

Does your skin need a shrink?

By: Karen Robock

When was the last time you talked to your dermatologist about your feelings? If you're struggling with acne or a sudden rash, your suppressed emotions could be surfacing as breakouts. To help clear up your complexion, you may have to go beyond skin deep.



That big red bump on the tip of your nose may be more than just a passing blemish. High levels of stress or suppressed emotions can cause everything from hives to acne, and topical treatments may only scratch the surface of your skin problem.

It's estimated that up to 60 percent of people who seek medical attention for a skin condition are also dealing with some kind of emotional issue. "And those issues can keep even the most advanced medical regimen from working effectively," says Dr. Ted Grossbart, an assistant clinical psychology professor at Harvard Medical School in Boston and author of *Skin Deep: A Mind/Body Program for Healthy Skin* (Health Press, 1992). If you think your latest breakout might be related more to emotions than hormones, the new field of psychodermatology – which addresses both mind and skin – may be for you. Here's how to tell when it's time to seek a little skin therapy.

The skin-psyche connection

How you feel emotionally can have a direct effect on your skin's health and appearance. If you internalize stress, anxiety or anger, it may surface on your skin as a form of dermatitis (such as hives or a rash) or exacerbate an existing skin problem (such as acne or psoriasis). "Anger is one of the most common emotional triggers," says Grossbart. He recalls a patient who was trapped in an unhappy marriage and unaware of how hurt and angry she really felt about her situation until she developed a rash on her ring finger. It became so inflamed that her wedding band eventually had to be cut off. "Her body gave voice to her suppressed desire to be out of an incredibly difficult situation," says Grossbart.

The look of your skin can also have an effect on your emotions. An extreme skin disease can create emotional turmoil – particularly with persistent, long-term skin conditions like eczema (a type of dermatitis that causes red, swollen and itchy skin), rosacea (a condition that causes redness and swelling, mostly on the face) and psoriasis (an inflammatory condition that typically causes patches of raised, reddish skin covered in white scales). The emotional distress caused by these conditions can further exacerbate them, which, in turn, can cause more emotional trauma. This vicious cycle can result in a deeper depression and more frequent or severe outbreaks.

For some, their skin conditions can be emotionally devastating and even lifealtering. "It can totally change a person's behaviour," says [Dr. Benjamin Barankin](#), a dermatologist in Toronto. The emotional and psychosocial consequences of these types of skin conditions can have an impact on almost every area of a person's life. People with severe psoriasis, for example, often try to hide their condition by wearing long sleeves and pants, even in the heat of summer. "And for young people, it can affect how likely they are to get a job, how confident they feel about themselves, how much they date and even how likely they are to get married," says [Barankin](#).

Skin shrinks

When your emotions are involved, traditional treatments alone may not be enough to clear up your skin. A psychodermatological approach addresses the mind and skin by combining traditional dermatological treatments with techniques like guided imagery, hypnosis, behaviour therapy and antidepressant or psychotropic medications. Grossbart says that about one-third of his patients see dramatic results with psychodermatology where traditional dermatology alone has failed. But there isn't a one-size-fits-all prescription for any given skin condition or emotional issue. And, unfortunately, there are only a handful of doctors who are considered specialists in this field and qualified to practice both psychology and dermatology – and all of them reside south of the border.

“I think that [Canadian] dermatologists are usually well aware of the psychological impact,” says Barankin. “Whether we're able to address it is another issue.” He estimates that as many as 20 percent of his patients are stressed, depressed or anxious over their skin conditions. All that's needed for some patients is an in-office discussion of stress-reduction techniques in combination with the usual prescription, but other patients require in-depth psychiatric care – treatments that are beyond his scope. Most dermatologists are ill equipped to deal with psychological problems because they are not trained in this area or simply don't have the time to discuss complicated emotional issues during a regular appointment – this is where a referral to a general practitioner, psychiatrist or psychologist comes in. “There needs to be more crosstalk with other specialties – and between dermatologists and their patients – to ensure that people are getting the best care,” says Barankin.

If you think that your skin disease or sudden breakout is emotionally triggered or causing you emotional trauma, ask your doctor or dermatologist to help you address that aspect of your condition. Clearing up your skin could be as simple as reducing some of the stress in your life. If you get to the root of whatever it is you're feeling and deal with it, your skin will thank you, says Grossbart. “I always tell patients that just because you feel it in your heart doesn't mean that you have to feel it in your skin,” he says.