

Managing others and difficult social situations

A guide for military personnel and veterans
with appearance-altering injuries



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Using this guide

It is not your responsibility to make other people feel comfortable about your appearance and/or disability, but there are things you can do to help yourself feel more comfortable in social situations, when you might feel self-conscious about your appearance or bothered by other people's reactions. This guide is about those things you can do.

This guide is for use by military personnel and veterans with appearance-altering injuries such as physical scarring and limb-loss, and their family and friends. It shares ways to manage difficult social situations, such as unwanted staring and questions related to appearance. You may find it useful to talk about your experiences with others who have been in similar situations.

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Understanding the behaviour of others

Sensing that we stand out – that others notice us or pay us special attention – can be uncomfortable. Attention doesn't have to be negative to affect us in a negative way, it simply needs to be uninvited or outside our control. People may stare, whisper about you, ask you questions. When they meet you for the first time, they may feel embarrassed, awkward, or feel sorry for you. The first step in learning to take control of these situations is to understand why individuals behave as they do when they see someone who looks 'different' in any way.



The human brain has evolved to notice anything unusual or outside our normal experience. Most of us will notice – stare or do a 'double take' – when we see someone who looks unusual. Even people with a difference that is purely cosmetic, like a tattoo or piercing, might attract interest or staring.

Many people are curious and want to look at and know more about conditions they don't understand. Curiosity is often followed by wanting to ask more. *"I hope you don't mind me asking – but what happened to you?"* Comments are often infuriating even if kindly meant: *"I think you are so brave dear, coming out when you look like that"* This is meant to be reassuring, but can feel patronising and unhelpful. Sometimes people might be curious about your injury, if you went to war, and what you did there. While these questions might feel intrusive, they usually come from an inquisitive and respectful place. People may also share opinions about deployments which may be challenging to hear.

Seeing a visible difference can also make some people feel concerned for you: *"that looks uncomfortable, does it hurt?"* Others may feel anxious or embarrassed or even avoid you because they're not sure how to behave or what to say.



These responses can make you feel self-conscious, anxious, defensive, angry or upset. Going out and socialising may become difficult.

How we respond to this unwanted attention and how we behave in social situations is vital. **Very often it's not what we look like but the way we behave that affects a social encounter, because the way we behave affects the behaviour of others.**

- By behaving shy you may attract more attention and others may be more likely to stare.
- If you are anxious this can make others uncomfortable around you, they can become concerned and focus on you more.
- Behaving aggressively can make others feel awkward and nervous around you.
- By not responding to questions, others may think you're rude.
- If you avoid people and social situations other people may avoid you or may give up asking you to socialise.
- Behaving defensively (irritated) can make it difficult for some people to engage with you and they may become distracted and move on to someone else.

Body language and verbal skills can increase your confidence and the success of your social interactions.



Body language skills

Body language tells us a lot about each other. Think of a situation where you were talking to someone and you could tell how they were feeling just by looking at them. We can use our body language to help ourselves and others feel more positive during social interactions.



Faces

When we talk to people we spend a lot of time looking at the area around the eyes, nose and mouth. This is why having a facial difference can be distracting to the person listening and why it can be helpful for people to learn skills to deal with these challenges.

Smiling can be a great first step in communicating with others. It can show that we're confident, friendly, and approachable. Smiling can reassure others if they're uncomfortable with your appearance. It can also make you *feel* better.

If your injury/condition(s) affects your facial expressions

Try explaining to people why you can't use facial expressions. Most people will understand your situation and be grateful to you for explaining it. Even a partial smile may help. It can be a quick and simple way of letting someone know that you want to communicate with them and that you are friendly. If you can't smile, use energy and enthusiasm in your voice and gestures when you talk to people.

