

# Intimacy, love and relationships

## Part 2: Getting closer



**CHANGING  
FACES**

**"Deciding that I did want to have a relationship was probably the best decision I ever made. It is hard and your pride hurts at times, but it is worth it when you meet that special person." *Alison***

**This guide aims to:**

- **Look at practical ways you to meet and communicate with someone you are attracted to**
- **Explore ways you can develop a relationship**

**If you would like to know more about what happens when two people meet, see [Intimacy, love and relationships, Part 1: Taking the first steps](#)**

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## How do I meet someone?

You are most likely to meet someone when you have something in common. Many people meet their partners at college, university, or work. You may meet someone through friends or a social event. People may find each other at a place where they have hobbies or common interests, such as the gym, evening classes or a place of worship. Or it may be at a choir, dance class, book club or even a quiz night at the local pub. It's worth thinking about the things you like to do – if you take up an interest, you will be doing something you enjoy and increasing the opportunity to meet a like-minded person, but without focussing all the pressure on achieving this.

“When I was little my parents made me join everything; if there was a new club or activity starting then I was the first to join it. I now realise how much it helped me. My family have always treated me as normal but I think my parents wanted to show other people that I was too, so that meant me going to things whether I liked it or not.” *Alison*

More and more people meet over the internet or dating services. Here are a few tips about this:

1. Choose an internet site or agency you have heard of before, or that someone you trust recommends to you.
2. When sending a photograph, consider a picture that tells the viewer something more about you (as opposed to just a head shot). For example, a holiday snap from somewhere you really enjoyed, an action shot or photo of you taking part in a hobby.
3. Think about the things you would like to know about a prospective partner. Consider this in the context of your profile or advert.
4. Get a friend or family member to look at it for you – often other people are better at highlighting our personalities and talents.
5. It is up to you, but don't feel that you have to refer to your condition or appearance. You may feel like getting to know someone first. And once you have made a connection, you may feel more comfortable and then you can tell them more.

## How do I approach someone and start a conversation?

Being able to communicate well goes a long way towards meeting someone you like and starting to talk to them. There is a lot more information about developing your communication skills and body language in our guide [Communicating with confidence Part 1: Join the conversation](#)

### First impressions

Instinctively, we use first impressions to decide what we think about people. How we dress and present ourselves gives people information about us. So, finding a style that suits you and communicates something of your personality can really enhance your confidence and tell the person who you are.

### Use your face and your body

As previously mentioned, people notice behaviour – and body language forms part of how we see and understand each other. Understandably, you may feel shy or worried, but try to be aware of how you are coming across and how this may affect the other person's perception of you. Poised, open people are attractive to others, regardless of how they look. If you walk confidently, head up, shoulders back and look the other person in the eye, they are more likely to be drawn to you and feel at ease.

Smiling, if you are able to, is a particularly important communication tool. It is one of the simplest ways of encouraging people. A smile says that you are warm, approachable, and open to talking.

"I try to remember not to hide my mouth or look down too much – these are things I sometimes do subconsciously – but I know it's good to use my face to its best potential. I can smile ok, but, because the left side of my face is paralysed, I'm just left with a half smile, so using this in conjunction with body language is definitely important in conveying how I'm feeling." *Mark*

You may be self-conscious about your smile, your facial expressions or making eye contact due to your condition. However, there are other ways you can express yourself:

- Try not to hide your mouth or look down
- Stand tall with your head up to give people the opportunity to see as many of your communication skills as possible
- Show that you are smiling – a smile is far more than just the movement of the mouth – your eyes and the expression they show are equally as important – tip your head to the side to show interest

- Nod, use hand gestures and non-verbal sounds
- Use the tone and pace of your voice to show your feelings
- Try looking at the bridge of someone's nose if you feel embarrassed about making direct eye contact.

Try to be aware of your feelings and how these might affect your facial expressions if you are nervous or wary. Also, keep the tone of your voice even.

## Starting a conversation

When meeting someone new for the first time, many of us go blank and can't think of anything to say. And if you are worried, it can be hard to think clearly. When you know nothing about the other person, it can be tricky to know where to start.

