

Massachusetts General Hospital BMT Survivorship Program

Changes in Appearance and Body Image

Bone marrow transplant can change how people look (appearance) and their body image. Body image is how you view your overall appearance. Body image is your “mental picture” of yourself.

Changes in the way someone looks after BMT can happen because of treatment, organ damage, the effects of graft-versus host disease (GVHD) and other medications. GVHD can cause changes in hair growth and skin tone. Steroids may change how our body distributes fat, changing the shape of our face and waist.

You may also feel different about yourself because of changes others can't see, some hidden under clothing. How we look and the face we present to the world are closely linked to our identity. In some cases, changes in our appearance may make us feel self-conscious, anxious or ashamed.

We are more than just the way we look!

Here are some tips to cope with appearance changes:

- Don't compare what you look like today to what you looked like before. Value what you still like about your appearance. Look at yourself with compassion. Don't judge yourself.
- Reframe the situation. Change your perspective and find ways to see beauty or meaning in the imperfection. A scar can also be a badge of courage, a testament to all that you have gone through.
- See a makeup specialist, a stylist, or go to a program such as the **American Cancer Society's Look Good Feel Better Program** help you with makeup, hair style or clothing. Log onto lookgoodfeelbetter.org or lookgoodfeelbetterformen.org
- Maintain an active lifestyle, exercise, eat well, sleep enough, and do things you enjoy. A healthy lifestyle will help you look and feel better.
- Keep relationships, friendships, and activities that you love. Relationships succeed or fail all the time based on things completely unrelated to appearance. How you behave and treat others is more likely to affect your relationships than how you look.
- If you can't learn to love your new look, try to stop caring about what others may think about your appearance. This may require changing what you value about yourself, grieving what you have lost, and pushing yourself to change your priorities.
- Talk about your feelings and fears with trusted friends. Finding ways to communicate your feelings with others can bring you closer.

Body Image Exercises

Exercise 1: Exposure

Take time each day to look in the mirror. Focus on each part of your body (nose, lips, teeth, skin, hair, fingernails, feet, shoulders, eyes, eyebrows and so on). There may be changes to your appearance after transplant. Look at the changes. Describe them to yourself (positive, negative, and neutral). If you have scars, try to look at each scar. Run your fingers over each scar. Sometimes it is helpful to think of appearance changes differently. For example, scars can be reminders of how strong you are. Notice other changes in your appearance. Have there been any positive changes? Are there any other parts of your body that remain unchanged? Take this time to get comfortable looking in the mirror and accepting your appearance today. It may be helpful to play some relaxing music in the background. The more you practice this exercise, the more comfortable you will become with your appearance.

Exercise 2: Defining Body Image

Changes in your body image may have occurred after transplant. Make a list of how you would describe your image. This can include physical attributes and nonphysical attributes. For example, “I am a strong person” and/or “I like how my body is curvy and feminine.” If negative thoughts come to mind, observe them, and then let them pass. Try to think more openly about how you may see yourself. Can a seemingly negative attribute be viewed in a more positive way? If a friend pointed out the same aspect in himself, how would you reframe that for your friend? Notice how compassionate you would be for a friend and try to apply that compassion to yourself.

Exercise 3: Values in Ourselves and Others

Expand your view of your body image. First, list five things you value about yourself. They can be anything. Next, list ten things you value about the people in your life you’re closest to. Now take a close look at your lists. How many of the values that you listed for those you’re closest to are based on their physical appearance? Notice how others look does not matter that much to you. You may notice that what you value in others has more to do with character and how they make you feel.

Exercise 4: Gratitude Exercise

Each morning, make a list of 3 things you appreciate about your appearance. Examples include: “I am grateful that my hair is growing back in this color,” or “I am grateful that my body is looking stronger each day.” There are no right or wrong answers.

Imperfection – The Beauty of Cracked Pots

A water bearer carries two large water pots, which he hangs on either end of a pole on his neck. One of the pots has a crack in it and every day leaks out half of its water onto one side of the path. The cracked pot is ashamed of its imperfection and apologizes to the water bearer for being imperfect and not accomplishing its task. The water bearer says there is nothing to be ashamed of and points out that only one side of the path has flowers. He tells the pot that it is thanks to the water leaking out of its crack that one side of the path has been watered daily, allowing the beautiful flowers to bloom. He tells the pot that he has always appreciated the crack because it has allowed him to bring beautiful flowers to the house.

Moral: We all have unique flaws – our cracks and breaking points. It is sometimes in these cracks and broken places that beauty resides. Recognizing that part of being human is being “flawed” in some way opens the door to greater acceptance of ourselves and others. Accepting our broken places may help us have compassion for the perceived imperfections of others. It can help us to reach out and make connections. Sometimes our vulnerabilities can be a source of inspiration or strength. And, regardless of how we feel about our broken places, they are part of what makes us uniquely ourselves.