*Paul has reduced facial expressions so he can't smile or frown: he worries that people will think he is either unfriendly or not very clever. Paul manages by using other ways of giving feedback to people. If everyone else is laughing at a joke **he will say something** like 'yeah, that's funny' and he will use **touch, eye contact and nodding** to show that he is part of what is happening. He uses this approach even in **e-mail** by using extra symbols and animated drawing to **communicate in a positive and amusing way**. This way he makes sure people feel warm and positive towards him before he meets them face to face.*

Eye contact

We say more with our eyes than we ever do with our mouths. Eye contact – looking at someone’s eyes when we see them or talk to them (or if you can’t look them in the eyes, look at the bridge of the nose), tells other people how you’re feeling, whether you’re listening, or whether you agree with what they are saying. It can also signal whether you like them or not!



But we can’t make eye contact all the time: we tend to look at people and look away lots of times in a conversation. The most important thing to remember is that by keeping eye contact most of the time, you’re telling the other person that you want to socialise with them. Avoiding eye contact, looking at the floor or away from the face can make you seem anti-social, not interested or appear nervous. It’s also easy to misinterpret other people’s gaze as intrusive – as staring at your appearance change – when in fact, people may be trying to engage your attention.

Eye contact can also help to hold the other person’s stare so they may be less likely to focus on your difference. Please remember that people naturally tend to look about and it is quite normal that people will look at your difference.

Posture

Most of us don’t think about our posture, but it’s an important part of how we communicate. Our posture refers to the way we hold our body and gives other people clues as to how anxious or confident we are feeling. If it is possible for you to do so, standing or sitting with your shoulders back and your head up gives a strong message that you’re confident: even if you don’t feel it. If you look confident, people are more likely to respond to you positively. Having an inner confidence can also reassure people too. If you stand with your shoulders bent forwards and your head looking down at the floor, people are likely to think that you don’t feel comfortable. This can make others feel uncomfortable too – and they may be less likely to engage with you.



Task: If your injury allows, think about how you're sitting and try to straighten your back and keep your shoulders down. Make an effort to practice this position at least once a day. When you're moving around or sitting in the next few weeks try looking up instead of at your feet, with your shoulders back. This should help you to look and feel more confident. Ask family and friends to work with you to improve your posture.



Gestures

Our gestures – the little movements of our hands and head – aren't always very obvious, but they tell us a lot about a person.

Nodding your head whilst someone is talking to you is just as important as keeping up eye contact. It shows that you're interested and that you understand what they are saying.

Hand gestures. If possible, moving your hands about to make a point shows confidence. Standing with your hands in your pockets can make you appear anxious or even bored. If it is possible for you to do so, it's important to use hand gestures because they show energy and enthusiasm for the topic you're talking about, this can be particularly useful if your difference makes facial expressions difficult.

If your hands are not affected, shake hands, fist bump or elbow touch with people, even if they don't initiate the interaction. Look them in the eye and smile. This will show that you're confident and comfortable with your appearance. If you're unable to shake hands, you could nod, use eye contact, smile, say hello and explain that you have an injury that prevents you from shaking hands.



Making the most of your appearance

A common response to an altered appearance is to think that it's now not worth bothering with other aspects of your appearance.

But, taking care of our appearance and grooming can be enjoyable and feel good, including a sense of pride from looking after ourselves.

Task: Take some time to consider ways in which you might be able to focus on self-care activities.

However, sometimes clothes or make-up designed to disguise a feature can have the opposite effect.

Baseball hats and hoodies may be particularly unhelpful in certain contexts because some societies associate them with aggressive behaviour and people can easily look threatening, especially if wearing them is associated with poor eye contact.

Similarly, wearing very large jackets or long sleeved tops in the summer may draw attention rather than disguising problems, and unskilled use of camouflage creams, that are sometimes used to cover differences such as scars or skin conditions, can make facial changes more obvious.



Verbal skills

Tone of voice

Have you ever had a conversation with someone where you picked up more about how they were feeling from their tone than from what they actually said? Your tone of voice tells people a lot about your thoughts and feelings. Probably the most important thing to remember is that your voice gives away emotion. If your tone of voice is aggressive or depressed, you may put people off. If you sound too nervous, people may feel uncomfortable.

