



A B O U T F A C E

Successful Coping: Strategies That Work

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Individuals and families affected by facial disfigurements or differences have had to cope with many big and little traumas or emotional “hurts”. The person with an evident facial difference, unusual facial feature, scars or a prosthesis is likely to encounter childhood teasing, adolescent rejection, and a lifetime of curious questioning, rude or pitying stares, and averted eyes. Disfigurements which change “normal” facial expressions may be interpreted as a sign of lack of intelligence; speech difficulties can compound the problem of being understood and accepted.

Parents and extended family of a child born with a craniofacial difference will have to cope with the pain of the initial diagnosis and coming to terms with having a child who is “different”, plus feeding problems, surgeries and numerous visits to health care professionals. They may also face difficult social interactions with friends, acquaintances and the public. Naturally, these additional traumas compound the emotional weight of having a child born with a facial difference, which in turn impacts the family’s interactions with their child and each other, as well as with the outside world.

Individuals with facial differences acquired through accident or illness, and their friends and families, have another set of emotional hurdles to manage. Dealing with the realities of cancer, the pain of burn recovery, or the second-guessing of a traumatic accident only compounds the difficulty of coming to terms with an altered physical appearance. Being perceived as “a different person” because of an altered or unusual appearance can be yet another traumatizing experience. The emotional impact of intense grief and loss involved in accepting disfigurement in oneself, a spouse, child, family member or friend adds further to the stress of the adaptation process.

So, how can you find ways to manage these and other difficulties? How is it possible to learn and grow stronger from a trauma instead of feeling weakened and overwhelmed by painful circumstances? Anyone coping with trauma, consciously and unconsciously, “chooses” methods to manage painful feelings to get through difficult times. What follows are several basic coping strategies that can be adapted to any situation and any individual. When used often enough so they are “integrated”, they enable you to handle pain with grace and dignity, and to develop self-esteem and a sense of serenity that are not dependent on outside people, places or things.

1. **Adopt a “one day at a time” philosophy.**

It is possible to get through one day of something that would scare or overwhelm us to deal with for a lifetime. Often when we are feeling overloaded, it is because we are thinking about the future, worrying about how we will handle something further down the road. If we can focus on “today” we have more energy to deal with what is directly in front of us. Learning to stay grounded in the present is a skill, just like riding a bicycle; most of us can learn to do it with a little bit of effort.

2. **Ask for help.**

Remember that it is the person that “works smart” (not hard) that gets the task accomplished with the least amount of struggle and the best results. Multiple traumas and overwhelming circumstances can feel like a million bricks on your back. And it is true that our society tends to place a high value on self-reliance. But ask yourself this question. Who is “stronger”? The person who moves his milling bricks all by himself or the person who asks 10 friends to help him and throws a Brick-Moving Party?

3. **Express your Self and your feelings honestly.**

Encourage your friends, family and children to develop strong emotional skills by supporting the honest expression of feelings, including grief, anger, sadness, and fear. First of all, this means



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accepting and expressing your own feelings. If this is a skill you never learned, this necessitates finding people and places to learn how. If a child with a facial difference is getting teased a lot at school and comes from a family where the parents model expressing their own emotions, she probably will express her pain and frustrations, letting Mom or Dad know she's having a hard time and needs help.

4. **Develop a strong support network and use it!!**

Friends and family can often help, but support networks add to our options. The more people we have in our support network, the more we can count on the "net" catching us when we fall! Often, hearing how someone else handled a situation can be the starting point for discovering "your" solution. Even when there is no "right answer", just knowing how others dealt with difficulties and gotten through them successfully can be enough to keep you going. A support network can be a large organized group or two people gathered for an impromptu chat. As long as you get non-judgmental listening and understanding not advice (unless you ask for it) – your network can be a safe refuge when things feel overwhelming. Remember, "Pain is divided and joy is multiplied when it is shared".

5. **Remind yourself; you always have choices and options.**

Our most painful feelings often surface when we feel "trapped" and without choices. If you cannot change your life circumstances, then at the very least you can decide how you want to handle your situation and what attitude you are going to take in addressing the issues at hand. Life sometimes just "happens" and it is often not to our liking. Expending energy in trying to make life different only keeps us trapped further in our pain and leads us to feeling victimized. On the other hand, choosing to look for solutions and options leads to a sense of increased strength, control and feeling of self-worth.

It is important to remember that every individual copes with difficulties in different ways and what works for one person or family member may not work well for another. What is effective at one point in life may not be as useful later on. Finding others who utilize coping strategies may be the best gift we can give ourselves; they are our role-models and guides, reminding us there can be hope and serenity inside us even when we seem to be surrounded by difficulty on the outside.

AboutFace is a national charitable organization dedicated to helping individuals with facial differences and their families. We support individuals whose differences are present at birth or acquired as a result of disease or trauma. If you or someone you know has a facial difference and would like more information, contact AboutFace at 1-800- 665-FACE or www.aboutface.ca.

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