

# Social anxiety and barriers to interpersonal connection after severe burn injury

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## Introduction

Anxiety is very common in the general Australian population, with a 12 month prevalence of 14.4% for adults (1). Social anxiety is characterised by fear of embarrassment and often the avoidance of social or performance situations (2). This specific form of anxiety has a 12 month prevalence of 4.7% in the Australian adult population (1). Burn survivors often have significantly higher levels of general anxiety and phobia, but social phobia after burn is less reported except after more severe burn injury (3-5). Physical scarring is a reminder of the injury that cannot be avoided. Other people can trigger reminders by asking questions or making inappropriate comments about scars, pressure garments or the injury itself. Gestures, gaze and negative body language can impact on a burn survivor's perception of other people's opinions of themselves. The cumulative effect can impact negatively on the burn survivor's worldview, increase their feelings of social anxiety and potentially lead to social isolation. The aim of the study was to investigate burn survivors' experiences in relation to social interaction. It is important to investigate this so that methods of assessment and the therapeutic management of negative social experiences can be offered to burn survivors in the future to minimise social anxiety or isolation.

## Methods

14 patients were interviewed who had sustained a severe burn injury ( $\geq 20\%$  total body surface area) with visible scarring more at least two years previously (6 females, 8 males). They had a mean age of 46 (SD16.7), a mean TBSA of 39.6 (SD 20.3) and were between 2 and 17 years post-burn,

## Results

The situational factors which adversely influenced social connection; interaction with others, reaction of others, offending others, and the need to endure situations. Emotional factors included rejection, self-consciousness, embarrassment and humiliation. Experiences of pressure garment use in relation to social were mixed.

## Discussion

There is a dichotomy between other peoples' need to understand different aspects of a burn injury and the burn survivors' need for privacy. Visible scarring means that the survivor is unable to forget as questions are asked without warning by complete strangers. Emotional and situational factors interact to create barriers to connection with others in order to protect the self. Pressure garments, although challenging to use, are useful to hide scarring. These factors could increase the risk of social anxiety, social isolation and the associated health related sequelae.

## **Key Words**

Severe burn injury; social anxiety; anxiety; connection;

## **Nominated Stream for Oral Presentations**

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