

Preparing to expose self-harm scars

One of the major steps in recovery from self-harm can be getting to a point where you feel comfortable enough to stop hiding any scars associated with a difficult time. In an ideal world, we would all get to a place in our heads where we treat scarred parts of our body just like any other – so whether or not it's exposed depends purely on what we happen to be wearing at the time, which is likely a simple reflection of the weather.

There is no shame in your scars. They are a part of your history. Scars show the battles you have fought and won and are a sign on strength, not weakness.

However, before you start exposing your scars though, there are a few things you should consider.

Do you want to expose your scars?

This sounds like a really silly question. You wouldn't be here if you didn't want to expose your scars, right? Well, actually you might. Some people feel like this is a step in the recovery process and that they **need** to do it even if they really don't want to. It's possible that when you expose your scars that you'll get looks or questions that make you feel somewhat uncomfortable. You need to be in a really good place in your head to manage this and you're unlikely to be in that place if you're doing it because someone else has told you you should, or you feel in some way obliged to.

Only do this if it's something you actually want to do.

Is it time?

Equally, you might feel strongly that you want to be able to own your past and show your scars, but are you ready **now**? There is no hurry and you're far better off waiting until you feel really prepared, than hurrying into things.

Build your confidence

Think carefully about when and where you first want to expose your scars. You might choose to first expose your scars in a situation where you're surrounded by a small number of people who you know care and support you and will not judge. They might even already be aware of your self-harm or have seen your injuries or scars in the past. Exposing your scars for the first time in a situation where you feel safe and supported can be a great first step. You might not be ready to take the next step for a while – that's okay. There's no hurry.

"My first step was wearing short sleeves at home. My family knew about my self-harming and were so supportive. It was a really big step for me and helped to build my confidence."

Other people have said they preferred to expose their scars for the first time when in a completely anonymous situation, where nobody at all knew them.

"I thought if I did it where nobody knew me then I could gauge their reaction and if it was bad then I wouldn't risk it with people whose opinions I actually cared about."

Either way, easing yourself in and gradually building your confidence is likely to be a good strategy.

Are you prepared for the questions you might be asked?

You might find that people have a lot of questions for you once you start exposing your scars. It's a good idea to have answers prepared for each of the most likely questions you'll get (some will be direct; some will be implied with a look or a stare). You might even choose to practice saying the answers aloud to a mirror, or role-playing them with a parent, friend or counsellor to help build your confidence.

The kinds of questions / comments you're like to get are:

- How did you get those scars?
- Are you a self-harmer?
- Why would you hurt yourself?
- How / why did you stop?
- Why don't you cover your scars up?
- Your scars aren't as bad as I thought they'd be
- Did it hurt?
- Do you wish you hadn't done it?
- Do you still do it?
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What advice could you give a current self-harmer?

The other thing that can often happen when you expose your scars is that people will see you as someone who has worked their way through self-harm and may be in a good position to offer advice about recovery. So you need to be prepared for disclosures from friends or other people who see your scars. Think about what advice you could helpfully give them and what support you could signpost to help them overcome their issues.

Can your close friends or family support?

If your friends or family are very supportive, you might want to think about engineering things so that the first few times your scars aren't hidden, you're with someone who can support you. Think with them about how, between you, you will respond to the kinds of questions outlined above and talk to them about how else they can support you.

"I'm a cuddler so I said to my friend 'I'm going to do this, but if I look like I'm going to cry, give me a cuddle.' It helped keep me brave."

You might also want to give your friends clear guidance about how you'd like them to treat your scars. For example, many people will avoid touching other people's scars, and this can feel uncomfortable if such avoidance takes specific effort. Most people want friends and family to treat a scarred part of their body in the same way they'd treat any other part. There is a conversation to be had here; otherwise you may all tiptoe around the issue, upsetting each other without meaning to.

Can friends field questions?

People might feel more comfortable asking your friends about your scars than asking you directly. Talk to friends about how you'd like them to react. Should they ask people to talk to you or are there some stock answers you can work through with them that you're happy for them to share on your behalf? Would you like them to tell you what people are saying / asking or would you rather not know?

"So we did a kind of test run. At first I pretended to be other kids in my year and my two best friends answered the questions. I was correcting them saying 'no don't say that, it's more like this.' Then they started telling me other things people would ask. It was actually a really helpful way for them to learn more about my self-harm and for me to learn about the sorts of questions I'd get at school."

What if people don't notice?

This is probably the last thought that has crossed your mind, but what if people simply don't notice? Your scars are probably one of the main things you see when you look in the mirror and are perhaps a key part of how you define yourself right now. But that won't be the case for everyone looking at you. Many people either won't notice, or won't acknowledge your scars. You should think about how that will make you feel. Especially if you've really built yourself up to the moment when you're ready to be honest about your past and share your scars. This can be a complicated mix of emotions to manage.

"I was scared about showing my arms. I thought people would point and stare and laugh. But no one said anything at all. That was worse somehow. I felt like my pain didn't matter."

Have a back up plan

Finally, we'd advise that for the first few times you have your scars on show, you have a back up plan which allows you to back out if things become too tricky. In many instances your back up plan will simply take the form of a jumper! Always think ahead though to how you could cover up quickly if things got difficult and whether you'd be able to remove yourself from the situation if needed. For this reason, you should think a little about the best situation in which to first expose your scars. For example, going swimming might not be ideal as you'd be in a situation that was harder to extricate yourself from and you wouldn't be able to cover up with long sleeves.

"I built my confidence by wearing a cardigan then just taking it off for a few minutes at a time when I knew I was safe. I always knew I could put it back on if I started to feel upset."

We hope this is helpful and takes you one step closer to building your confidence. Just remember, it's your body and your choice. You don't have to take this step if you don't want to, but if you decide that you're ready and you want to then you'll do well to invite some supportive passengers on board and take things slowly.

Good luck!