

British Skin Foundation

PRESS RELEASE

Half of people with a skin disease have been verbally abused

For immediate release

A shocking 47% per cent of people with a skin disease in the UK have been victims of verbal abuse one or more times from another member of the public, a new snapshot survey reveals.

The online survey, conducted by the national skin disease research charity, the British Skin Foundation (BSF), also discovered that a further one in six (16%) people admitting to having self-harmed as a result of their skin disease. Disturbingly, seven people out of all those who took part said they had attempted suicide, with another 17% (125 respondents) stating they had contemplated suicide at some stage.

A total of 729 people were asked a series of questions relating to their skin disease or that of the person they care for. Questions were asked on the ways skin disease affects daily life, including forming sexual relations, social life and work life. The results show that the long-term effects of skin disease can have a devastating impact on sufferers' lives in ways few would expect.

Many skin diseases, such as vitiligo and psoriasis, can be very noticeable and visually striking, and likely to provoke a response from an untrained eye. Worryingly, a fifth of respondents described that they had been victim to regular bullying because of their condition, whilst one in every eight people who took part said they had suffered some form of physical abuse from another member of the public at least once.

Common conditions such as eczema and even acne, can affect people on a long-term basis. Asked to rank what they felt were the top three areas affected by their skin condition, seventy percent said a fall in self-confidence was their biggest issue, 42% said it impacted on their work and more than half (56%) said making friends was one of their biggest problems when it came to skin disease.

For many, sadly, having a skin disease had implications for their romantic and sexual relationships, with a fifth of participants (75 people) who answered that question stating that their skin disease was the driving factor for the breakdown of their most recent relationship or a previous one.

Living with a skin disease can prove to be a hugely stressful experience, a previous survey conducted by the BSF last year revealed that almost half of respondents suffered from sleep deprivation caused by severe pain and/or itching. Other factors that contributed to feelings of stress included sufferers feeling 'over-reliant' on others for care, hospitalisation for treatment, and time off work or even unemployment. What's more, a study conducted in 2001 showed how acne, one of the most common skin diseases affecting over 90% of males and 80% of females by the age of 21, impacted on the mental health of 14 to 16 years olds. It was found that those with definite acne, particularly girls, had higher levels of emotional

and behavioural difficulties, yet less than a third of participants had sought help from a doctor, with boys less likely to talk to friends and family about their acne.¹

Dr Anthony Bewley, a spokesperson for the British Skin Foundation and a psychodermatologist, is hopeful about what the survey can highlight to the public. He says: "It's important that we consider these results. Patients with skin disease often feel enormously upset about their skin condition, as it affects their confidence and self-esteem in so many different ways. All too often the impact of skin disease is underestimated, and this research makes it very clear that it is common for individuals with skin disease to consider suicide. Many patients consider their skin conditions to be more psychologically damaging than diabetes or heart disease."

Matthew Patey, Chief Executive of the British Skin Foundation, says: "The results makes for depressing reading, but reflect the life-altering problems faced by many people living with a skin disease. Clearly there is an ongoing need for better awareness amongst the general population about what skin disease is and crucially, how severe conditions can get. We have to remember that, aside from the symptomatic effect any skin disease will have on the sufferer, it can also have a devastating effect on social relations, people around them and cause lasting damage to a person's mental health as well."

Summary of key findings from the survey:

Suicide and self-harm

- 17% (125 people) of participants had contemplated suicide.
- Percentage of respondents who had attempted suicide: 1% (7 people)
- 16% of participants said they had self-harmed because of their disease.

Impact on social life and relationships

- 68% said a fall in self-confidence was the number one issue caused by their skin disease.
- 29% claimed their skin disease was an active barrier in finding a partner.
- 42% said the second biggest area affected was their work life.
- 56% said making new friends was the third biggest issue.
- One in five (19%) people with a skin disease had experienced a relationship breakdown.

Daily Life

- Participants who had been verbally abused by a member of public at least once: 46% (179)
- One in eight people (12%, 46 people) had suffered physical abuse by another member of the public at least once
- Participants who had been bullied regularly: 20%
- 37% (144 people) had received unfair treatment at work or full time education.

-Ends-

For more information about the survey, or to find out more about the British Skin Foundation, contact Bevis Man, Communications Manager at the British Skin Foundation. T: 0207 391 6347 E: bevis@britishskinfoundation.org.uk W: www.britishskinfoundation.org.uk

The British Skin Foundation (BSF) is a charity committed to raising funds for skin disease research. 100% of the money raised for the charity goes back into funding vital research. Over the last four years, the BSF has awarded in excess of £2,700,000 to numerous studies, £1.8 million of which has been dedicated to research into the various types of skin cancer.

¹**Study details:** British Journal of Dermatology August 2001, Volume 145, issue 2, p274-279, "Acne prevalence, knowledge about acne and psychological morbidity in mid-adolescence: a community-based study" A. Smithard, C. Glazebrook, H. Williams* DOI: 10.1046/j.1365-2133.2001.04346.x

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