Although you may not know anything about the person you like, you can glean a certain amount of information about them based on the context in which you are meeting. Consider this as the 'thing' you have in common and use it to start a conversation. Try some of these tips:

- Talk about the weather, the news or the place you are in
- Think about what you have in common
- Show interest in the other person.

For example, if you meet someone at a work event you can ask about the department that they work in, or a particular aspect of their work. Perhaps you know the same people? If you meet someone at an evening class, you might ask them what sparked their interest in joining. Or ask about other hobbies or interests.

"I found that shared hobbies and interests was a great way to meet people and also socialising with a group of people rather than going out with just one or two friends gave me more confidence." *Alison*

## Be prepared

It is useful to think about a social situation before you go. This will help you 'to feel' more in control and confident about your conversation skills. Try making a list of possible subjects before you get there.

For more information about communication skills and how to develop yours, see our guides

[Communicating with confidence: Parts 1 and 2.](#)

Talking to a Changing Faces Practitioner may also **help you** to work on your communication.

## What about flirting?

Flirting is a more light-hearted way of telling someone you like them. Body language is more important than words when flirting. Here are a few tips:

- Smile – even if your smile is not symmetrical because of your condition – we all respond well to a relaxed, smiley person who is enjoying themselves
- If you're unable to smile, you can show enjoyment by tipping your head to the side, being expressive in your hand gestures and laughing a lot
- If you want to let someone know that you like them, make eye contact and hold their gaze for a few seconds longer than usual
- Turn your body towards the person you are interested in. Be aware of having more 'open' body language, by unfolding your arms and either uncrossing your legs or pointing one foot in the direction of the person you like (often this happens naturally)
- Lean in closer to the person you like when they are talking to show they have your attention
- Laugh to show you are enjoying the other person's company
- If you notice that the person is flirting with you too, you could take things to the next level. A gentle touch on the forearm or shoulder can feel personal and intimate.

## How do I know someone is interested?

Sometimes, you can just sense a connection with someone. Subtle observation of another person's body language can also provide clues they are interested in you:

- Is their body turned towards you?
- Are they leaning forward or adopting a posture similar to your own?
- Are they maintaining eye contact and smiling at you?
- Are they tactile with you or asking more questions?

## How do I ask someone out?

If you would like to meet up with someone again, you could start by being subtle or more general, for example, *"This has been great. Perhaps I'll see you here again?"*

Or, you could use your common interest as a reason to meet again, *“There’s a Hogarth exhibition on at the Tate Gallery next month. Would you like to go?”*

If you’re feeling more confident, you might want to be more direct and say, *“I’ve really enjoyed tonight! Would you like to meet up again, perhaps for a drink?”*

No one finds this easy at first and we all need to judge how brave and confident we are feeling. However, it’s worth remembering, we will never know what the other person thinks until we ask.

## What if someone declines?

Everyone gets turned down at sometime or other. It’s not nice, but doesn’t have to be the end of the world. And it doesn’t necessarily mean they haven’t enjoyed your company or they are judging your appearance. People say no for all sorts of reasons, including the fact that they are just not looking for a partner at that time.

Of course, sometimes, the simple truth is that a person may not find another person interesting or appealing. It happens to all of us. This can be disappointing and upsetting, but it doesn’t mean someone else won’t be interested in you. You will naturally feel hurt and perhaps rejected. If someone turns you down, try to respond lightly and leave a good impression. A simple response might be, *“Well okay. Thanks for the chat. Enjoy the rest of your night.”* Then you can walk away with your dignity intact.

Sometimes people may say they want to be friends. If you really like this person, it might be worth considering. You may feel too upset, but if you feel you can do it, friendship can be very rewarding. Plus you could meet other new people through this friendship – and increase your chances of meeting someone else.

If you do decide to give the friendship a chance, give yourself some time to get over any embarrassment you feel and let the person know that you need that space.

