



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Facial Palsy
BUILDING YOUR
SELF-ESTEEM



Oxford Facial
Palsy Service

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WHAT IS SELF-ESTEEM?

Self-esteem refers to how people see themselves and how much they value themselves as a person.

Perhaps the best way to describe self-esteem is as 'the opinion that a person has of themselves'.

- When someone has good self-esteem, they generally feel positive about themselves and the things they can do. They are able to pick themselves up after disappointments.
- When someone has low self-esteem, they often feel very self-critical and compare themselves unfavourably to other people. They struggle to get over disappointments.

It is really normal to have times or situations in your life where you experience a degree of self-doubt. People can often feel more dissatisfied with themselves when they are experiencing a challenging or stressful situation; for some people this might include living with facial palsy.

What causes low self-esteem?

Low self-esteem or confidence can be an understandable consequence of difficult past experiences. For many people, low self-esteem develops from challenging childhood experiences with teachers, parents and friends. Facial palsy can have a negative impact on self-esteem and confidence, regardless of whether someone was born with facial palsy, or acquired it later in life.

Difficult social situations relating to facial palsy (e.g. people staring or making unhelpful comments) can make you lose confidence in yourself and feel more vulnerable when you are out and about. These experiences can change the way you feel about yourself.

Some people take particular care or pride in their appearance and this can make coping with facial palsy especially challenging.

The link between self-esteem and body image

We can think about **self-esteem** as the view we have of our **whole self** (including our appearance, personality, skills and attributes). **Body image** is the opinion that we have of our **physical self**.

In today's society there is a lot of focus on looks and attractiveness, with many advertisements linking physical attraction with success. The same unfair messages are often found in films and TV programmes, which cast an attractive person as a hero, while a significant proportion of 'villains' have a visible physical difference.

People tend to judge their own appearance by comparing themselves against the pictures and images in magazines, on TV and in adverts that surround our lives. Unfortunately, these tend to be air-brushed or well-lit images in magazines or on the internet, which give an unrealistic comparison, but affect peoples' self-esteem none-the-less. This can be even harder to manage when you are living with facial palsy.

The impact of facial palsy on self-esteem

If you have noticed that facial palsy has an impact on your self esteem, then you are not alone. Unfortunately, people with facial palsy often describe experiencing difficulties with self-esteem. This can be a consequence of how you feel about yourself, but also how other people react to you.

For people who develop facial palsy, many experience a sense of loss especially since appearance and speech are a large part of many peoples' identity. **People often find themselves making comparisons with the appearance of not only other people, but also their own appearance prior to the onset of facial palsy.** Such comparisons are often unhelpful, as they can make you feel sad, upset and low. Other factors associated with facial palsy which can impact on self-esteem include: worry about the future prognosis of facial palsy; worry about work; worry about feeling attractive to a partner and concerns about other people's perceptions of their speech and/or synkinesis.

For many people, their negative experiences of having facial palsy can lead them to develop negative beliefs about themselves.

Common beliefs include:

- "I'm ugly."
- "I'm unacceptable."
- "I'm unlovable."
- "I'm disgusting."

We often refer to these beliefs as **core beliefs**. The more strongly that you believe these negative core beliefs, the worse they make you feel.

We develop 'rules for living' to try to protect ourselves from the worst of our beliefs.

For people with facial palsy, these rules for living might include:

- "I must avoid crowds, because if people stare at me it means that I am ugly."
- "If I please people all the time then they might not reject me for how I look."
- "If I dribble while I am drinking in front of people they will think I am disgusting, so I must avoid having a drink with colleagues."

These rules can often guide behaviour. Depending on their rules, people with facial palsy may go about their day trying to do everything perfectly, sticking rigidly to their own self-imposed rules, avoiding crowds or trying to avoid challenging situations.

If you are able to follow these rules or live up to these standards then you are likely to feel better in the short-term. However, if they are unrealistic or too rigid then in the longer term they can keep low self-esteem going. This is illustrated by the example of Samantha in the next section.

PATTERNS THAT MAINTAIN LOW SELF-ESTEEM

So far we have looked at the factors that can cause low self-esteem to develop. We will now look at the ways in which our thoughts, feelings and behaviours keep us having low self-esteem, but let's first meet Samantha:

Samantha, aged 39

Samantha has a diagnosis of Ramsay Hunt Syndrome which developed 9 months ago. Although Samantha has never viewed herself as attractive, she has always taken great pride in appearance (i.e. her clothes, hair and make-up). She thinks this is a result of her mother always making sure that she was neat and tidy before leaving the house as a child.

