

Intimacy, love and relationships

Part 1: Taking the first steps



**CHANGING
FACES**

This guide aims to:

- **Consider the feelings and worries people with an unusual appearance have about intimacy, love and relationships**
- **Consider how other people may feel and react.**

Contents

What is intimacy? It's personal	4
What if I look different?	5
What are you worried about?	6
Will anyone find me attractive?	6
I'm so used to feeling rejected. I will never meet someone special	6
I don't know how to let someone get close to me	7
I'm frightened of getting physically close to anyone	8
I've never been out with anyone before	8
What is happening?	9
Our experiences affect how we think and act	9
When two people meet	9
What might be happening for you?	10
What might be happening for the other person?	11
How might you see each other?	12
The result	12
Changing thoughts and behaviour	13
Changing your thoughts	13
Changing your behaviour	
Summary	15

What is intimacy? It's personal

As humans, we naturally need love and closeness. From babyhood into adulthood, loving relationships make us feel valued and cared for, help us to develop emotionally and give us confidence. As adults, many people feel the desire to develop loving and intimate relationships with others and eventually find a partner.

We all have our own thoughts about what intimacy means to us. Common understandings are:

- Having a deeper emotional connection to another person
- Feeling love for and love from another person
- Having a physical (eg. touching, caressing, hugging) relationship with another person
- Having a sexual relationship with another person
- Feeling a spiritual connection with another person.

For most of us, a meaningful, intimate relationship will include a combination of more than one of the above.

Many of us are apprehensive about intimate relationships. How we feel about relationships can be affected by our past experiences – with our families, friends, previous partners, as well as how strangers respond to us. Starting a relationship can feel challenging and scary. We may feel cautious – we all worry about being hurt or rejected. When we grow closer, this may mean sharing our private thoughts and feelings – this can make us feel exposed or vulnerable – but, it can also bring happiness, love, passion and security.

What if I look different?

If you have an unusual appearance, this may affect how you feel about yourself – and how you feel about or respond to others. People may also react to you in ways that make you feel self-conscious, shy or embarrassed, for example, by staring, avoiding you, being ill at ease or making unkind remarks. For more information about this area, see our guide [Living with confidence](#).

Understandably, these negative experiences can knock your confidence and may make you feel uncomfortable about approaching an intimate relationship with someone. However, many people with an unusual appearance enjoy very successful personal relationships, whether this is dating, finding a long term partner, getting married or having children.

“I do think about quite a lot of questions and fears when entering a relationship, although I know these are not unusual to have and that I'm probably not the only one experiencing them. For me the structure of my mouth would be the biggest hurdle, as I perceive it, to enjoying a fulfilling relationship with someone. Relying on the other person to be understanding of my situation plays a part, but I realise it's up to me to play my part in making things work too.” *Mark*

Changing Faces uses the terms ‘unusual appearance’, ‘condition’, ‘looking different’ and ‘disfigurement’, when appropriate. ‘Disfigurement’ is used in the [UK's Equality Act 2010](#) to protect people from discrimination. However, we recognise that disfigurement is not a term preferred by many people who are affected. Many people prefer, when describing themselves, to name their condition, by saying “I have a birthmark” or “I have neurofibromatosis” or similar. If you would like more details, please see the section on the website about [Language](#).

What are you worried about?

How you feel is personal to you. However, people with an unusual appearance often experience similar worries about intimate relationships – some of these are explored below:

Will anyone find me attractive?

This is something we hear at Changing Faces all too often. If you're not used to being complimented on your looks or you have been teased or bullied about your appearance, it is understandable that you may believe that you are unattractive, unacceptable and even unlovable. You may believe that you are not 'good enough' and assume that no one will find you attractive either. Other people may also make judgements about your ability to find a partner.

“One new colleague at work couldn't believe that I had a partner – a case of ‘you have a partner?’”