Tone of voice can easily make or break a situation. If you're feeling anxious, aggressive, depressed, or even bored, your tone of voice can give this away. Many people often don't realise they're using a flat voice, but just by thinking about the way you talk, you can make sure that you use more variety. If you use a flat tone it may sound boring and suggest you aren't that interested in them or that you aren't that interesting! It can increase the chances that others may switch off when listening to you.



Task: Spend a couple of minutes now saying the following sentence out loud in different tones – for example, in a happy, sad and angry tone: *“Hi, how’s it going? I’m having a great day”*. You could try recording yourself using your phone and play it back to hear how the different tones sound.

1. Can you tell the difference?
2. Listen to the way that other people around you talk.
3. What do different tones tell you about the way someone is feeling?

Slow down your voice

Another important part of voice control is speed. If you're feeling anxious or annoyed, it's easy to talk more quickly and your voice may also shake. People can find it difficult to understand you if you're speaking quickly. It's important to remember to slow down. This makes your speech clearer and gives the

other person a chance to take in what you're saying. Even if you don't feel very confident, sounding as though you are can make you feel better and will result in others reacting more positively towards you.

Speak clearly

Remember to speak clearly. If you speak too quietly, people may find it hard to hear you and may lose interest in what you are trying to say. But, avoid shouting! There is nothing more irritating than someone who is shouting at you when they are standing right next to you. With practice you'll be able to get the right volume, which will help you to speak more clearly.

Active listening

Active listening is about hearing what someone says and showing that you've understood them. It's a good skill to encourage conversation and to show that you're confident. Skills that can be used to show active listening include agreeing, commenting and repeating back. Let's explain those:

Agreeing

Saying "yes" or "umm", "uh huh" whilst someone is talking to you shows that you're listening and that you understand what they're saying. This can make people feel relaxed and helps you both enjoy the conversation.

Have you ever tried having a conversation with someone who was completely silent the whole time? It can be very difficult! You could try being silent when you're talking to a close friend or relative just to see what effect it has. But if you're going to do this it's good to explain to them afterwards what you were doing!

Commenting

Making short comments about what the person is saying can also help, such as "cool", "really!", "yeah, I know what you mean" or something similar. This shows that you're involved in the conversation, even if they're doing the talking. Be careful not to comment too much. You don't want the other person to think you're trying to take over the conversation!

Repeating

It can sometimes help to repeat things back to the other person. This will take some practise! If someone asks if you understand, use a quick sentence (for example "so you're going shopping on Saturday to get your Mum a present") to show you that you were listening.

Starting conversations

Starting conversations can be tough. What do you say? How do you start? It's even more difficult if you feel anxious in social situations, or worry about your appearance. Although it can feel difficult, being able to start a conversation is very important. People are going to find it difficult to get to know you if it's always them making the effort. If you're unhappy with your social life or you feel you'd like more friends, it's also important to make an effort to meet new people when you have the chance.



Ask people about themselves

The secret to starting conversations is to ask people about themselves. The easiest place to start is at work or in a situation where you have things in common with a group of people you know well.

It can be a good idea to identify something about the other person that can be used as a question: Noticing if someone is wearing particular piece of jewellery, or an interesting tie. T-shirts often have slogans or flags or something on which people can comment.

Examples of questions to start a conversation

- *"What do you think of [film/music/TV show]?"*
- *"What do you like to do in your free time?"*
- *"What do you do for work?"*
- *"How do you know [the host/whose birthday it is/mutual friend]?"*
- *"Are you looking forward to the game/show/gig?"*

Remember confident body language: Stand/sit tall, with your shoulders back and head held high. You will appear confident. This will encourage people to want to talk to you; look people in the eye when starting conversations. Smile to show that you're friendly.



Open questions

Try to stick to open questions. These are ones that allow people to give you more than a yes or no response. If you use too many questions that only need a yes or no response, you may run out of things to say very quickly – and it can sound like an interrogation! Open questions often start with ‘how...’ or ‘what do you think...’

