

# **British Association of Dermatologists**

## **Telling someone I'm in a relationship with about my skin condition: How to cope with my anxiety - a self-help leaflet**

Living with a skin condition can bring many challenges. As well as managing the physical aspects of your condition you might find that these challenges include those to do with your emotions. The emotional impact of living with a skin condition can be particularly relevant to your relationship.

We would like to help you approach the topic of disclosing your skin condition in a relationship by drawing from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT): a type of talking therapy that aims to help people manage their thoughts, emotions and reactions to the problems in their lives. We understand that it must be anxiety-provoking to consider disclosing your skin condition but we hope that this self-help material improves your ability to cope.

We decided to write this piece of self-help material because we think that coping with a skin condition could be made easier with the support of a reliable partner, friend or family member, rather than trying to deal with it alone. The person(s) you disclose to is up to you – we use the word “partner” throughout this leaflet, as one example.

### **Getting to know cognitive behavioural therapy**

Before we work on the specific topic of disclosing your skin condition in a relationship we would like you to get to know the basics of the approach used in cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). To do this please read our leaflet on ‘What is CBT?’

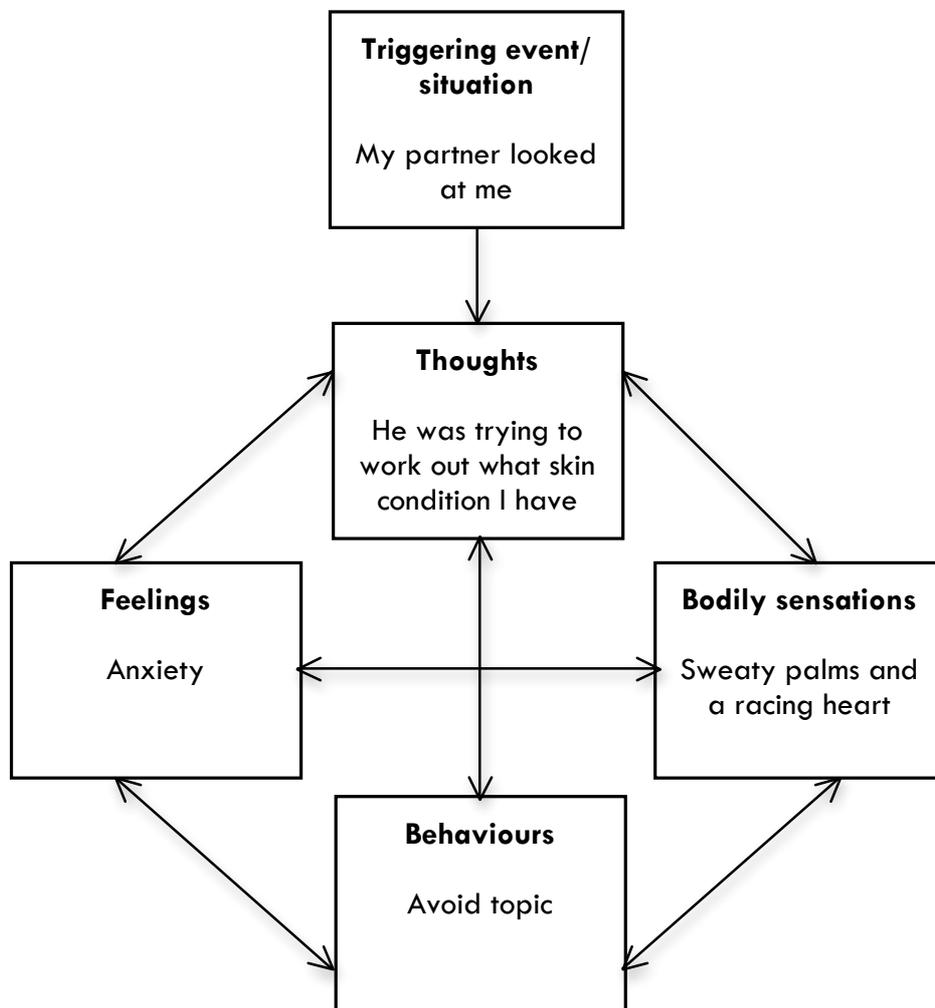
### **Using CBT to understand the struggle with telling your partner about your skin condition**

