

Beauty is More than Skin Deep

Positivity, self-confidence and self-esteem impacts one's health and self-image

By Elliott Weiss



Lymphedema as we currently view it is a medical condition. It occurs due to developmental abnormalities before birth or as a consequence of disease and/or its treatment. From the perspective of a care provider, our focus is based on the premise that by treating or correcting the underlying cause, we should be able to reverse, restore or limit the consequences of diminished or altered lymphatic flow.

Q How do my physical symptoms of lymphedema affect how people will see me?

A Through the eyes of the person living with lymphedema, an enlarged limb can be a major personal health challenge. There are many aspects to consider including comfort, decreased functional ability, and altered life plans and expectations.

As human beings, we can be all too quick to judge others. Commonly we make quick decisions about others based on their appearance, also known as “first impressions.” This could be based on how she dresses, the colour or style of his hair (or lack of), ethnic and cultural attributes, or mannerisms and behaviours. Having a physical feature that is seen by others as different or unusual can be pretty intimidating. Think of facial tattoos or limb amputations.

As a consultant in physical medicine and rehabilitation, my patient population is extremely

diverse. This includes those with limb loss (amputees), weak arms and legs from strokes, polio or brain trauma, and joint deformity of rheumatoid arthritis. All appear different from the norm. In many ways my lymphedema patients are unique and special.

Consider this: If it is natural for us to judge others by how they appear, how do we judge ourselves when we do not fit into the mold or what we consider to be “normal?”

To live with lymphedema is to live looking and being different. Lymphedema may limit your activities, place unwanted health burdens on you and the care required to manage your condition. It requires time, expertise and expense. But often people only see what is skin deep.

Q How can I stay positive about living with lymphedema?

A An equally important step for successful lymphedema self-management is developing and maintaining high self-esteem. Positivity, self-confidence and self-esteem do wonders for one's health and self-image. Taking advantage of positive attributes, dressing and appearing with panache and self-confidence can go a long way toward turning “being different” into “being special.” Some people do this naturally, others need to consciously work on it. With planned dressing and accessories, cosmetics, and positive behaviours and/or mannerisms, individuals can

bring focus onto their strengths, while minimizing the visual impact of other features.

This reminds me of a patient of mine who many years ago, was thrilled to be able to wear pants instead of long skirts after many, many years. The marginal reduction in limb size produced such a tremendous response for her. It was truly inspiring.

Q What resources are available to help me live with my challenging condition?

A Living with lymphedema is a challenge in so many ways. *Pathways* Magazine, the Canadian Lymphedema Framework, each of the Provincial Lymphedema Organizations, local support groups and many of the providers of lymphedema services and products in your community, are all resources to potentially improve not just the health but the lives, livelihood and lifestyles of those living with lymphedema.

While you may not have a choice having lymphedema, you do have a choice how you live with it. While we continue to work towards better lymphedema health care options, I wish you all success and good health living well with lymphedema. 



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HAVE QUESTIONS?

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