Linda

In today's society, we are exposed to many images and messages which link 'good looks' to success or emphasise physical 'perfection'. These can affect the way we see and feel about ourselves physically. This can be a bigger challenge when faced with negative reactions, teasing or bullying, which may cause you to feel unaccepted, worried or ashamed. Overcoming this may seem like a struggle. Changing Faces offers **support, advice and information**. You may find it helpful to talk to one of our Changing Faces Practitioners in more depth.

Although often we may often judge initially on first appearances, people are attracted to others for many different reasons. Personality plays a big role in attractiveness. Confident and open people are attractive to others, regardless of how they look. Think about the qualities you find attractive in another person. Appearance is likely to be a long way down the list when considering a longer term relationship.

“I find personality far more attractive than a person's looks. Personality is more interesting than a person's looks.” *Linzie*

I'm so used to feeling rejected. I will never meet someone special

Being on the receiving end of unkind remarks or being avoided is very hurtful and can feel like rejection. When this happens to you several times, you may begin to expect people to find you unattractive and anticipate being rejected.

It may help to be aware of the assumptions you make. Think about how you feel in a new situation. Have you already decided how people will act or what they will say? By recognising the expectations you have, this may help you to put these aside and wait and see.

Understandably, if you've been hurt or rejected in the past you may feel you want to avoid being upset again. This might mean you shy away from chances to meet a future partner. However, although you may be steering clear of potential pain, you are also missing the chance to meet someone. You may need to work yourself up to being brave and taking risks, but this may lead to better things too. It may be helpful to try not to put too much pressure on yourself – and not to feel like you have to rush into anything – perhaps start by thinking of becoming friends with someone first and then see how things develop.

"It is so easy to feel negative about your appearance, to wish things were different and to generally consider yourself unworthy of an intimate relationship. I experienced a spell in my late teens where I basically reduced my social contact with other people because I was afraid of being rejected. I felt completely unlovable particularly as all my peer group seemed to be in a relationship so decided that not going out was the better option. How wrong I was – my self-esteem plummeted and after several months I decided that going out with friends and joining new things was far more rewarding." *Alison*

I don't know how to let someone get close to me

Some people feel naturally more shy or apprehensive about being open or talking about themselves. On top of this, some of the negative experiences people have as a result of having a disfigurement can add to worries about getting close to someone. You may find it hard to share the things important to you – your thoughts, feelings, dreams – and, especially if you haven't discussed it much before, you may feel uneasy about talking about your condition.

On the other hand, if you have always been very independent – and used to dealing with life's challenges on your own – you might feel reluctant to share your thoughts or feelings with someone else. Someone else's interest in getting to know you better might make you feel naturally defensive – you might clam up or not know what to say.

"You can get used to being on your own, so you can become very independent. Potential partners may want to be helpful, but it can seem like you are defensive and unintentionally pushing people away." *Linda*

These feelings are natural. Your head might know you need to tell someone about the things that are meaningful to you and to show someone who you are. But in your heart, it's not easy – it takes time to feel trust in people and to open up.

I'm frightened of getting physically close to anyone

As well as sharing your feelings, the thought of getting physically close can also be tough. You are not alone. Generally, many people worry about sex and physical closeness and find it difficult or embarrassing at times.

If you don't like your condition, scar, mark or unusual feature, you may be worried about your partner getting close to it or touching it. You may imagine your partner doesn't like it either – or that it will put them off.

Having a disfigurement can sometimes add other physical worries, for example:

- Functional difference, such as not being able to open your mouth wide or limited ability to move your tongue
- Little sensation in some parts of your body or you may wear a prosthesis
- Previous surgery or medical treatments causing you to see your body as something painful and unable to experience pleasure
- Sex may be painful for you.

You may be worried that you won't be able to enjoy the physical and sexual aspects of your relationship. You may even see yourself as 'unsexy'. It can also be hard to talk to someone about these things. All this can make you feel pressured and worried when getting physically close to someone.