Samantha has noticed that people tend to look at her more since the onset of facial palsy and often has the belief "I'm not supposed to look like this, I'm ugly".

Samantha feels a great sense of relief whenever she finds a way of cancelling social events. This has led her to become more and more socially withdrawn and to develop the rule "If I avoid going out, then nobody will judge me for looking bad".

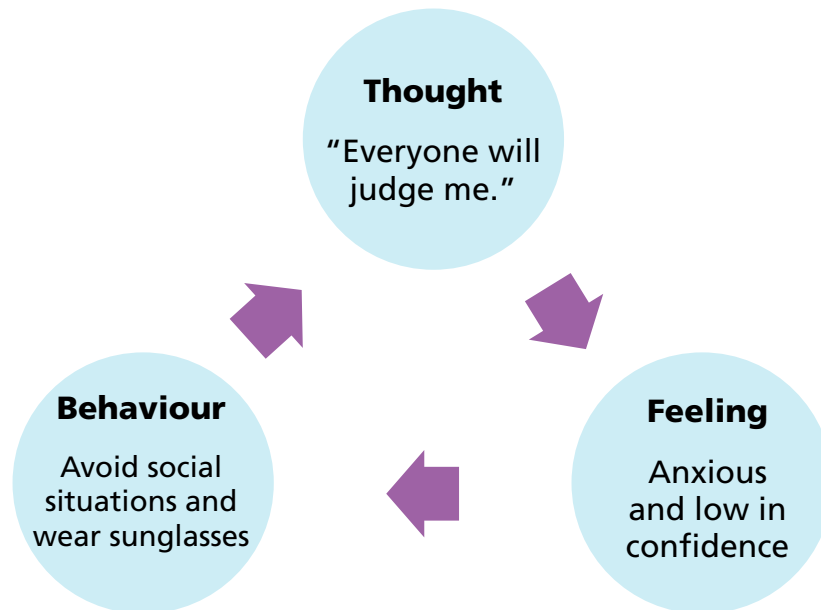
When Samantha finds herself in a social situation she often has the thought "Everyone is judging me". This understandably makes her feel anxious. As a result, she avoids socialising as much as possible and wears sunglasses, even indoors, to disguise the fact that her eye is watering.

Missing out on social events leaves her feeling lonely and sad. It also doesn't give her the chance to discover that her friends like her for who she is, and don't really care how she looks. People stare at Samantha when she wears sunglasses indoors because this is unusual. She thinks they stare at her because of her facial palsy, which makes her feel more self-conscious.

The links between thoughts, feelings and behaviours

Samantha shows how **core beliefs can shape the thoughts that people have in any given situation**. For example, Samantha's core belief "I'm ugly." leads her to think "Everyone is judging me." when in social situations.

Like all people, Samantha's **thoughts affect her feelings**. In this case, her thought "Everyone is judging me." leads her to feel anxious. In turn, this **emotion affects her behaviour**, with her anxiety leading her to avoid social situations and to wear sunglasses indoors. Unfortunately, this behaviour does not give her a chance to challenge her unhelpful thoughts, creating further anxiety. This creates a negative cycle, as shown below:



The rest of this guide will show you that by identifying and challenging unhelpful thoughts and behaviours, you can start to re-build your self-esteem and confidence. We will start by looking at **thoughts**:

THOUGHTS

Unhelpful thoughts

We tend to understand and make sense of our experiences in a way that fits with our **core beliefs**. This means **that we typically only pay attention to information which confirms our beliefs** (e.g. focusing on the 1 person that stared at us, rather than the 99 that did not).

We also interpret unclear information in line with our beliefs. For example, someone with the core belief "I'm ugly." may interpret someone asking a question about what has happened to their face as evidence that they are ugly, rather than thinking that the person was simply being curious or insensitive.

These biases to interpret things negatively can also lead people to make negative predictions about the future. For people with facial palsy, these predictions are often about the actions and judgements of others in relation to their appearance, as well as their own ability to cope.

As we have seen earlier in this guide, people often compare themselves to others. **Some people with acquired facial palsy judge themselves in comparison to how they used to be or look**. Comparing in this way is usually likely to make you feel worse about yourself.

We will look at some of the negative consequences of these types of thoughts in the behaviour section later on, but first we will learn about how you can start to challenge some of your negative thoughts.