It can be very easy to make assumptions about daily events or situations with your partner, and for these situations to trigger certain feelings, body sensations, and make you act in certain ways. For example, a person with

a skin condition might see their partner look at them and then become anxious and experience sweaty palms and a racing heart, for example. The person with the condition might then avoid the topic of their skin or of disclosing information about it.

However, we have not yet considered what the person with the skin condition is thinking in this situation. Diagram 1 illustrates that the reason why the person with the skin condition experienced anxiety, sweaty palms and a racing heart was not due to the situation itself, but was due to the interpretation (or misinterpretation!) that their partner was trying to work out what skin condition they had. This thinking was also the reason why the topic was avoided and so an unhelpful vicious 'circle' was created.

**Diagram 1.**



Understanding the role of interpretation (and misinterpretation!) is the key to coping better with disclosing your skin condition. Misinterpretations come in many common forms of thinking styles and it is important that you learn to identify the ones that you make. Only then can you break vicious

circles such as the one in diagram 1, and turn them into more virtuous circles that help you talk about your skin condition with your partner.

For example, if you suspected that you had misinterpreted your partner's look you might break the vicious circle (or prevent getting into it in the first place) by discussing, rather than avoiding, the topic of your skin condition and find out that he/she was in fact not thinking about your skin, and that you had misinterpreted their look. As a result you would probably feel less anxious about the role that your skin condition was having in your relationship. The next section will help you identify any vicious circles that you might be experiencing related to disclosure.

### **Identifying your vicious circles about disclosure**

If your skin condition is visible most of the time when you are with your partner it may become a topic of conversation fairly early on in your relationship. If you conceal it, or only have the condition in areas that are usually covered, it may take longer before you consider disclosing your skin condition.

No matter which of these situations is relevant to you, take a moment to write down the thoughts that you experience when you consider disclosing your skin condition to a partner. Use box 1 below to note these down. It might be worth trying to write these down immediately after seeing your partner. When you complete this exercise it might be helpful to ask yourself: What is the worst thing that goes through my mind when I consider telling my partner about my skin condition? Or what am I scared of?

