

Behind our Reactions

Understanding what's going on behind our reactions.

Whether you have a disfigurement or not, you'll know that social encounters of all kinds can be very challenging. One of the most important things to realize in any situation when one person has a disfigurement, is that BOTH parties can feel unsure of how to behave, scared of saying the wrong thing or looking in the wrong way. This double 'scaredness' can definitely make communication awkward.

At Changing Faces we use the 'SCARED' acronym to look at what's going on for both parties and how communication barriers often result:

Person who has a disfigurement		Person who does not have a disfigurement
feels Self-conscious	S	Does stare
Is Cautious	C	Is Curious
Feels Angry	A	Shows their Anguish
Is Reticent	R	May Recoil
Feels Excluded	E	Feels Embarrassed
Feels Discounted	D	Dreads the Meeting

Underneath these feelings and behaviors we also need to debunk all the ingrained myths and stereotypes that exist around disfigurement in our language and culture:

The Myth of Success

"There is no way you'll ever be a success looking like that - a second rate life is inevitable."

It's easy to believe this myth when you consider that most people publicly associated with success (celebrities, sporting heroes, actors and models) are portrayed to be 'good looking' even if their appearance has been air-brushed.

So it is not surprising that we believe that people who have disfigurements would have little chance of success, resulting in lowered expectations and wasted potential. In reality, many people who have disfigurements live fulfilled, successful lives with upfront, public-facing roles and many have been enriched by their experience.

The Myth of Surgery

"It's amazing what surgeons can do these days."

Simplistic media stories about the latest miraculous breakthrough in reconstructive surgery added to exaggerated advertisements about the brilliance of cosmetic surgery, lend credence to this myth.

If you believe it, you'll imagine that someone with a disfigurement is going to get 'it fixed soon' - or expect them to do so - possibly adding to the pressure on them to seek surgical or other medical treatment to become more 'acceptable' and to disappoint when hopes are not realized.

Realistic understanding of surgical treatments and their limits is essential and it does not help if they are promoted in an exaggerated way.

The Myth of Heroism

"You are so brave - you must be a real hero to live with a disfigurement."

This myth sees disfigurement as one of the worst things that can happen to someone, and so anyone who deals with it must be exceptionally brave.

The fact is that there is very little choice available if you do experience disfigurement. Although it can take courage to face difficult social situations, many people who have come to terms with their unusual appearance often say that they have gained new insights and social skills for dealing with the world.

The Myth of Horror

"I don't like the look of him, he looks frightening."

People are often scared of the unknown or difference. This fact has prompted the use of disfigurement as a device to portray evil in horror films, cartoons, comic strips, religious imagery and fairy tales.

As a result, some people are scared of anyone who is disfigured - and seem to feel free to resort to ridicule by using names like, "Alien" or "Phantom" or "Freddie Kreuger" from popular films.

Disfigurement has no influence what so ever on moral character.

The Myth of Learning Difficulties

"People think that because I have an unusual face, there's something wrong with me mentally."

People with disfigurements often report that other people talk down to them, speak very slowly or ignore them altogether and talk to the person next to them.

This behavior seems to reflect a belief that disfigurement is a visible manifestation of some form of mental impairment. It is a fallacy to generally associate disfigurement with learning difficulties.

The Myth of "Appearances don't Matter"

"People think that because I look unusual, I'm not interested in my appearance."

It's a myth to assume that appearances don't matter to people who have disfigurements and that they are not interested in looking good.

Initial judgments are often made in the first few minutes of a meeting and being well presented sends out positive messages as well as boosting self-esteem. Everyone enjoys wearing make-up, jewellery and clothes that suit them to positively enhance their appearance - because we all know that appearances do seem to matter - in the first few minutes at least.

Language Matters Too

It's not just our assumptions about disfigurement that we need to look at again. The language we use can also have an undermining effect - often articulating our underlying attitudes and reinforcing the myths.

"A victim of disfigurement" and "suffering from disfigurement"

'Victim' and 'suffering' are words that an individual might choose to use themselves but it is inappropriate to assume that they are applicable to all. Many people with disfigurements are not suffering pain from their scars or unusual features and they prefer not to be pitied by other people!

"When I look at my friend's daughter with her dreadful acne, I think 'poor thing, no man would ever want her looking like that'.

Remember that many people with disfigurements have totally fulfilling relationships. Note also the pitying tone which could come across as patronizing.

"Jane's great at her job but I wouldn't want to promote her to receptionist - we have the company's image to think of and her disfigurement might put people off."

Many people with disfigurements have very successful jobs in public-facing roles where their sophisticated communication skills help to actively bring in customers and clients. Also, if you act on this belief, you might be guilty of discrimination under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

"I don't know what to do so it's easier to look away."

Think about how you would feel if people constantly looked away from you - wouldn't you feel rejected? The best solution is to remember to make eye contact just as you would with anyone else.

"I find myself staring when I see someone who looks different."

This may be a natural reaction but if it constantly happened to you, there is a good chance that you would feel there was something wrong with you.

"It's not worth you applying for that job, you wouldn't even get past the interview."

Not true! Many people with disfigurements get through interviews and accept good jobs. And what's more, the interview allows them to change the interviewer's assumptions about people with disfigurements.

"When are you going in for your next operation?"

This question reflects the underlying conviction that it is not okay to look different and that there is something wrong with someone who does. Actually, the individual may have chosen not to have any more surgery having weighed up the risks and benefits with their surgeon. They may have accepted the difference as part of themselves.

Changing the way you think, feel and act

Understanding your own feelings and those of others as well as looking at what causes people to think and behave as they do is the first step towards change.

From Changing Faces.