

# Staring Is a Fact of Life

Before a burn injury, we shopped, attended movies, and walked through malls rather anonymously. Life changes abruptly when we suffer a burn injury. After discharge, there is suddenly a great deal of unwanted attention everywhere we go. It can be overwhelming for us and for our family.

Before and after discharge, patients and families need a “coach” who openly discusses the fact that people may stare. Our thoughts and self-talk can create all kinds of rationale about why people stare. It is a reality of life that looking different draws attention. Patients and families can be reminded that it seems to be part of human nature to look at people with some type of difference. We look at people who are deaf and use sign language, people in wheelchairs, people wearing native costumes from another country, and people whose gait is uneven because of a disability. People often stare out of curiosity or concern and very few stare to be rude. We cannot change the public and their reactions to people with burns, and we can take responsibility for our reactions to stares.

It seems the biggest problem about staring is the meaning and importance that people give to it. The meaning and importance comes directly from our thoughts. The experience of being stared at is shaped by our thoughts at the moment. Our thoughts produce feelings that trigger our behavior. We tend to think that other people and events make us feel the way we do. Actually it is not the circumstances, but how we think about them, that determine our experience. There are two dimensions of human experience: what happens in life and what we make of it. People give power over their lives to others they do not know and will probably never see again. To give strangers the power to take away our joy in living is to make them more important than ourselves.

Staring usually occurs while standing in lines, sitting in restaurants, shopping, and walking among large crowds. These activities may seem awkward and scary at first. Until one is more comfortable and confident, taking a family member or friend along may ease anxiety.

Constantly focusing on whether people are staring only keeps one’s thoughts on a victim level rather than being present in the moment. The person who is involved in life and does not focus on stares will enjoy the journey much more.

## Staring “Tool”

When someone stares, the easiest and fastest way to stop the uncomfortable moment is to do the following:

1. Use your STEPS “tool.”
2. Stand up straight, look the person in the eye, smile, and say, “Hi, how are you doing?” or “Hi, nice day, isn’t it?” or any friendly “small talk.”

The person staring will usually respond in an equally friendly way and speak, the staring ends, and by smiling and speaking to the person, *you* change the “energy” of the interaction and the person sees *you* as a person and rather than focusing on your burn injury.

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# **S-T-E-P-S** **to** **Social Comfort & Confidence**

STEPS is a simple and effective “tool” for anyone affected by a burn injury. When meeting strangers, entering new social or work situations, or going into public places, we can influence how others respond to us. By using STEPS every day, we project confidence and send the message to others that we are self-assured. It takes practice until it becomes authentic and easy.

## **1. Self-Talk** — what we say to ourselves and believe

I love and accept myself the way  
I am and the way I am not.

I meet people easily and feel  
comfortable with them.

I Can Do It!

## **2. Tone of Voice**

Friendly      Warm      Enthusiastic

## **3. Eye Contact**

LOOK people in the eye — even if only for 3 seconds.

## **4. Posture**

Head raised      Rib cage lifted      Shoulders back

## **5. Smile**

Confident      Approachable

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