## How do I turn someone down?

You may be asked out by someone you’re not interested in. This may sound okay, but it can be surprisingly difficult to turn someone down, especially if you like them as a person or there is a chance you will come across them again. It is best to be polite, brief and honest. Say that you enjoyed chatting with and meeting the person, but you’re not interested in taking it any further. There is no need to be too specific about why or to go into a long explanation.



## Learning more about each other

When you've been with someone a while, you will naturally start to share more about yourselves – your background, experiences and achievements; your fears, hopes and dreams; your likes and dislikes. This sort of exchange of information is important in developing a relationship, it helps you to get to know each other better, understand where you are both coming from and recognise your differences as well as your similarities.

## Talking about your disfigurement

At some point in your relationship, it's likely you will start to consider talking about your disfigurement, as part of sharing information about yourself, your history and experiences. This is a personal choice and judging when this feels right and comfortable will vary from person to person and may depend on your partner and the relationship.

“It is daunting when meeting a new partner or even thinking about dating. How do you steer a conversation onto disfigurement? In this day and age (and I am thinking internet dating, etc), there is opportunity not to mention it, but then you have to think about meeting the person at some point – how are you going to deal with that? Personally I have always been upfront about my port wine stain. I use cosmetic camouflage, but you still have to tell people, as they are going to cotton on at some point aren't they? I think it's best to be upfront about it. It's also daunting for partners or potential partners too. So, I would take things one step at a time and get to know the person as a friend before taking things further.” *Linda*

Understandably, it might feel daunting, especially if you have not talked about your condition much. Here are a few things to consider:

### *When?*

This is a very individual decision. Some people may feel that talking about their condition on a first date is too early, but for others, this may feel natural and right. Some may feel that avoiding talking about their unusual appearance is actually getting in the way of their relationship developing and prefer to get it out in the open earlier on. Others may prefer to wait until the relationship has developed and they feel totally sure of the other person. When to talk will depend on a number of factors; some of these may be:

- How confident you feel

- How close you feel to the other person
- How comfortable you feel with the other person
- How you feel about your condition and talking about it generally
- How you feel it is affecting your relationship's development
- How open the other person is about it.

### Where?

It is likely you will want to be in a place where you feel happy to talk about something so personal. Again, this is an individual choice. Here are a few potential thoughts:

- You may want to consider somewhere private where you can talk uninterrupted and without being overheard
- You may feel safer and more confident talking on your 'own territory'
- You may prefer somewhere more neutral or common to both of you
- The topic may just come up naturally, in which case you might not be in control of where you are. Under these circumstances, it is important to feel the place is comfortable for you to talk – and if not, you may want to suggest going somewhere else or postponing your conversation.

### How?

There is no right or wrong here. It is up to you to decide which approach makes you feel most confident and comfortable.

You could introduce the subject more informally, referring to your condition in a passing conversation and seeing if your partner asks you more about it. For example, you could say something like, *"I love this sunny weather, but I have to be careful about exposing my skin because of my scarring."* This suggests that you are at ease with talking about your condition and that the other person can feel comfortable too.

Alternatively, you may prefer to set aside dedicated time to talk in more depth. If this is the case, it may be helpful to prepare your partner a little in advance by saying something like, *"I want to tell you more about my condition. Can you come around this evening?"* This clearly outlines your aim and the importance of this discussion.

### *What do I say?*

You may want to prepare by thinking about what you want to say beforehand; it might help to write it down. Here are some tips to think about:

- Think about the things you think your partner might want to know
- Think about how much you want to say. What do you need them to know? What will help them to understand you as a person?
- Try to stick to using more neutral words to describe the colour, size, texture or sensation of your condition
- If possible, give the name of your condition and other facts
- Try not to use negative or critical words – for example, instead of saying, *“It makes me feel ugly”* try saying something like *“I feel self-conscious about it”* or *“it makes me feel less confident”*
- If possible, try to explain both sides of having a condition, *“It was difficult when it first happened, but I feel ok about it now.”* or *“When I was young, I felt shy and embarrassed, but now I feel much more confident”*
- You may want to check out what you want to say first with a friend whom you’ve spoken to about your condition.