Use daily events

If you use social media or watch TV, then you’ll have lots of different things that you can use to start a conversation: the latest big sporting event, boxsets, price of petrol, or news headlines are good places to start. Try to avoid anything that people may have strong opinions about. If you pick these kinds of topics, you might find that people have too much to say! Light hearted topics, or topics that cause discussion and debate rather than an argument are far safer.

Talking about yourself



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Talking about yourself or your injury may be triggering or not an easy thing to do, therefore it is important to start only when you're ready to do so. Talking about yourself can show that you're open and friendly, it also makes socialising more personal. Think about the things that you do or enjoy. Try making a statement about yourself and asking another person if they feel the same:

Examples of questions

- *"I went to a brilliant class at the gym last week – do you like to exercise?"*
- *"I love having time to catch up on boxsets at the weekend. Have you seen anything good recently?"*
- *"Last year I went to [x] on holiday – do you like traveling?"*
- *"Have you got plans this weekend?"*
- *"I love going out for dinner and trying new restaurants, have you eaten anywhere good recently?"*

Be careful not to be too personal though. Especially if you're talking with a stranger – they won't thank you for telling them everything in detail about your private life the first time you meet!

Be prepared

It takes a lot of brainpower to think of interesting topics to talk about on the spot, so thinking of some earlier can make all the difference, especially if you're not feeling confident. Being prepared may help you to feel more in control. Have some questions that you can use in different situations.

Think about your own interests and have pre-planned statements you can make about yourself, you can use the examples on the left as a guide.

Keep up to date with current events or TV programmes as these are useful ice breakers.

Think about social situations before they happen. If you know what the situation is likely to involve, then you can think what questions or statements you could use. Who's likely to be there? What are their interests likely to be? What do I have in common with those that are there? What's everyone talking about at the moment? What interests or hobbies do I have that others might be interested in?

If you don't like the topic of conversation or it's about your condition and making you feel uncomfortable:

Option 1

You can be assertive. Calmly and firmly explain that you don't feel comfortable and would like to talk about something else:

- *"I don't like talking about that, I find it really uncomfortable, but I'd like to talk about..."*

Option 2

You can change the subject quickly using a prepared question:

- *"What did you think about...?"*
- *"How are you going to...?"*
- *"When did you see...?"*

Appear calm and relaxed, and don't behave anxiously or angrily.



How to manage staring

Staring is one of the biggest issues to deal with if your visible difference is obvious to others. Sitting on a bus or the train with a pair of eyes on you, which keep drifting back to your injury, or not even bothering to look at your face, can be annoying. Sometimes people don't mean to stare and will look away quite quickly, but sometimes you may have to put up with 'persistent starers', people who just keep on looking at you! Young children can be particularly inquisitive, but they don't mean any harm, they're simply curious, so try giving a very simple explanation that a child can understand. If you ignore them, children tend to get louder and carry on more.



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An aggressive response, though sometimes tempting, is not usually helpful. However, when adults or teenagers stare, there are a few responses you can use to put them in their place:

Option 1. A firm stare back is often very effective.

Option 2. Try to **make eye contact** and smile to show you understand their curiosity, help normalise and encourage them to see the whole person, not just the injury.

Option 3. A question: For example, *“Have we met before? You seem to be trying to remember who I am.”*

Option 4. Point it out: Sometimes the simplest approach is just to smile and point out what the person is doing in an assertive and not an aggressive manner:

- *“Please don’t stare at me?”* Is an assertive version of *“Who do you think you are looking at?”*
 - *“Please don’t stare at me I really don’t like it.”*
 - *“I’ve noticed you are looking at my face. I don’t mind, but I’d rather you ask if you have a question, I have a scar from an incident that happened during my military service, do you need any more information?”*
-

Option 5. It’s their problem: If you want to make a point, you can smile and say something that shows it’s them who has the problem:

- *“Does my appearance bother you? It doesn’t bother me.”*
-

Option 6. Use humour: For example,

- *“You should see what I look like on a bad day.”*
-

These comments can help you to feel that you’re taking control of the situation without coming across as too aggressive. It can be helpful to practice using a range of these options, so you become confident in using them and can use whichever is best suited to the situation you are in. But beware: there are situations where people may be particularly threatening. If you think the situation is worrying or that people are threatening, the best thing to do is move away.

