

10 Tips for Facing the Mirror after Surgery

Viewing your appearance is an important step in your recovery.

1. Do not delay.

It is normal to be nervous about seeing yourself in the mirror for the first time. However, the longer you wait to take this important step, the harder it can become. If you avoid what you are scared of you may strengthen your fears and allow your imagination to run wild. Once it is medically appropriate, try to view yourself as soon as you are mentally ready. Do this before you leave the hospital. If you view yourself during early phases of recovery you may more fully appreciate improvements in your appearance that occur over time.

2. Get a description.

Hearing about what surgical areas look like before seeing them can ease the shock that may be felt when you view yourself after surgery. Find a trusted friend, family member or health care provider to describe your surgical areas to you in an objective way. Ask that person to describe the length, width, size, shape, color and texture of the area, *without offering their opinion*.

3. Use your sense of touch.

We learn about our world and our bodies through our various senses. This experience is no different. Many patients find it helpful to feel their surgical areas before looking at it. Make sure it is medically safe to do so, then gently touch your surgical areas to learn about them and re-connect with your body after surgery.

4. Start slowly.

Like any task that feels overwhelming, sometimes breaking it up into small steps feels more manageable. Remove bandages in small segments rather than all at once to reduce anxiety. You may find it helpful to remove a part of your bandage, look at the area, replace the bandage, and then remove another part of the bandage and repeat the cycle until you work up to looking at the whole area.

5. Take a picture.

Ask a trusted friend or family member to take a picture of your surgical areas. Look at this picture before you directly look at yourself to help prepare you for viewing yourself for the first time.

6. Dim the lights.

The harsh lighting of hospital rooms and clinic exam rooms is not ideal for viewing yourself for the first time after surgery. If at all possible, dim the lights or begin first with the lights completely off, working your way up to looking at yourself in full light.

7. Use a mirror.

First, look in the mirror at an area of your body that was not impacted by surgery. Then focus on your surgical areas. Some patients find it helpful to view themselves in increments. Keep in mind that mirrors come in different sizes. You can use a small hand-held mirror first to focus on a small area of your body and work your way up to a full-length mirror.

8. Practice relaxation exercises.

In order to help you feel less anxious and more relaxed, practice some deep breathing or close your eyes and imagine being in a pleasant and peaceful place before you view yourself. Soft music, gentle massage and pleasant aromas may also help you relax.

9. Be compassionate.

Stay mindful of the self-talk that occurs internally while viewing yourself. Try to offer yourself the same compassion you would offer a friend or someone else in your position. You may or may not like what you see. Keep in mind that your body has been through a difficult experience and the end result will likely change over time as swelling decreases and healing continues. For some patients, more surgery is an option.

10. Seek support.

When you are ready to view yourself for the first time, consider whether you would like to be alone or with someone you trust. If you struggle with body image, communicate this to your loved ones and your treatment team. Counseling services are available to you. Ask your treatment team for a referral. Be patient with yourself and know that you will likely need some time to adjust.