"Don't feel you need to rush or feel pressurised into anything that you don't feel ready for." *Linda*

I've never been out with anyone before

The thought of being with someone can feel very daunting, especially if you've never flirted, gone out on a date, had a partner or had sex before. You might feel nervous, unconfident and not know how to behave. You may worry the other person is judging you or doesn't like you. You may feel under pressure to act as if you are more experienced or blame yourself when things don't go so well. When it comes to dating, we all have to start somewhere – it is perfectly normal to have these feelings when you first get into having relationships. And for some people, it takes some time to relax and feel confident.

What is happening?

“When you're out socially, sometimes you don't want to be reminded of your more ‘unique’ qualities so talking about them in detail might not be good for the confidence levels either.” *Mark*

Our experiences affect how we think and act

All the experiences we have help us to learn to manage our lives and to recognise and avoid danger. If we feel threatened by something difficult that happens several times, we often develop set ways or ‘patterns’ of thinking and acting, to defend us from harm or pain.

Sometimes, these set patterns might not be helpful however – if we are in a challenging situation, like some of those described above, we might be unknowingly reacting as if we need to escape harm or danger. This may give a ‘defensive’ message to other people, who will think we are not approachable. Feeling like this can also develop into symptoms of anxiety for some people, making it even more difficult when approaching a challenging situation. Talking to a Changing Faces Practitioner may help to deal with these fears.

A note about anxiety and unusual appearance:

Some people experience difficult symptoms of anxiety. This is a ‘fear’ response, creating the instinct to ‘fight or flight (ie. run away)’, including:

- Physical feelings, like a pounding heartbeat, sweating, feeling faint, nausea, chest pains, not able to breathe, shaking, blurred vision, jelly legs
- Feeling constantly frightened, panicky, very stressed out or on high alert
- Feeling powerless, out of control, like they are about to die or go mad.

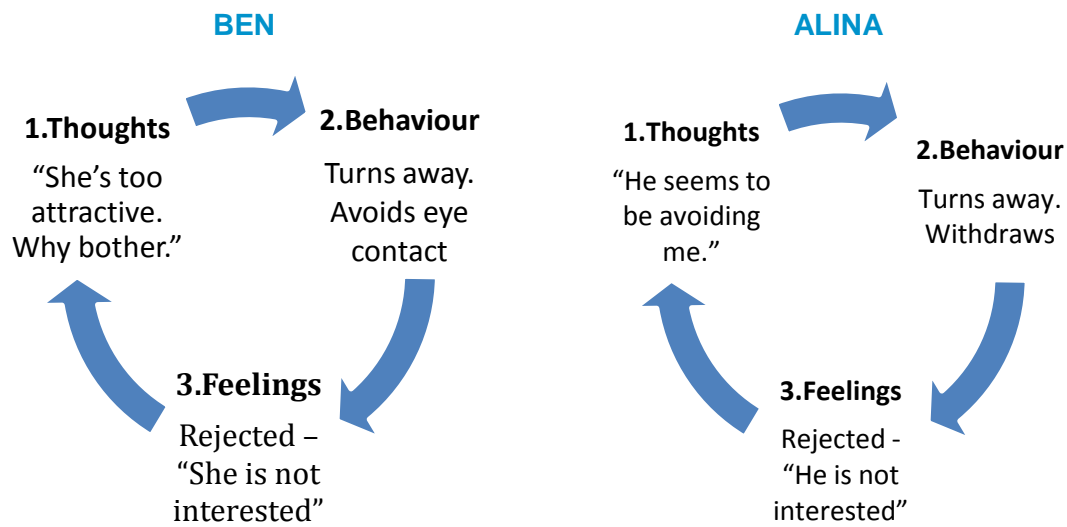
If you experience these feelings, some of the techniques in [Living with confidence](#) may help. You may also consider visiting your GP or speaking to us at [Changing Faces](#).

When two people meet

It gets more complicated. When two people meet, both have past experiences and, therefore, think and act in certain ways as a result. All this will affect their interaction with each other. Look at the situation below:

Ben is at a friend's party. He notices a woman he finds attractive on the other side of the room. His automatic thought is, "She's too attractive to notice me. Why bother, she'll never be interested." While he was busy thinking about this, Ben fails to notice that Alina has looked over at him and smiled. Instead, he turns away from her, avoiding any eye contact.