If you are in a situation where you can’t move away and don’t want to draw attention to yourself try the following:

Option 7. Distraction is another very easy way to focus away from the situation. A newspaper or book to read, particularly if it can be held up to interrupt the staring, can be helpful.

Option 8. Visualisation: Imagine shrinking the person into a tiny little figure or putting them into a different context (for example, in their pyjamas) can allow you to feel more in control of the social situation.

How to answer questions about your appearance



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Some people are curious around accidents, incidents, or dangerous life events that have led to situations they **think** are extraordinary. Questions from other people are likely and are typically related to curiosity and not meant to be intrusive or rude. It may be frustrating to hear people ask about your ‘accident’ when the nature of your injury may be due to an ‘incident’. It’s helpful if you can learn to take control, so you don’t feel trapped into giving away more information than you feel comfortable with, or surprised by a question in the middle of a conversation about something else.

A lot of people dread that opening line *“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but...”* Here are some different ways to respond, all of which will help you keep a sense of control and ensure the encounter is a positive one. Decide on a technique that you feel comfortable with and that’s right for the situation. You can use these responses, or develop your own as you feel more confident. Some people find that having prepared what they might say in response to questions can help them manage any anxieties they may have about talking about it. Practicing more than one answer to suit different situations can also be helpful.

Option 1. Use short answers. If you don't want to discuss your appearance with others and want to end the conversation then – together with firm eye contact and a smile – use a short answer with a 'no follow up' statement at the end. This shows the other person that the topic is closed.

Q: "What happened to your leg?"	A: "I've had a below-knee amputation. Don't worry about it."
Q: "What happened to your leg?"	A: "That's a long story. I'll tell you about it sometime."
Q: "What's wrong with your arm?"	A: "That's so boring – you don't want to hear all about that."
Q: "What's wrong with your arm?"	A: "My arm is affected by a burn, it's not a problem."

Option 2. Change the subject. If you don't want to discuss your difference, but want to carry on talking to them, try answering and then changing the subject. Asking about their hobbies, holidays, or their friends can take the attention off you.

Q: "What happened to your hands?"	A: "I've got burns on my hands because of an incident I was involved in when I served in the military – so, tell me about your holidays?"
Q: "What's wrong with your face?"	A: "My face is like this because of a training accident when I was serving in the military, are you having a piece of cake?"
Q: "What's that scar?"	A: "That's a long story. I'll tell you about it sometime. I hear you've just come back from overseas. How long were you there?"

Option 3. Use humour. Some military personnel and veterans use banter or jokes when talking about their appearance. If you feel comfortable using humour, try making a light-hearted comment about your appearance. This might not suit everyone, but worth considering if you feel comfortable and in control and that this is about laughing together, not being laughed at.

Option 4. Discuss your appearance. Sometimes encouraging a discussion about your appearance can help to get the subject out of the way.

Q: “What happened to your hands and face?”

A: “Well I’ve got scars from an incident that happened during my military service. It’s changed the way that my hands look and work and changed the appearance of my face...”

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Option 5. Get in there first. If you’d like to avoid unwanted questions about your appearance, it can often help to mention it before anyone else gets the chance. Be careful though, talking about your appearance may lead to further questioning.

“Have you been using that new make-up? It looks great. I wish I could, but I’ve got scarring. It affects my skin, it’s so dry, so I need to be careful trying new brands...”

“Isn’t this weather lovely? One of the things I’ve noticed with my scars is that my skin is very sensitive in the sun.”

This shows everyone around you that you are content and accept your appearance, and also provides them with a small amount of information about your injury without them having to ask.