#### **Box 1.**

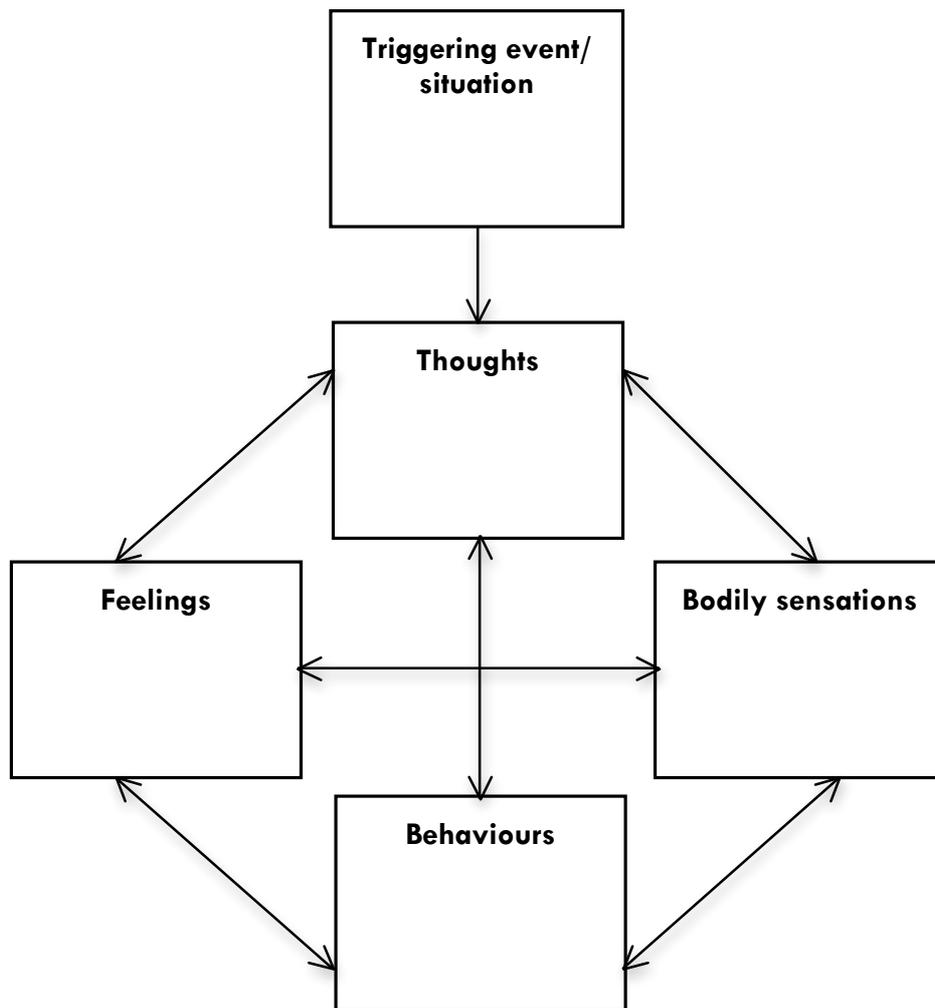
<p><b>My thoughts about disclosing my skin condition are: ...</b></p>
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Now you have identified your thoughts (box 1) ask yourself how you feel and what you do in the situations where you have these thoughts. You can also ask what sensations you feel in your body. Please use this information

to complete diagram 2, filling in each of the boxes. This will help you to understand your vicious circle about disclosure.

Once you have completed diagram 2 you can move onto the next step, which is to understand the thinking styles that you use when thinking about disclosure.

**Diagram 2.**



## Identifying thinking styles about disclosure

Let's run through some of the unhelpful thinking styles that might occur when considering disclosing your skin condition to someone you are in a relationship with.

Table 1 has some of the thinking styles (misinterpretations) that you might have when planning disclosure.

**Table 1.**

Thinking styles	Examples
Thinking the worst/ catastrophising	"If I tell her I'll <i>never</i> see her again"
All or none thinking/ black and white thinking	"He'll be <i>helpful</i> or he'll <i>avoid</i> the subject"
Fortune telling	"The relationship will be <i>doomed</i> "
Mindreading	" <i>He thinks</i> my skin is disgusting"
Shoulds and oughts/ self-criticise	"I <i>should</i> have done this by now"
Emotional reasoning	"My ' <i>gut</i> ' feeling is that if I tell her now she'll leave me"
Name calling	"I'm an <i>idiot</i> for not having told him this yet"
Overgeneralising	"People will always react badly if I tell them about my skin condition"
Personalisation	"My skin is worse at the moment, it must be something I've done!"

Do any of these thinking styles look familiar? Do any match up with the thoughts that you wrote in box 1? This is not an exhaustive list but consider if you have been using any of the above thinking styles. If the answer is yes, write them down in table 2 next to the relevant thoughts that you have.

**Table 2.**

My thoughts...	My thinking styles

The most important point about identifying your thinking styles is to help you see that, at these times, your emotions and behaviours related to disclosure are being driven by *thoughts not facts*. The good news is that you can therefore start to question your own thinking in order to cope better.

### **How to look for more helpful views**

This section is not about removing old thoughts from your mind. It is more about challenging them and generating new helpful thoughts for better coping in the long-term. Many of the ideas below are helpful no matter what the thinking style is. However, some of the ideas are grouped by thinking style which may be useful for you:

#### **Questioning the evidence**

This technique is general useful and is one of the most commonly used in CBT. It might be particularly useful if you are catastrophising or trying to use emotional reasoning.

