Visible vs hidden scars and their relation to body esteem.

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship among burn scarring, severity and visibility, and body esteem. Previous work addressing this question has relied on case studies and small samples. We mailed a survey to 2500 members of a national burn survivor support group. Survivors were asked to complete and return the mailed survey or complete the survey on line at our Web site. Three hundred sixty-one survivors completed all questionnaires in the survey relevant to this study, which included measures of burn characteristics, social stigmatization, social support, depression, and body esteem. The sample characteristics were as follows: 52% were women, the mean age was 44.1 years, the mean age burned was 26 years, 88% were European American, 5% were African American, 4% were multiracial, 3% were other, the average TBSA was 48%, and the mean educational level was high school graduate. We measured scar visibility by asking survivors to rate "how often are your burn scars visible to others" on a six-point scale. We also asked them to rate the presence or absence of scars on 15 body parts, total TBSA, and number of surgeries. The correlation between visible scarring and different aspects of body esteem, that is, self-satisfaction with appearance (-.19) and perception of others reaction to your appearance (-.27), was statistically significant but low. Visible scarring was unrelated to self-satisfaction with weight (.01). Visible scarring had a low but significant correlation with perceived stigmatization (.23) and was not correlated with depression (0.01). Other measures of scarring also had low correlations with social and emotional outcome variables. Because scar severity and visibility are hypothesized to be particularly relevant to body esteem, we performed a multiple regression predicting body esteem. We entered the variables in three blocks: burn characteristics, demographic characteristics, and social and emotional characteristics. Burn characteristics accounted for less than 20% of the variance. R square for the final equation equalled.62, with social adjustment and depression accounting for the largest portion of the variance. In this sample, burn scar visibility and severity did not have a strong relationship with social and emotional adjustment variables. More effort must be placed into developing psychosocial interventions that help survivors accept scars, reduce depression, and build a strong loving support system.

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