



A positive approach

This eBooklet aims to help you take a positive approach to coping with vitiligo and managing the reactions of other people, whilst recognising that living with the condition can be difficult.

The social context

It has to be acknowledged that we live in a consumer society that values physical appearance highly. It is difficult not to be influenced by the media images of models and celebrities who seem to have 'perfect' skin, as well as slim bodies and expensive clothes.

In this context, it is not surprising that having vitiligo often makes people feel embarrassed about their appearance and anxious about how other people will react to their condition. The distress caused by these negative feelings can make people react in a number of ways, such as:

- avoiding/escaping social situations and activities they would otherwise enjoy (e.g. swimming).
- hiding the white patches by means of using camouflage or wearing clothing they would not otherwise wear.
- becoming very self-absorbed and oversensitive about the reactions of other people.
- comparing themselves unfavourably with other people.

These reactions are understandable, but they can damage your confidence and prevent you from leading a happy and fulfilled life.

A positive approach

The approach suggested here involves challenging negative thoughts and feelings and replacing them with more positive ones. By doing this, it is possible to change how you see yourself and how you relate to other people. Using the following method should help you develop this more positive way of coping with your skin condition.

1. Thinking positively...

Focus on the positives

- **Try to identify your negative thoughts and challenge them** by asking yourself:

“Is it true that ALL people judge me in terms of my skin?”

“Does my whole worth as a person and my abilities depend upon my physical appearance?”

“Would I ever choose a friend solely on the way they look?”

- **Become more conscious of the positive aspects of your appearance and your personality.** Focus your attention on your strong points and on the good things in your life as opposed to your vitiligo. Make statements to yourself, such as:

“I am worried that I won’t be loved/accepted because of my vitiligo but actually there are many people in my life (e.g. family, friends, colleagues) who do love/accept me because...”

“I am going to stop worrying about my skin and concentrate on the positives in my life.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. There are people who find me attractive because..... (insert positive attributes of your appearance or your personality).”

- Have a **self-motto**. Use a brief positive statement about yourself which you can repeat in your head when you are in a difficult situation, such as:

“I’m fine because I am competent (efficient, caring, passionate, courageous, considerate etc.).”

“Everyone who really knows me thinks I’m great (witty, wonderful, good company etc.) and I am!”

- **Divert your attention**

When you realise that you are thinking about your appearance and what other people might think about your looks, deliberately redirect your thoughts. Focus your attention away from negative thoughts onto something else. You could do this by:

- using your self-motto.
- thinking of something you have to do or are looking forward to.

- **Stop making comparisons**

Try monitoring the times of day, activities and situations in which you tend to compare yourself with other people. This can increase your awareness of this habit and help you to stop it. Concentrate on treating yourself well to increase your self-confidence.

- **Stop checking**

Also try to stop the habit of checking your skin too frequently in a way that causes distress. If you check yourself, you need to do it in an objective way. That means looking at your body and observing your appearance without judging it.

2. Behaving positively...

Reduce your own anxieties by acting positively.

You can:

- **Make your appearance as good as possible.** If you are happy with your clothes, shoes and hairstyle, you will feel more confident and able to act positively. Remember people are not just looking at the vitiligo, they are looking at the rest of you too.
- **Be aware of your 'body language'.** Remember that we communicate how we feel by how we stand, sit or walk. Having your head up, making good eye contact, smiling and having a strong voice gives the message that you are confident, friendly and worth getting to know. Making eye contact can feel intrusive or cause anxiety for someone with vitiligo, but it should help to think of it as a 'normal' part of the communication process.
- **Arrange for friends or family members to go with you to places which are difficult or new.** This will give you someone familiar to talk to and someone who can give you more confidence to make contact with new people. They can also be there to rescue you if a difficult situation arises.
- **Reduce other people's anxieties by talking positively** about vitiligo. Remember that they might also feel self-conscious (perhaps they have never met anyone with vitiligo, they may be unsure of where to look for fear of making you feel uncomfortable, or they may just be feeling your anxiety).