Thought challenging

We have learnt about unhelpful thinking styles the **Facial palsy: Managing anxiety** and **Facial palsy: Managing your mood** guides. These are thinking traps which people often get caught in, which lead them to think about a situation in an unhelpful way:

Thinking style	Description	Example
Negative comparisons	Focusing on the negative aspects of your own appearance and the positive aspects of others (or your previous appearance).	"Their smile is so much better than mine."
Discounting the positives	Not paying attention to, or discounting, your positive attributes.	"It doesn't matter that I have a nice smile, my eyes ruin how my face looks."
Black and white thinking	Not seeing the 'middle-ground' - things are either perfect or a total failure.	"I can't ever eat in front of people, it's too embarrassing." "No one will employ me looking like this."
Catastrophising	Jumping to the worst possible conclusion, rather than seeing things for how they really are.	"Everyone will stare and I will cry in front of everyone."
Over-generalising	Coming to a conclusion based on one small thing.	"Everyone will stare and I will cry in front of everyone."
Mind-reading	Believing that we know what others are thinking.	"Everyone thinks I've had a stroke"
Fortune telling	Predicting that something negative will occur before it even happens.	"I will cry uncontrollably if anyone asks me a question about my face."

It can be helpful to challenge some of your unhelpful thoughts.

You might ask yourself:

- Is this my inner 'self-critic' speaking?
- What would I say to a friend who was thinking like this?
- Is there another way that I could view the situation? What alternative perspectives are there?
- Am I trying to predict the future?
- Am I ignoring any positive information?
- What is the factual evidence for and against this prediction?
- What are the best and worst things that could happen?
- What things could I do to cope if my worst fear did happen?

The following exercise demonstrates the ways in which you can challenge your unhelpful thoughts.

Example:

Situation:	Unhelpful thought: (strength of thought %)	Emotion: (strength of emotion %)	Evidence of my thought	Evidence against my thought:	More balanced thought: (strength %)	Emotion: (new strength %)
Going to a party	I look ugly everyone will judge me (80%)	Anxious (85%)	Yesterday, a child asked me, "What is wrong with your face?" Some people can be really judgemental I don't like how I look, so other people might also think the same I have noticed people staring at me recently	My partner tells me that I am still attractive My friends really don't seem to judge me Everyone tells me that my change in appearance is not that noticeable Even if people notice my change in appearance, most people are nice and are unlikely to judge me I might be falling into thinking traps: fortune telling and black & white thinking	Although my appearance has changed, most decent people are unlikely to judge me because of it (50%)	Anxious (65%)

HAVE A GO YOURSELF

Use this template to practice weighing up the evidence for and against your negative thoughts. Do this every time you find yourself having a negative thought or making a negative prediction. This will help you to **create a revised, more balanced thought**. Pay attention to whether creating a more balanced thought helps you to feel in a better mood.

Emotion: (new strength %)			
More balanced thought: (strength %)			
Evidence against my thought:			
Evidence of my thought			
Emotion: (strength of emotion %)			
Unhelpful thought: (strength of thought %)			
Situation:			

A MINDFUL RESPONSE TO THOUGHTS

Sometimes we can get so caught up in our thoughts. If this happens, it can be helpful to separate or 'defuse' ourselves from our thoughts. This helps us to see that thoughts are **opinions, not facts** and are just mental events or stories that our mind is telling us.

"I notice that I am having the thought that..."

Sometimes we can create a sense of separation or distance from a thought by changing how we say it in our head.

For example:

Take the thought "I'm ugly."

Step 1 – Think about it for a while, try and believe it as much as you can.

Step 2 – Now, repeat the thought in your mind with "**I'm having the thought that...**" in front of it: "I'm having the thought that I'm ugly."

Step 3 – Now, repeat it again, but with "**I notice that I'm having the thought that...**" in front of it: "I notice that I'm having the thought that I'm ugly."

Leaves on a stream

Another way that you can learn to 'defuse' from your thoughts is to practice the following exercise (initially designed by psychologist Louise Hayes and her colleagues):

1. Find a comfortable position and close your eyes (or fix your gaze in front of you if you prefer).
2. Imagine that you are sitting by stream and that there are leaves gently floating past on the surface of the water.
3. For the next few minutes, take any thought that pops into your head and place it on a leaf. Watch that leaf float past you.
4. Do this for any thought, whether positive or negative, just place them on the leaf and watch them go by.
5. Don't try to find thoughts and let the stream flow at its own rate – don't try to speed it up or slow it down.
6. If your mind says "I can't do this" or you feel bored or impatient, then place those thoughts/feelings on a leaf.
7. Don't try to force a leaf to float away, just watch what it does and eventually it will float away.
8. If you notice that your mind wanders away from the stream, congratulate yourself for noticing where your mind has gone and gently bring your attention back to the stream.

