

Self-Consciousness and Stress

What you can do about them

By Elizabeth McMahon



Q Lymphedema makes me so self-conscious.

A Because lymphedema makes you physically different, it is easy to feel self-conscious, embarrassed, or ashamed. A natural response is to want to withdraw socially or try to hide your lymphedema. These actions are understandable, but they can actually increase feelings of shame and inadequacy in several ways.

Withdrawing and hiding harms your self-esteem, your social life, and your relationships. Avoiding or hiding makes you feel that what you have is so awful it must be hidden from others, that you are not good enough as you are. You avoid social situations because of how you look or what you can (or can't) wear.

When you do go out, instead of being joyfully present, you may find yourself tense and on guard, wondering, "What if they notice? What will they think?" Instead of being free to share and interact, you may censor what you say to leave out references to lymphedema.

Finally, trying to hide lymphedema can interfere with self-care by making you reluctant to wear compression garments or bandages.

Since withdrawing and hiding are such problematic options, what are your alternatives?

The fact that lymphedema is visible means that it violates your privacy. Your power lies in choosing your response to this fact.

Interestingly enough, other people's reactions are strongly influenced by how you present yourself and by your own comfort level. The more comfortable you are with who *you* are, the more

comfortable *others* are. You can use this influence.

Decide in advance what you want to say when others ask about the swelling, compression garments, or bandages. Practice what you choose to say at home until you can say it smoothly and confidently in a steady voice, with your head up while looking directly at the other person and smiling. You are sharing interesting information, not a shameful secret. You can raise awareness of lymphedema, thereby helping others.



By visibly caring for your lymphedema, you are a role model for good health and self-care.

Carrying on with your life, while caring for your lymphedema, is something of which you can and should be *proud*. It is an accomplishment—not something to be ashamed of.

Let *you* be the person who decides what you wear and what you do, how you feel about yourself and how you lead your life. Do not allow self-consciousness or fear of others' reactions to limit you. Find people to support your efforts: join a support group; talk to healthcare and/or mental health professionals.

Live your life to its fullest. Other people will respond to that and respect you for it. You will feel stronger and freer. Accept lymphedema, but put it in its place. You're who people want to know.

Q Stress makes it hard to cope with lymphedema. Do you have any tips?

A Coping with stress is often the most challenging and most important barrier to maintaining successful self-care over time.

Here are proven, practical tips. People's preferences and situations differ, so try different approaches to find the ones that fit your lifestyle and work for you.

External approaches to stress management

Always begin by searching for ways to reduce your stress. Write down every source of stress in your life. Next to each one, write ways to avoid, delegate, lessen, or problem-solve.

What can you change to reduce stress from each source? If you are stuck, ask a trusted friend or counselor for ideas. Listen carefully and be willing to try new approaches they may suggest.

Physical approaches to stress management


Care for your body by making good food choices, getting enough sleep, avoiding overuse of drugs or alcohol, and reducing caffeine or other stimulants.

Physical activity elevates mood and reduces stress. Move your body. Walk. Dance. Exercise. Engage in sports. Do something playful and enjoyable. Relax your mind and body physically. Experiment with using diaphragmatic breathing, muscle relaxation, relaxing showers and baths, massage, activities like yoga, or any other physical activity that leaves you feeling less stressed.

Spiritual approaches to stress management

Prayer, meditation, mindfulness, or other spiritual practices can be powerful stress-reducers. Activities like yoga, qi gong, and tai chi incorporate both physical and mental or spiritual aspects.

Mental approaches to stress management

Do whatever lifts your spirits. Listen to music, sing, play, read, garden, engage in sports, find a creative outlet, play with your pet, volunteer, etc. Spend time in activities and with people who make you feel happier. Watching laughing babies on YouTube! Focus on how stress may be temporary. Search for benefits that could arise from dealing with your stresses. 



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