1. Start by stating the thought that is distressing you.
2. Practice asking yourself “what is the evidence for my thought and would it *stand up in court as fact?*”
3. Then ask yourself “is there evidence that suggests that the thought is not totally true?”
4. Then ask yourself “what else might happen?” and make a list of some possibilities.
5. End by considering all of the evidence for the original thought and the other possibilities and write a more realistic and rational statement. It might begin with “Even though I have the thought....”

#### **Do you criticise yourself or name-call?**

1. Start by writing these thoughts down and practise calling them your internal bully when you notice them.
2. Then ask yourself what a good friend would say to you if you had just voiced this thought to them about your situation.
3. You can also ask yourself what you would say to a friend with a skin condition who had just voiced the self-critical thought as if it applied to them.
4. Then ask yourself “Is there any reason why these new views can’t apply to me?”

5. You might like to ask a friend to write down 3 positive things about you and then to put these up on your fridge or put them in your wallet to remind you of your positive qualities.

**Are you a black and white thinker at times?**

1. Draw a straight line to represent a continuum from 0 - 10 and put the extremes of your thinking at either end (e.g. 0: He'll leave me straight away & 10: He'll really want my skin to get better).
2. Now start writing other possibilities onto the continuum that represent '2', '4', and '6' as a way of seeing the 'grey area'. Then question the evidence for your original thought as outlined above.

At this point you might want to use table 3 to record some new more balanced thoughts that offer more helpful and alternative views about disclosing your skin condition.

**Table 3.**

<b>New more balanced thoughts...</b>

Ok, so by now we hope that you are becoming more aware of your thoughts (not facts) about disclosing your skin condition to your partner. We hope that you are now more able to manage these thoughts. The next section is a guide on what to say when disclosing your skin condition to your partner.

**What to say when disclosing my skin condition to my partner**

Disclosing your skin condition to a new partner needs to be considered carefully. It is up to you when you do this. It is possible that you have known your partner for some time before you disclose, depending on the nature of your relationship.

## **Verbal disclosure**

To disclose your skin condition, make sure you choose an appropriate place (where you have privacy) and time (when neither you nor your partner are in a rush). Consider the following points when preparing for verbal disclosure:

- Consider that your partner may not be as concerned as you are about your skin condition.
- You might ask your partner if they have ever had a skin problem or another health difficulty that may have got in the way of their life at times.
- Try not to forget the positive points from your conversation. For example, you might talk about your independence with its management or your confidence in the team that treat you if this is relevant.
- It is important to listen to your partner's concerns and to manage their potential reaction to put them at ease.
- Consider if talking about this could be helped by having a picture with you. You might not do this the first time you talk about it. However, if you consider the anxiety curve you learnt about in this self-help material, seeing a picture may reduce *their* anxiety in the long-term. Using a picture can therefore be considered another way of helping you and your partner prepare for seeing your skin condition.
- When describing your skin condition try to use neutral and descriptive words in your language rather than words that are emotive. For example, it would be more helpful to refer to your skin as dry/loose/pale/ridged rather than to use words like disgusting/deformed/ugly/etc.
- It might also be important for you to be honest with your partner about how it makes you feel.
- You might find it useful to role-play disclosing your skin condition with a friend/family member who already knows about it.
- Another suggestion would be to write down what you want to say beforehand.

