psoriasis. The patients who cope best are those who know to expect that new outbreaks may occur and are willing to try new treatments, creams, shampoos and whatever else may be required.

As you continue to read this book and to live with psoriasis, remember that you may not be able to control your skin, but you can control your attitude towards it. Accepting psoriasis as a fact of life will free up your emotional energy for more productive endeavours and should alleviate some of the stress associated with psoriasis.