

ECZEMA

New research has highlighted the psychological affect eczema has on sufferers and the impact it has on everything from sex and parenting to work and friendships – 82 per cent of sufferers asked say they are embarrassed or ashamed of their condition, and more than three quarters admit that it has a negative effect on their mood. Dr Linda Papadopoulous is working to highlight the problem of hand eczema which affects up to six million in the UK...

WHAT IS ECZEMA?

It is a painful skin disorder causing red blisters, itching, swelling and deep cracks. It can strike at any age and can flare up during stressful times of our life or it can be related to an allergen. Our hands are a very socially important part of our body.

HOW DEPRESSING CAN IT GET FOR SUFFERERS?

It's psychologically handicapping – it affects your self-esteem and quality of life. You might like swimming and suddenly you can't, you might like to wear strappy dresses and suddenly you can't. When we meet people we shake hands – we can alter our body language and feel we have to explain it.

IS THERE A STIGMA ATTACHED TO ECZEMA?

Of course. There's a whole mythology around skin disease – is it contagious or due to a lack of hygiene? It is absolutely not the case. We need to bring awareness to this and get people to learn how to react around these conditions. We live in a visual society where we get upset if we have a blemish. It's all about perfection and Photoshopping. No one sees a sore throat but with eczema your illness doesn't become your own as it's on display. People will ask and point and make faces.

WHAT CAN SUFFERERS TO DO?

Don't become your condition. It shouldn't define you, it's only a small part of you. Learn basic social skills – if someone is staring, stare back and smile which says: 'You're not okay but I am, it's your problem.' Secondly, you're not the poster child for the condition, so you can choose whether to explain it or not. You can have a sentence ready to explain it in your

toolbox of things to do. Thirdly, keep a diary of things you're putting your life on hold for because of the condition and ask yourself if it's really worth it and begin to reclaim your life. Basic stress management and understanding when stress is coming on can help stop an attack before it comes. Beyond that, speak to your partner, speak to your GP and get professional help. And for those who don't have eczema and see it – educate yourself! Smile at

someone, shake their hand and don't ask – it can make the world of difference to someone. **OK!**



DR LINDA PAPADOPOULOS IS A RENOWNED PSYCHOLOGIST AND A SPECIALIST IN PSYCHODERMATOLOGY. SHE HAS COLLABORATED WITH WWW.MYHANDDECZEMA.CO.UK TO RAISE AWARENESS AND HELP SUFFERERS OF HAND ECZEMA, WHICH AFFECTS UP TO SIX MILLION PEOPLE IN THE UK.

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