## **Physical disclosure**

To physically disclose your skin condition, make sure that you are as comfortable as you can be with the way it looks as well as with touching your skin. Before physical disclosure you might:

- Spend more time at home exposing your skin, even in private. You might spend more time looking at disliked areas of your body if you usually avoid them.
- Take advantage of the times when your skin condition is not flaring if this is relevant for you. You might do this by uncovering more at these times.
- If you tend to get preoccupied with your skin condition, for example, by checking it, try to reduce this.
- Remember to pay attention to the parts of your body that are not affected by your skin condition. For example, if you like wearing make-up and can then go ahead
- Make a note of areas of your body that you do like.
- Take the time to note down your positive qualities as a way to remember that you are not defined by your body and that there is much more to you than your skin condition.
- Really optimise your self-care and increase adherence to prescribed hospital treatment as much as possible to boost your confidence.
- Spend more time in public places exposing appropriate parts of your body, if this is less anxiety provoking than physical disclosure to your partner.
- You might physically disclose your body in a graded way to manage both your anxiety and that of your partner. To do this you might build a brief hierarchy to follow using table 4.

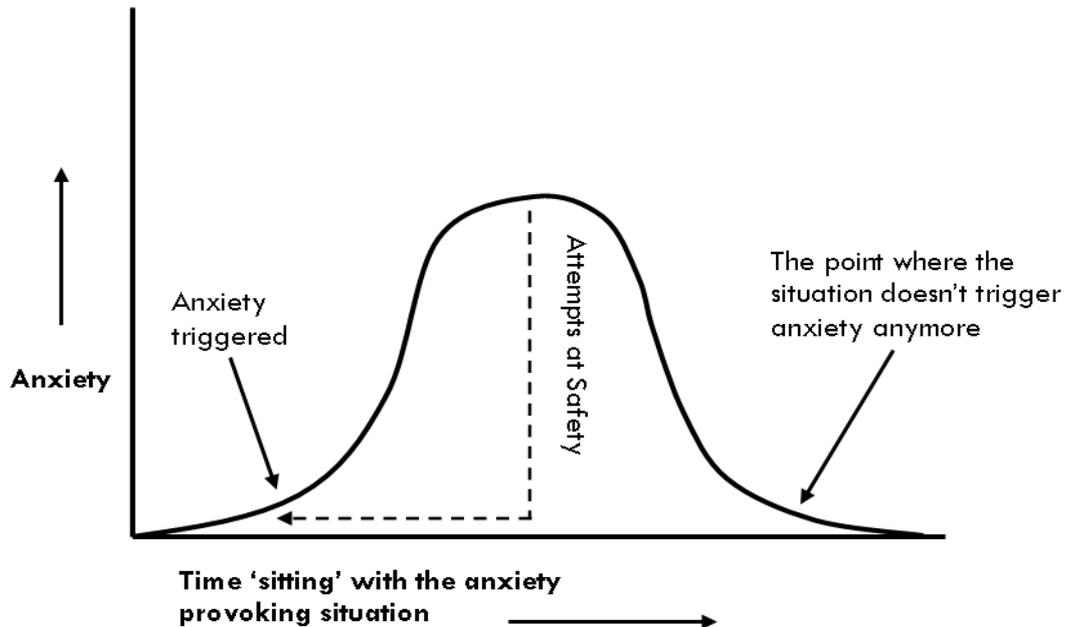
The next step is to gradually, in your own time, start changing your behaviour in situations with your partner. Let us therefore briefly talk about behaviour change and emotion.

### **Learning about behaviour change and emotion**

When you feel unsafe or vulnerable it makes sense that you would behave in ways to protect yourself. However, when these behaviours are motivated by unhelpful thoughts, such as your thinking styles, the result is a vicious cycle – like what was explained earlier. Let us call these ways of behaving “attempts at safety” (given that they are the things you are doing to try and keep your relationship going).

Usually, the main emotion experienced in this sort of situation is anxiety or self-consciousness. Diagram 2 illustrates the problem with these attempts at safety for your anxiety levels in the long-term.

**Diagram 2.**



In a nutshell, the diagram shows that: ‘what goes up must come down’, in terms of your anxiety levels. However, when you do something to control that anxiety (i.e. an attempt at safety) it gets reduced much faster (shown with the dotted line). The problem here is that you go back to the beginning of the anxiety curve. This means that you haven’t yet reached the point where the situation does not trigger anxiety anymore.

