



How to Break the Cycle of Eczema and Stress

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The Surprising Connection Between Eczema and Stress

Most people are willing to admit that having eczema is stressful. With its red appearance and itchy feeling that can disrupt your daily routines, eczema is a significant problem that affects your life.

Though people can see some link between eczema and stress, they may not yet grasp the complete connection between mental health and eczema. Learning about this association will not magically improve your condition, but it could give you the information needed to understand your symptoms and make better decisions about your treatment.

The Link Between Eczema and Mental Health

Whether acute or chronic, physical health conditions have the power to impact someone's mental health. Even the most benign colds can result in a person feeling down, un-motivated and drained of energy. Some people will become very anxious with the onset of a medical condition and find themselves feeling very worried, tense and restless.

With many conditions, the connection ends there. A cold makes someone feel down, but then the physical health symptoms alleviate with time, which reduces the mental health symptoms.

This "cause and effect" relationship is common with some conditions, but eczema creates a cyclical relationship. In cyclical relationships, sometimes called bidirectional relationships, eczema causes some mental health effects, but then the mental health symptoms trigger new and worsening eczema symptoms.

Cyclical relationships feed on each other. In time, mental health and medical health symptoms escalate to the point where each aspect of the person's life is adversely affected by eczema.

Causes of the Connection Between Eczema and Stress

Now that you know there is a connection, it is valuable to know the roots of the association. Everyone experiences some level of stress, and during times of stress, the body responds by producing and releasing high levels of stress hormones (including adrenaline and cortisol) into the system.

Excessive levels of these chemicals are unhealthy as they speed up the aging process and damage the immune system. For people with eczema, the inflammatory response that ensues can lead to a symptom flare.

This inflammatory response not only creates worsening eczema symptoms, but it may also affect how someone's brain operates. This change may impact how the person thinks and feels, which may lead to the development of mental health symptoms.

Mental health symptoms create intensified levels of stress, which further harms the immune system and triggers more inflammation; the cycle continues.

Eczema and the Possible Mental Health Outcomes

Eczema is stressful, and this stress plants the seeds of mental health issues. For some people, stress never amounts to anything more than a passing physical tension, irritability or low mood. For others, stress grows into fully-formed mental health conditions.

Two of the most common mental health conditions fueled by stress are depression and anxiety. Although there are various types of these disorders, they share many qualities with the others.

For depression, the stress will create symptoms such as:

- A low or irritable mood.
- Lower energy levels.
- Less motivation.
- Less interest in people or activities that were previously pleasurable.
- Changes in sleep.
- Changes in appetite, diet and weight.
- Decreased ability to pay attention and make decisions.
- Increased feelings of worthlessness and guilt.
- Thoughts of death, dying and suicide.

Anxiety will present with a separate group of symptoms such as:

- Intense worry about specific issues or about many facets of life.
- Physical tension with tense or rigid muscles and movements.
- Restlessness and feeling uncomfortable in own skin.
- Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.
- Poor concentration.
- Experiencing panic attacks with shortness of breath, chest pains and the sense of losing control.

Unsurprisingly, more than 30% of people with eczema also have a depression or anxiety disorder diagnosis. Some people will have both conditions linked to their eczema.

Treating the Mental Health to Improve the Medical Health

If you can see the connection between your medical and mental health, it is time to take action quickly. Left untreated, depression and anxiety tend to worsen over time, so waiting is not a recommended plan of attack.

Start by identifying the possible condition you have. For anxiety, consider:

- Exploring relaxation techniques like deep breathing, guided imagery, meditation, muscle relaxation and autogenic training to become calm.
- Investigating and challenging your fears.
- Identify your sources of stress and look for ways to avoid or minimize them.

For depression, consider:

- Noticing your depressed thoughts and change your negative self-talk.
- Spending time doing things you enjoy with people you love.
- Offer yourself compliments.

No matter your specific mental health condition or symptoms, you can lower your stress by:

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- **Eating well:** seek fresh, healthy foods.
 - **Exercising regularly:** find the physical activity type and intensity that works for you.
 - **Getting enough sleep:** prioritizing sleep will shrink your stress.

These areas have such a drastic impact on your life and well-being that they cannot be ignored. Your diet, activity and rest dictate all other parts of your life.

Eczema is a condition that can begin to control your life if you let it. Instead, decide to take back control by decreasing your stress to stop the cycle of eczema.