Seeing Ben turn away, Alina thinks that Ben is not interested in her. She turns back to the conversation she was having. Ben looks again and notices her turn away. He sees this as a confirmation of his original thought that she would not be interested in him.



Think about what might happen for you when you meet someone you find attractive for the first time.

What might be happening for you?

What do you think of first? Do you automatically assume they are not attracted to you? Do you worry about rejection? Do you think they are looking at your condition? Do you feel self-conscious? Are you nervous or defensive? How might you behave as a result? Do you avoid looking them in the eye or talking to them? Do you pretend not to care and ignore them? Or even act in an unfriendly way so you don't have to talk to them? Perhaps you try to conceal your disfigurement by pulling your hair over your face or dipping your head down.

Changing Faces can **help** with this. Also, for tips on body language, see **Use your face and body in Intimacy, love and relationships, Part 2** and **Communicating with confidence, Part 1**.

What might be happening for the other person?

Think about the other person – what might they be feeling? Many people feel uncertain about how to behave when they meet someone with a disfigurement for the first time. Perhaps they've never met someone with your condition before. They may be surprised or shocked, and yet, natural curiosity can mean they want to look at you. They might be worried about embarrassing you and themselves. Whatever the reason, their behaviour is often awkward and clumsy. Some people may even avoid you because they just don't know what to do.

Changing Faces uses the acronym **SCARED** to describe how you and the other person may be feeling and how this then influences the way they behave.

Are you **SCARED**?

FEEL	→	BEHAVE
Self-conscious	S	Shy
Conspicuous	C	Cowardly
Angry / Anxious	A	Aggressive
Rejected	R	Retreating
Embarrassed	E	Evasive
Different	D	Defensive

Is the other person **SCARED**?

FEEL	→	BEHAVE
Sorry/ Shocked	S	Staring / Speechless
Curious / Confused	C	Clumsy
Anxious	A	Asking / Awkward
Repelled	R	Recoiling / Rude
Embarrassed	E	Evasive
Distressed	D	Distracted

See our guide [Communicating with confidence, Part 2](#) for more information on dealing with situations and handling other people's reactions.

How might you see each other?

The other person's behaviour could lead you to think that they are either not interested in you or, worse still, repelled by your appearance. You might think they are staring at you in an unfriendly way, rather than a curious or interested way, making you feel defensive or upset.

Your behaviour may come across as unapproachable, shy, unconfident or even unfriendly. They may assume you are not interested in them and do not want to talk to them.

The result

You both feel awkward – the opportunity for a conversation has gone. No wonder meeting people can feel so difficult!

"I find it very hard to meet a guy. I have been single for a long time. I think a lot of this is due to feeling scared to speak to a guy. I find flirting difficult with a guy I like, as I get tongue-tied or embarrassed. Part of this is to do with the way people have acted towards me in the past. I find it much easier to talk to a guy who I don't find physically attractive, or I know they have a partner. It's kind of like, I think "ok, so I can be myself with this guy, as I don't have to try and impress him."

Linzie

All is not lost – although it can seem difficult, Changing Faces can support you to change the way you think and act to make these types of situations easier to deal with.

Five helpful techniques for social interaction:

EXPLAIN – REASSURE – DISTRACT – ASSERT – HUMOUR

Changing Faces has identified these five simple techniques to help you with managing social interactions. You might also find these useful to bear in mind when thinking about communication and socialising. There is a lot more information about this and managing the challenges of an unusual appearance in the two guides [Living with confidence](#) and [Communicating with confidence Part 2: Handling other people's reactions](#).

Changing thoughts and behaviour

Although most of us are unaware of this happening, as we saw with the situation with Ben and Alina, our thoughts, behaviours and feelings are all interconnected:

- Our experiences create certain feelings in us
- These feelings influence our thoughts and beliefs
- Our thoughts affect how we behave
- How we behave can affect other people's thoughts, behaviour and feelings
- How other people behave can affect our thoughts, behaviour and feelings.