Some people prefer to do this exercise by imagining thoughts as cars driving past on a road, birds flying in the sky, waves flowing on a beach or as words projected up on a cinema screen. There is no right or wrong way of doing it! The important thing is that you are creating some space or distance from your thoughts.

POSITIVE QUALITIES (BREAKING OLD HABITS)

As we have seen, it is common for people to focus their attention on all the parts of themselves they wish were different. These might include concerns they have about their appearance or facial function. **People often pay lots of attention to any negative experiences that they have, but find it much harder to notice or remember the times when people pay them a compliment or act positively towards them.**

The longer a person feels negative about themselves, the more they fall out of the habit of noticing their positive qualities. It can be helpful to break this habit by actively reminding yourself of the positives about you and the things you like about yourself.

Use the prompts below to write a list of your positive qualities. Notice if you have any unhelpful thoughts about any of your qualities! For example "That is not an impressive quality." or "Everyone does that." . Don't let those negative thoughts stop you from writing down your positive qualities!

When you are done, copy the list of positive qualities into a book, onto your phone or put it on a piece of paper where you will see it often. Practice looking for other positive qualities you have and add these to your list.

The more you practice looking for your positive qualities, the more automatic it will become.

Prompts:	Positive Qualities:
What do you like about yourself, however small?	
What are your achievements, however small?	
What has helped you to cope with having facial palsy so far?	
What skills, gifts or talents have you got, however small?	
What challenges have you faced or obstacles overcome?	
What qualities do you admire in other people, that you have yourself?	
What are the bad traits that you don't have?	
How might someone who cares about you describe you?	

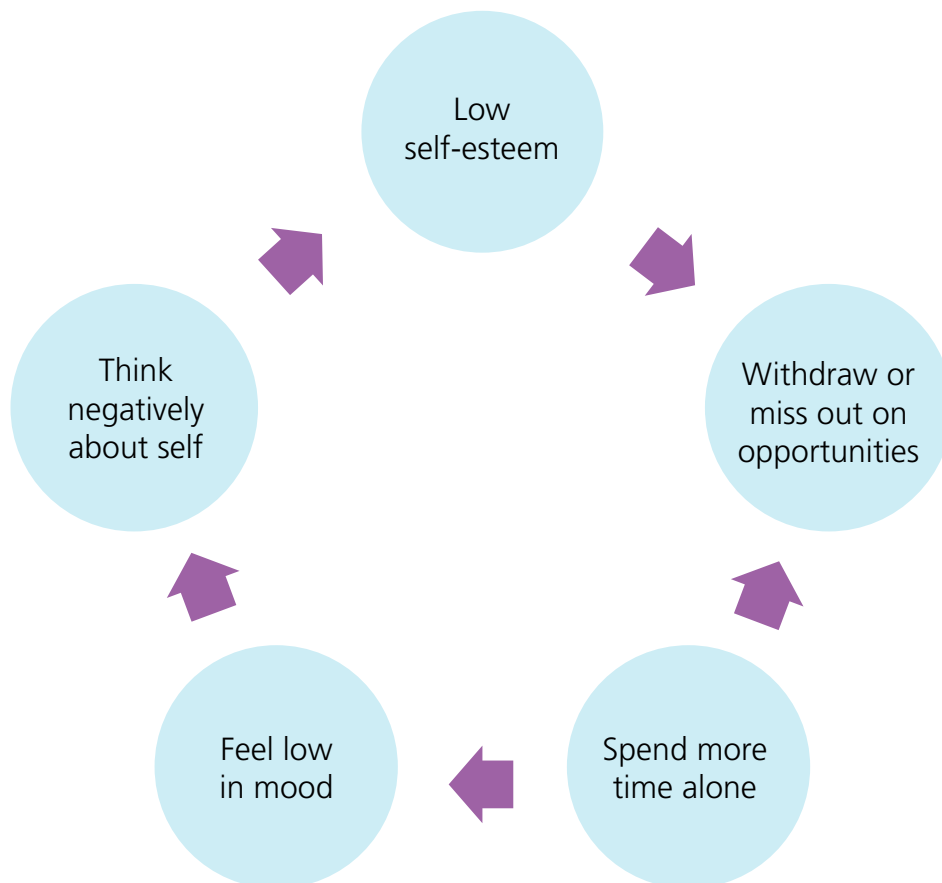
BEHAVIOURS

As we showed earlier, helpful thoughts can have an influence on what you do or how you behave.