If you are using attempts at safety, as in diagram 2, not only does your anxiety continue but also your unhelpful beliefs (thinking styles) are likely to still feel like the truth/ fact. Remember, this is because thoughts, feelings and behaviours are strongly linked.

We understand that this approach is essentially saying ‘face your fear’ so that your concerns about disclosure become more manageable – allowing you to talk more comfortably about your condition in the future, when you wish to do so. We understand that disclosure can be a big step and so we recommend that you develop a graded approach. In order to do this you might make a hierarchy, similar to that found in table 4. Note that the situations in table 4 change between physical and verbal disclosure on the

way up the hierarchy. The hierarchy should be put together based on how distressing relevant situations make you feel.

**Table 4.**

<b>Situation</b> (This could be related to physical or verbal disclosure)	<b>How distressed am I about this?</b> 0 (not distressed) – 10 (most distress possible)
Showing my partner the psoriasis on my arm	8
Telling my new partner I have psoriasis	7
Uncovering arms with psoriasis in public	5
Telling a friend that I have psoriasis and psoriatic arthritis	3
Uncovering arms with psoriasis at home	2

You might want to use table 5 to write out your own hierarchy. Once you've done this, the aim is to start at the bottom and move to the next situation on the hierarchy when the one you are currently working on does not trigger anxiety anymore, or at least only triggers a small amount of anxiety that you feel is much more manageable.

**Table 5.**

<b>Situation</b> (This could be related to physical or verbal disclosure)	<b>How distressed am I about this?</b> 0 (not distressed) – 10 (most distress possible)

**Using behavioural experiments to disclose my skin condition to my partner**

By now we hope that you have made progress towards disclosing your skin condition. However, you might not have made as much progress as you might have liked. If this is the case then we would like to help you put everything you have learned together using a technique called behavioural experiments.

To develop your behavioural experiment follow these steps and use table 5 as you do so. This process can be used for both verbal and physical disclosure, if you want to:

1. By working through this self-help leaflet you will have identified what you think will happen at and around a time of disclosure. Describe the situation that you will be in when having this thought.
2. Now treat these thought(s) as your prediction(s). How much do you currently believe the prediction(s)?
3. It is then very important for you to define how you would know if your prediction(s) came true. When you do this write down evidence that would *stand up in court as fact?*"
4. To test your prediction(s) you will need to drop your attempts at safety – the things you usually do to maintain the status quo with your anxiety-provoking thoughts about disclosure. Write these down.
5. Before you try out your experiment you can re-read the section of this leaflet on what to say when disclosing my skin condition to my partner.
6. Choose the best time to try out your experiment and then try it.
7. Write down what actually happened and decide on whether or not your prediction was correct based on the evidence you defined.
8. Make time to reflect on what you have found out. Write down how this will influence how you disclose your skin condition in the future.

**Table 5.**

Describe the situation	What do you predict will	What attempts at	What actually happened?	What have you found out?
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	<p><b>happen?</b></p> <p><b>How much do you believe it will (0% not at all - 100% completely)?</b></p>	<p><b>safety will you need to drop?</b></p>	<p><b>Was the prediction correct?</b></p>	<p><b>How will this influence how you disclose your skin condition in the future?</b></p>
	<p><b>How would you know if it had happened? I.e. What would the evidence be?</b></p>			

### **Summary**

- Living with a skin condition can be difficult emotionally and so you might want to talk about it with someone you are in a relationship with.
- Knowing how to disclose your skin condition to a partner can be challenging and so this self-help leaflet has offered some ideas on how to cope based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.
- Unhelpful vicious 'circles' can easily be formed that maintain your anxieties about disclosing your skin condition. Understanding how your thinking is linked to your anxiety, behaviours, and body sensations is key to coping better with disclosure.

- Tips covered in this self-help material that can help you progress with disclosure include: How to look for more helpful views, ideas on what to say to your partner, how to disclose your condition physically, how to approach the topic gradually, and how to test what you believe.

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