It takes time and practice, but it is possible to become more aware of your own thoughts, feelings and behaviours. By becoming more aware, you may start to identify 'negative patterns'. Once these have been identified, you may be able to change them. This may help you to have a more positive experience when you meet someone for the first time.

Changing your thoughts

Although we can't always stop thoughts from popping into our minds, we can try to become more tuned in to what we are thinking, especially when the thoughts are negative. For example, becoming aware of the thought, *"This person will not be interested in anything I have to say."* could then be replaced by something more positive to say to yourself, eg. *"I have lots to say that could be of interest to this person."*

Changing your behaviour

Like our thoughts, we are often unaware of our behaviour and its consequences. However, by becoming more aware of how we act, and trying to change this in a positive way, we may influence how we appear to other people for the better. Think about what it feels like to talk to someone who is very happy or excited. Naturally, we respond positively to this – and enjoy the excitement and joy shown through their energy and body language (including lots of eye contact, hand gestures, excited tone and pitch of voice). See our guide [Communicating with confidence Part 1: Join the conversation](#) for more information about communication and body language.

You may also like to think about the table below – this shows how somebody who feels unconfident in social situations may think, feel and behave. It then offers new thought and behaviour options:

SITUATION: MEETING SOMEONE I AM ATTRACTED TO				
FIRST THOUGHTS	FEELINGS	BEHAVIOUR	NEW THOUGHT	NEW BEHAVIOUR
<p>"They will never be attracted to me."</p> <p>"There's no point even trying."</p>	<p>Self-conscious</p> <p>Worried</p> <p>Nervous</p> <p>Unconfident</p>	<p>No eye contact</p> <p>Head down</p> <p>Avoids talking to them</p>	<p>"I'm an interesting person."</p> <p>"I am going to let this person know about me."</p>	<p>Smile</p> <p>Make eye contact</p> <p>Introduce yourself</p>

It may be helpful to plan ahead and practise thinking about yourself in potentially challenging situations. You might like to use this table to help you prepare for specific scenarios where you might meet someone you want to get to know better.

Trying to think about the things you can make the most of may also help you to feel more confident and at your best.

"I always made sure that I had control over the aspects of my appearance that I could have control over (if that makes sense!). I couldn't change my disfigurement but I could make sure that I wore a fashionable, flattering outfit, that my hair looked good, that I smelled nice and that I smiled. I've always loved my hair and everyone said I had nice eyes so I concentrated on those." *Alison*

This all sounds simple – however, Changing Faces recognises this is not easy – it takes time, effort, commitment and practice – but we can **support you** with this process.

Summary

- We all have our own thoughts about what intimacy means to us
- Many of us are apprehensive about intimate relationships
- If you have an unusual appearance, this may affect how you feel about yourself – and how you feel about or respond to others
- Although we may often judge initially on first appearances, personality plays a big role in attractiveness
- Although you may be steering clear of potential pain, you are also missing the chance to meet someone
- It takes time to feel trust in people and to open up
- Many people worry about sex and physical closeness and find it difficult or embarrassing
- Our experiences affect how we think and how we act
- When two people meet, both have past experiences and, therefore, think and act in certain ways as a result. All this will affect their interaction with each other – they may be **SCARED**
- It is possible to change our thoughts and behaviours to help us to have more positive interactions with other people
- Changing Faces can help you to work towards overcoming these challenges.

If you're interested in meeting someone or taking a relationship further, please read our guide [Intimacy, love and relationships, Part 2: Getting closer.](#)

Supporting and advising

Changing Faces offers information, advice and support to children, parents and adults with scars, marks or conditions that affect their appearance.

Informing

We work to improve policy and practice in organisations. Through staff training and consultancy we help to create fair and inclusive environments.

Campaigning

We campaign for social change. We aim to promote a society in which people are treated fairly and equally.

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This guide is also available, on request, in plain text and on CD

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