When we have low self-esteem we often:

- withdraw and/or avoid social situations or events
- try too hard to please people
- miss opportunities and don't look after ourselves
- become passive rather than assertive (i.e. letting other people make decisions for us and not putting our own views forward)
- try not to draw attention to ourselves.

Unfortunately, each of these behaviours often lead people to miss out on opportunities, spend more time by themselves and generally feel more negative about themselves. This leads into even more negative thinking and a negative cycle:



Are there any unhelpful behaviours that you are engaging in? What are the negative consequences of these? (E.g. avoiding eating in restaurants leads to feeling more isolated and even more frustrated about having facial palsy.)

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Making positive changes

Maybe you are avoiding certain situations; maybe you have lost touch with someone close to you; or maybe you have stopped an activity that you enjoy. Often these behaviours are a result of a negative prediction, such as "People will judge me." or "Everyone will stare.". It can be really helpful to set yourself the challenge of testing out your predictions, to see what really happens.

Tony, aged 47

Tony has facial palsy that affects his speech. He works behind the checkout at a supermarket, but has been off work for 4 weeks since his symptoms started. Tony delayed returning to work because he thought that his speech difficulties would mean that he wouldn't enjoy his job. Indeed, he predicted customers would be unfriendly to him.

Tony decided to test out his prediction when he returned to work, noticing whether any customers were unfriendly to him. He noticed that although he received some questions about his face from a small number of customers, many regular customers were actually really pleased to see him again and were concerned about how he was doing. He concluded that his predictions about returning to work had been too negative.

Now it's your turn! Use the exercise on the following page to find out what actually happens when you test out your negative prediction.

SELF-COMPASSION

So far in this guide we have looked at how negative or critical thoughts impact on your confidence and self-esteem. One way to feel more confident is to work on our self-compassion. Self-compassion is thinking about how we talk to ourselves and treat ourselves during testing times.

It involves:

- **acknowledging or recognising** that you are having a challenging time
- recognising that it is normal to struggle for time-to-time and that many other people would struggle in the same position
- responding to how you are feeling in a **kind and caring** way, rather than trying to avoid feeling that way, ignoring how you are feeling or blaming yourself for having these thoughts
- thinking of ways to soothe any difficult or painful feelings by responding to yourself in a comforting and caring way.

When you notice you are thinking in a harsh or critical way about yourself, it can be helpful to ask what you would say to a friend or loved one who expressed thoughts like that about themselves.

For example, if you had the thought "I'm ugly.", then you could think about what you would say to a friend who was calling themselves "ugly". Most likely you would respond to them in a kind and caring way. Unfortunately, we often take a kind and caring approach with other people, but find it harder to do this to ourselves.

Compassionate statements help us to respond to ourselves in the same way we would respond to a friend who was being overly critical of themselves.

Examples of compassionate statements include:

- This feeling will pass.
- I can do this.
- I have done this before, and I can do it again.
- This is just the self-critic talking.
- I'm doubting my ability to do this because I have had a challenging time recently, but I can do it!
- Lots of people struggle from time-to-time.
- Other people think I'm good at
- I can help myself to feel better by
- If a friend was in a similar situation, I would tell them

5 compassionate statements I can say to myself when I am lacking confidence:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)

SUMMARY

- Lots of people who have facial palsy notice a reduction in their self-esteem. This can be influenced by the value they place on their appearance, as well as the reactions of other people.
- Low self-esteem is often characterised by people having negative beliefs about themselves.
- These negative beliefs can keep low self-esteem and low-confidence going.
- By identifying and challenging any unhelpful thoughts and behaviours, as well as focusing on your positive attributes and developing self-compassion, you can gradually rebuild your confidence and self-esteem.

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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June 2021
Review: June 2024
Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
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OXFORD HOSPITALS CHARITY (REGISTERED CHARITY NUMBER 1175809)



**The development of this booklet
was funded by a grant from the
VTCT Foundation**