### *How will they respond?*

Of course, it is not possible to completely predict how another person will respond. You can try to think about possible reactions in advance and think about how you may feel about these.

Try not to assume the reaction will be negative or that it will change anything. You are sharing some important information about yourself – and it is likely that your partner will have some feelings about the situation, but these may vary. They may be surprised. Or they may be worried or concerned for you. They may also be less concerned or affected than you imagine.

*“Once in a relationship don’t allow your disfigurement to become almost like a third person within that relationship. I’m Alison with a facial disfigurement not Alison and her facial disfigurement.”*

*Alison*

Some people may have a lot of questions or want to talk in detail. You may find it helpful to provide some written information at this point and let them know if you are happy to talk about your condition now. Or, alternatively, you may say it is better for them to read the information and for you to talk again at another time.

Other people may not know what to say at first or struggle to let you know what they think. They may not say much straight away and probably need time to take in all the things you are saying.

If you have been together for a while, you may have a sense of your partner's possible reactions. It might be worth thinking about this beforehand – but with the acceptance that they may not act exactly how you expect.

### *What if my condition is not usually visible?*

If your condition is not something immediately obvious, this conversation will reveal something new and probably unexpected about you to your partner. The approach to talking about your condition is the same as described in 'Where?', 'When?', 'How?', 'What do I say?' above. The main difference is that your partner is most likely unaware of your condition. You may need to prepare yourself for your partner to react in any number of ways; they may be very surprised, shocked, sad, worried or concerned for your welfare. These are natural reactions and it's important to talk about them if you can. You can prepare your partner beforehand by saying you have something important and personal that you want to share with them and it may come as a surprise.

## Helping your partner manage other people's reactions

"I've had a couple of serious long term relationships and my partners at the time have had to deal with all sorts of comments – one example being, "Urgh. What are you going out with that for?" I even had a partner's ex-girlfriend telephone him to "warn him" what I looked like without my make up on! Fortunately he just laughed it off and told me about it." *Linda*

If your condition does attract attention, your partner might feel unsure about how to respond. If they notice that other people are staring or overhear remarks or unnecessary questions, they may feel protective towards you or even angry. They may even make comments to someone or start an argument. Although this is understandable, you might not find this helpful or feel you want to manage this in your own way.

### *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**

These situations may not be easy for them and it may be worth talking to your partner when things happen. This will also give you a chance to explain how you manage these situations. Then together, you could talk about possible ways for your partner to react that are supportive or helpful to you. It might also be useful to direct your partner towards the Changing Faces guides in the box above to give them more understanding about the situations you come across and to help them think about dealing with other people's reactions.

"Sharing my life with my husband has been brilliant. He has given me lots of support and has out-stared many a starrer over the years." *Alison*

There are times you might find it useful to have their help. Some people plan this with their partner in advance and use a signal to indicate when they want support. This could be as simple as, *"If someone asks me about my birthmark, I'll be okay to handle it. But if they keep on and I feel like I'm struggling, I'll give you a wink and perhaps you could interrupt by saying something like, 'Really, let it go!'"*

"I have been with my partner now for ten years and although we just shrug off the stares and comments, it does annoy him and depending on his mood, he can be more vocal about it than I am." *Linda*

## Let's talk about sex

Almost everyone feels self-conscious about showing their body to a new partner and apprehensive about sex at first. And it's not always easy to talk about sex; most people feel embarrassed or awkward about this at some time or another. However, if you and your partner are becoming more physically or sexually intimate you may need to talk further about your condition – especially if there are physical reasons or differences in shape, texture or sensation.

"I found becoming intimate another obstacle to overcome. Explaining about my face had become easier over the years, but then when you become intimate with someone there are the scars you've always kept hidden to explain about. I then realised, for me, that it was better to explain about the whole lot together and to include it with my explanation of my disfigurement." *Alison*

Although you might feel anxious about this at first, talking to your partner about these aspects of your condition can actually reduce any nervousness that may affect both of you in terms of enjoying sex or physical closeness. Your partner may be worried about hurting you or if they should touch certain areas, but not know how to ask you about this. This may cause you to think your partner does not like this part of you. Once you start talking about it, you will both understand the situation better. Also, talking about such a personal and intimate thing is likely to make you feel closer, as well as give you ways to manage things together.

