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Title:
The effects of attachment style on coping with visible skin conditions and responsiveness to a compassion based self-help intervention.

Abstract:
It has been identified that attachment orientation is associated with adjustment in several long term health conditions. However, there has been little research looking at the role of attachment in adjustment to skin conditions. This project involved two related studies which aimed to: i) explore the relationship between attachment style and psychological coping; and ii) assess the usability, acceptability, and initial effectiveness of compassion-focused self-help with people who might be at higher risk as a result of having insecure attachments.

In study 1 attachment orientation, coping, and appearance concern, were assessed in an online survey with 207 adults with a variety of skin conditions. Defeatism coping was found to partially mediate the link between attachment orientation and appearance concern. Higher attachment avoidance and higher attachment anxiety were associated with use of defeatism coping which in turn was associated with greater appearance concern. Additionally, higher attachment avoidance was directly associated with higher appearance related concern. Therefore it would appear that an insecure attachment orientation is linked to adjustment and that the relationship might be partially explained by the use of defeatist coping strategies. Consequently interventions to improve adjustment should focus on the needs of people with insecure attachment.

In study 2 self-help materials were emailed to nine participants drawn from study 1 who were identified as having an insecure attachment orientation. Shame, self-criticism, and appearance distress were assessed at baseline and at six weeks follow-up. A feedback form assessing experience of use, perceived benefits, and suggestions for improvement was completed. Content analysis was used to examine participants’ feedback on usability and acceptability. The Reliable Change Index was used to examine individual effectiveness. Five participants completed the measures of effectiveness of which three also returned the feedback form. Participants reported benefitting from the self-help. However, some aspects of self-help were reported as being difficult to engage with. Suggested improvements included: inclusion of more varied exercises, providing evidence for the compassion-focused approaches, and providing additional assistance to facilitate practice. Self-criticism reliably decreased in two participants. Shame decreased in two, but also increased in two participants. Appearance related distress decreased in one participant.

Our findings suggest that compassion-focused self-help for people at risk of developing distress associated with their skin condition has the potential to be effective, however further investigation is clearly needed to confirm this. Future studies should also examine the potential risks posed by self-help for individuals with high levels of psychological distress.

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Skin Deep – 20 Years of Research
British Skin Foundation Research Conference – Thursday 13th October 2016
Royal College of Physicians, London

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