It can be helpful to use this technique in job interviews when you may feel the interviewer is interested in or concerned about your appearance:

“You will notice I have a facial injury. I’ve developed my social skills to help manage this and I think you will find I am very good at putting other people at ease.”

“Yes, I have an amputation, but this is a longstanding issue and doesn’t mean I’ll need time off for hospital appointments.”

“You’ll notice that I have a visible difference. The great advantage of this is that people can always remember who they spoke to.”

Option 6. Responding to children. If a child asks you a question about your appearance, you may want to adjust your answer to give an honest response you feel comfortable with that is age appropriate, such as: *“I served in the military and I was injured, that is why I look like this.”*

Task Practice your answers with a friend or family member (and remember to smile as you respond). The aim is to have them ready when you need them.



How to deal with negative comments about your appearance

Although it may be understandable for people to question you about your appearance when they're in a conversation with you, it's inappropriate for strangers or passers-by to make intrusive and rude comments. As you might have already experienced, strangers aren't very good at keeping their opinions or thoughts to themselves! Here are some options that you can use:

Option 1: Move away. Ignore them and move past them or move away. This doesn't show weakness in any way. It's firm and assertive and shows that it's the other person who has the problem. If you can hold your head high and ignore such comments, then you're showing the world that you're strong and that you accept your appearance.

Option 2: A firm stare. If you want to make a point, then a firm stare can be a good way of responding to comments. It's confident and assertive and tells the person that you have heard them and you're not happy. Most people are unaware that you can hear them when they make comments, and they will usually feel embarrassed that they've been caught out.

Option 3: Be assertive. If you're feeling assertive, and the situation is not too threatening, then you could try saying something in a non-aggressive way. Here are some examples:

- *"Don't worry; it isn't catching"*
 - *"My face might look odd, but I can still hear all right"*
-

These responses are confident and show that you have a sense of humour. It also focuses the attention on the other person. Which response you choose will depend on the situation and how confident you feel. If you are going to respond in this way, be certain that the person is making comments about you! Only respond if you actually HEARD what the person was saying.

Some people are unpleasant, but don't assume that all people set out to be rude or cruel. If you feel comfortable doing so, open a 'seek to understand' dialogue, such as those in options 4 (Discuss your appearance) and 5 (Get in their first) in the 'How to answer questions about your appearance' section, earlier.

Helpful contacts

If you would like extra support for any concerns or difficulties related to your injury or your mental health, you may find the following organisations helpful:

- **Veterans Gateway**
www.veteransgateway.org.uk 0808 802 1212
Facebook and Twitter: @VeteransGateway
- **NHS Op Courage**
<https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/armed-forces-and-veterans-healthcare/veterans-nhs-mental-health-services/>
- **Help for Heroes**
www.helpforheroes.org.uk 0300 303 9888
Facebook: @HelpforHeroesOfficial
Twitter and Instagram: @HelpforHeroes
- **Blesma**
www.blesma.org 020 8590 1124
Facebook, Instagram and Twitter: @Blesma
- **Combat Stress**
www.combatstress.org.uk 0800 138 1619
Facebook, Instagram and Twitter: @CombatStress
- **Walking with the Wounded**
www.walkingwiththewounded.org.uk 01263 863 900
Facebook and Instagram: @walkingwiththewounded
Twitter: @supportthewalk
- **Blind Veterans UK**
www.blindveterans.org.uk 0800 389 7979
Facebook: @blindveteransuk
Twitter: @blindveterans
Instagram: @blind.veterans
- **Changing Faces**
Support for those with an altered appearance, developed for civilians, but may be helpful for veterans.
www.changingfaces.org.uk 0300 012 0275
Facebook and Instagram: @ChangingFacesUK
Twitter: @FaceEquality





Centre for Appearance Research

Centre for Appearance Research, University of the West of England
Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK
car@uwe.ac.uk uwe.ac.uk/car

 @AppearanceResearch  @car_uwe  @car_uwe



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