You can use the following ways of talking positively:

- **Explaining** your condition, using words you feel comfortable with, such as: *“It’s called vitiligo; it causes my skin and/or hair to turn white in patches”* or *“My skin has patches of different colour, that’s all.”* Mention it if the other person looks concerned, even if they do not directly ask you about it. Try to keep your explanations short; this will inform people but keep some of your privacy as well. People don’t really need to know any more than you want to tell them.
- **Reassuring** other people that vitiligo does not hurt if they seem to be concerned about this.
- **Reassuring** them that they cannot catch vitiligo if this seems to be necessary. All you need to say is: *“It’s called vitiligo, it’s not catching.”*
- **Using humour** if you can. It may be appropriate to say something like: *“It’s just the way I look. It makes it easier to spot me in photographs.”*
- **Keeping relaxed**, trying not to talk about your anxieties unless you know the other person is going to be interested and sympathetic.

If you don’t feel like talking about your condition, or you don’t like the way someone is asking you about vitiligo, you can try:

- **Distracting** people away from your condition by changing the subject. Ask the other person a question about themselves, or about an interest you have in common.
- **Being assertive**, without being aggressive or rude. You can just say something like: *“I don’t really feel like talking about it now.”* Then make an excuse to move on to someone else or some other activity.

Dealing with difficult situations:

People with vitiligo frequently have to deal with uncomfortable situations, as when other people are staring or making intrusive comments. These can be very challenging and make you fearful. If this applies to you, it may help to make a list of the situations which cause you distress. Then you can start by working out ways to tackle the least intimidating ones before dealing with the situations that cause you most distress. Taking a gradual approach can help you build up your confidence. For example:

- If you think someone is **staring** at you, try giving them a quick smile. This will let them know that you have noticed their stare. Hopefully they will be embarrassed and stop staring at you. Remember they are probably just curious about your condition and are not necessarily being rude or intentionally insensitive.
- When you are **asked about your vitiligo**, look straight back and smile at the person and decide whether you want to reply or not. Use the Explaining, Reassuring, Distracting and Being Assertive methods described before.
- You may find talking to strangers easiest on holiday, when you are relaxed and with people you may not meet again.
- Think about the situations you have tackled, learning from any things you could have done better, but particularly noting what went well. Praise and reward yourself for your achievements in overcoming your difficulties!

3. Feeling positive...

Expressing your feelings

Remember that

- everyone who has vitiligo experiences negative feelings at some stage. This is normal and you are not alone.
- It usually helps to express your feelings, rather than to suppress them.
- Sharing how you feel with other people close to you will probably help them as well as you. They will better understand how to support you.
- Sharing your feelings with other people who have vitiligo will help you realise that you are not alone in experiencing these emotions.

Accepting the condition

If you think and behave positively in the ways suggested, you can get to the stage of accepting your condition. You should not feel guilty in any way, either for having vitiligo in the first place, or for having difficulties managing it.

Look after yourself and try to see that **your appearance is only one aspect of who you are**. Statements like the following may help you to accept your skin condition and treat yourself well:

- *“I still have a healthy skin.”*
- *“I am different, but everybody is different in some way.”*
- *“I may not like my vitiligo but it is part of me. Everybody has something that they may not like or worry about.”*

It is recognised that being positive and accepting the condition is extremely hard for those of us who live within communities that hold specific negative beliefs about vitiligo. You may, in particular, benefit from getting further help and support to cope with your skin condition.

4. Getting further help and support

You can contact the Vitiligo Society at www.vitiligosociety.org.uk for information about all aspects of the condition. The Society has Open Days where you can get advice and meet other people who have vitiligo. They will understand your condition and your difficulties. You will not have any explaining to do!

Some people find it helpful to get support from a counsellor or another 'neutral' person when they are coping with vitiligo. You can get advice, for example from your doctor, about what is available and what might be suitable for you. One type of counselling you may want to ask about is called Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy. This therapy uses the kind of 'positive thinking' approach suggested in this eBooklet.

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