Clear communication is essential. Don't expect your partner to know everything about you and what might feel good or not. Don't assume your partner knows your condition has caused differences in the shape or texture of your skin, or you have altered sensation. Your body or skin may be irritated, sore or highly sensitive – but how does your partner know this? Give them a chance to understand better by giving information.

Try to be clear about your condition by using descriptive and neutral words to explain shape, texture and sensations. You will want to find your own words to describe your condition and the way it feels, but here are a few examples:

*“I want to tell you about the scarring on my leg. It is dark pink and it is a little bumpy in places, but it doesn't hurt me at all.”*

*“Even though my birthmark looks different, I have the same feelings there as you.”*

*“This part of my face is a bit sensitive, but it's fine to touch everywhere else.”*

*“This part of my body feels less smooth and sometimes it feels sore, but don't worry, I will let you know.”*

If the shape or structure of your mouth is different, you might need to let your partner know about kissing, by saying something like:

*“When you kiss me on that side of my mouth it feels great, but on this side I feel very little.”*

It may be the same for certain parts of your body:

*“I need you to take care when you touch me here... it's very sensitive.”*

If you feel uncomfortable or worried about something your partner is doing, explain this to them, and try to tell them what does work for you.

When it comes to sex, we all have to learn what feels good and what doesn't. If you haven't had sex before, it may be a case of trying things out and telling your partner how it feels. And everyone is different – with each new sexual partner, we have to learn about each other and what works best together as a couple.

Changing Faces offers you the chance to **get support** and talk through any of your thoughts about becoming more intimate physically.

## Give yourself time

If it is a first relationship, people often discover new things about themselves, both emotionally and physically. Or possibly, you may not have had a relationship for some time and so feel 'out of practice'. Even if you have had several relationships, each one is different and takes time to adjust to a new one.

Often, as a relationship develops and we feel closer to someone, this may affect the way we see and think about ourselves. This may give you more confidence and make you feel more sexy and attractive. You may feel happier and more at ease. At the same time, you may feel apprehensive as you go through the different stages or aspects of your relationship. It may not always be plain sailing. First arguments can be very upsetting, but it is natural and understandable to have disagreements from time to time.

If you are ready to try a relationship, don't let anyone stand in your way. Some friends or family may feel protective towards you and worry about you being unhappy or getting hurt. However, we all risk the likelihood of being hurt at some time – but in order not to miss out on the benefits of a potential relationship, we have to take this risk sometimes.

"Sometimes well meaning, over protective family and friends can also deter you from forming a relationship. They worry that you will get hurt but are actually denying you something that they consider essential and that they enjoy. It's important to remember that you have an opinion too. I was fortunate that my parents stood back and allowed me the space to meet someone." *Alison*

Relationships take time to develop. Getting used to all these different feelings and emotions may take time and adjustment. Try not to over analyse or worry too much. If you can, try to relax and enjoy yourself, taking each issue in your stride as it arises'. If you need time to yourself, take it –

and your partner may need this too. Either way, the key to any relationship is good communication.

## Summary

- You are most likely to meet someone when you have something in common
- Show your personality through your style
- Use your face and your body – smile – our body language makes up a big part of how we see each other
- When starting a conversation, think about what you have in common
- Prepare in advance of social situations
- Flirting is a light-hearted way of telling someone you like them
- Remember, we will never know what the other person thinks until we ask
- When talking about your disfigurement with your partner, you may find it helpful to prepare in advance and think about when, where, how, what you are going to say and how you think they may respond
- Your partner may need you to help them manage other people's reactions
- Most people feel apprehensive about sex at first – and it's not always easy to talk about sex, but this may reduce any nervousness you have about it
- It takes time
- Changing Faces can offer you **help** with intimacy and relationships.



## 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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Please contact Changing Faces for further details of sources used.

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