

# skin deep

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
PSYCHODERMATOLOGIST,  
DR. JOSIE HOWARD, BY BEAUTY  
WRITER AND MAKEUP ARTIST,  
KAVITA KAUL

**When it comes to the phrase “beauty is only skin deep”, Dr. Josie Howard knows that is simply not true.** A psychiatrist specializing in the field of psychodermatology, Dr. Howard sits on the advisory board at Simple Skincare.

As a Makeup Artist, Beauty Writer, sufferer of adolescent acne and still temperamental skin, I was intrigued by her expertise and wanted to find out more.

**KK: Tell me more about your specific field, psychodermatology. I had no idea such a thing even existed and am personally thrilled and relieved that it does! To everyone out there, what does this mean?**

**JH:** Psychodermatology is a broad field that deals with the interactions of skin and emotions. Think of it in two main categories -- skin conditions that affect mental health, and mental/emotional conditions that affect skin.

Skin conditions that affect mental health include conditions such as psoriasis, eczema, alopecia areata, and acne; all conditions that are visible and can be worsened by stress, anxiety, and depression.

The second category, mental/emotional conditions that affect skin, includes conditions like skin picking and compulsive hair pulling (trichotillomania), where the habit creates a dermatologic condition (such as skin lesions or hair loss).





There is some overlap between the categories as well. For instance, acne can be worsened by stress and can cause stress and anxiety. Due to the high visibility of acne, which usually peaks during the key years of identity formation, it's often accompanied by compulsive picking, which can lead to worsening of the acne as well as scarring.

**KK: What led you to this specific field?**

**JH:** I have always had an interest in the mind-body connection and the many ways our mental and physical health are intertwined.

One of the first patients I saw on my medical school psychiatry rotation had a psychodermatologic condition, as did one of my patients on my dermatology rotation. This led me to look further into the field, and I became fascinated as I learned about the reasons this both makes sense as a field, and is something

that is an unrecognized need for many patients.

One of the things that struck me in medical studies was learning that during weeks three through eight of fetal development, three layers of cells are formed that eventually become all the cells and organs in the body.

One of these layers, the ectoderm, becomes just two things, skin, its associated cells and tissues, and the



nervous system. So our brain and skin are derived from the same embryonic layer of cells!

Finally, I have personally always suffered from sensitive, acne-prone skin and had noticed the impact of stress on my own skin's appearance, so I also felt a personal connection.

**KK: What in your experience is the impact of stress and emotional well-being on the skin?**

**JH:** Stress impacts the skin in a number of ways.

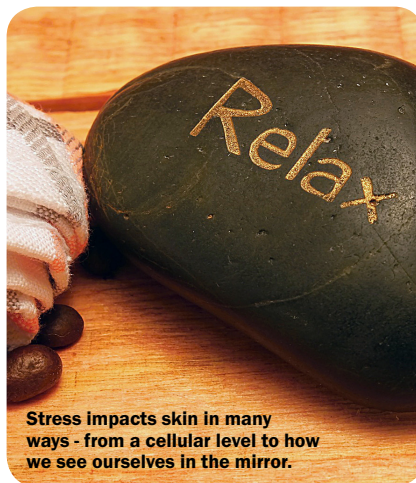
First on a biological level, we know that it impairs the moisture barrier (making it more vulnerable to irritants and dehydration) and delays healing.

One fascinating study was done at the University of California San Francisco on medical students, using tape stripping which is often used as a research method for creating a small wound so that healing can be measured. Tape was stripped from the skin of students just before exams and then again just after spring break. There was an interesting finding: Not only were the wounds more severe in the pre-exam students, but they were also much slower to heal.

On a cellular level, pro-inflammatory stress hormones as well as stress chemicals (called neuropeptides) released from nerve endings are released causing a cascade of skin reactions to emotional distress.

Second, when under stress people often either neglect their skin, or they may start to pick at their skin as a form of anxiety release. These habits then lead to a worsening of skin sensitivities.

Finally, when we are under stress, our perception is often distorted in such that we may see ourselves and our skin,



**Stress impacts skin in many ways - from a cellular level to how we see ourselves in the mirror.**

in an inordinately negative light; some psychiatrists call this a "negative filter" through which we see the world when under stress.

**KK: And what is the impact of troubled skin on our psychological/emotional state?**

**JH:** Chronic skin conditions can have a tremendous effect on one's emotional state because they are often so highly visible.

If they are worsened by emotional distress it can feel like one is wearing his or her emotions on their skin, exposed for the world to see. Moreover, there is often a great deal of misunderstanding about conditions being contagious, leading to a sense of isolation and shame for many patients.

Another important thing to consider is that conditions such as acne, strike at a vital period in which one is gaining a sense of self in the world, particularly regarding self image, social interactions, and romantic attractiveness. Because of this, the experience of severe acne during adolescence can have a life long impact and can be particularly traumatizing if it recurs during adulthood.

**KK: What three emotional tools would you say every woman needs in her toolbox, to ensure she is in her best mental state, and therefore her feeling her best self?**

**JH:** First, the ability to connect what one is experiencing in one's body with one's emotional experience. For instance, if you begin to itch uncontrollably or break out in hives, can you identify this as a signal from your body that you are under stress and need to attend to your emotional state? If you are a stress responder, the proportion of people who are also stress responders varies according to condition; for example, with psoriasis, it's about 60%.

Second, the ability to self-soothe; once you realize you are stressed, are you able to effectively call on your resources to care for your self? Whether that involves doing yoga, taking a walk, reading a book, deep breathing, or talking to friends.

And finally, working on having a consistent sense of identity that is independent of your skin's appearance. Counter-intuitively, this can lead to a more confident sense of self, which can result in better skin care and more beautiful, healthy skin!

**KK: There seems to be much shame attached to imperfection these days. What is your take on this?**

**JH:** Embrace imperfection. It's what makes each of us distinct individuals. I always think of Cindy Crawford's mole; her so-called imperfection made her distinct and helped her become a supermodel. 📷

*To learn more about Josie Howard, MD, and her psychiatry and psychodermatology practice, visit her website at [josiehowardmd.com](http://josiehowardmd.com).*