

can cause redness, swelling, and sensitivity, as well as the breakdown of the skin barrier, making it more difficult for skin to hold on to moisture and leaving it more permeable to irritants and allergens. A few bad days and your complexion can turn into a ruddy, broken-out mess.

Whether the condition is acne, rosacea, or eczema, psychodermatologists usually start with relaxation techniques. They tell patients to practice yoga and meditation, for example, thinking of a monosyllabic word such as “peace” every time they exhale, for five minutes, five times a day. One study found that psoriasis sufferers who listened to meditation tapes while undergoing ultraviolet therapy—medically supervised exposure to the light, which is thought to have an anti-inflammatory effect—cleared up 40 percent faster than those without the tapes.

The catch? Human nature—actually doing the mind exercises regularly can be achingly dull, and many patients fail to stick with it. “Many people find that relaxation techniques are boring and hard to fit into their schedules,” says Iona Ginsburg, an associate clinical professor in psychiatry at Columbia University who specializes in skin disorders. For these people, doctors may recommend massage, acupuncture, or biofeedback, which involves learning to control the heart rate and body temperature with a device that signals when to inhale and exhale. According to studies,

hypnosis can also help. Early in his career, Francisco Tausk, professor of dermatology and psychiatry at the University of Rochester, was able to make improvements in a severe case of psoriasis by suggesting to the hypnotized patient that she’d just swallowed a miracle pill.

Should breakouts or redness persist, psychodermatologists progress to talk therapy. (While a handful of physicians have degrees in both dermatology and psychology or psychiatry, it’s more common for practitioners to form a tag team.) “One of my goals is to see what sorts of life issues might be triggering the problem or keeping the usual medications from working,” Grossbart says. “The questions I address in my sessions are very focused: When does the breakout start? When does it get worse—or better? Also, what role does it play in your life?”

If a patient’s unhappiness and skin woes linger, the therapist may prescribe antidepressant and antianxiety drugs, including SSRIs such as Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, or Lexapro. Psychodermatologists generally prescribe the pills for six months or so and say that they are particularly helpful for people who have begun to obsessively pick at their skin or pop their pimples, and for those who develop “phantom acne.” (The latter is used to describe patients who fixate on even the smallest imperfections, according to Richard Fried, a dermatologist and clinical psychologist who runs a comprehensive psychodermatology clinic in Yardley, Pennsylvania.) For those whose obsessive-compulsive behaviors result in extreme emotional or

functional problems, the therapists may even prescribe antipsychotic drugs.

Maureen, 43, says a combination of antidepressants and antianxiety pills helped get rid of her picking habit. Following the sudden death of her husband when she was 28, her skin broke out in bumps, and she couldn’t leave it alone. Her fixation got so bad, she started attacking imperfections she now thinks she exaggerated or imagined. “I went to a lot of dermatologists, but nobody knew what to do,” she remembers. Five years ago, a dermatologist referred her to Iona Ginsburg. After diagnosing Maureen with depression and anxiety, Ginsburg prescribed Zoloft and an antianxiety medication called Buspar, along with continued talk therapy. Maureen felt a sense of calm almost right away, and within about two and a half years, she had stopped picking completely. “I still can’t believe I did that stuff to myself, but at least I learned why,” she says.

This use of psychotropic drugs worries some doctors. “The risk here would be if a family doctor were simply to add skin problems to the list of things to attack with SSRIs, rather than considering other behavioral factors,” says Craig Sawchuk, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Washington who specializes in the interaction between psychiatric disorders and medical conditions. Antidepressants themselves are complex. The acting physician still needs to be trained in how these drugs behave and interact with individual patients.

Even psychodermatologists admit the field has its limits. “These approaches will work for your skin only if they work for your mind,” says Amy Wechsler, a New York City dermatologist and psychiatrist. And even if a breakout coincides with a breakdown, countless other triggers could be involved, including allergies. Because people who learn to manage stress start taking better care of their skin, it’s also unclear just how much of these techniques are the cause or the solution. Still, Fein says, “If stress can have all of these negative consequences to our external and internal self, it would stand to reason that strategies aimed at reducing it may also benefit the skin.” ♦

Extreme Close-up

A few years ago, New York City dermatologist David Colbert landed a unique role: He became the first skin doctor responsible for an entire film cast, on *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Colbert has also injected cortisone on the set of *Cinderella Man*, armed Cate Blanchett’s skin against sun damage for *The Missing*, and examined countless images of insect bites for the cast of *The Constant Gardener*.

Increasingly, studios are hiring dermatologists who either work on-set or remotely, by analyzing photographs and making diagnoses via computer. A pimple may sound minor, but because it’s raised, it is difficult to camouflage on film—and

expensive and tedious to retouch in post-production. “If somebody’s skin looks bad on camera, an entire production can go on hold,” Colbert says.

“I can’t reveal who it was, but recently, a star’s complexion got so bad due to a disrupted sleep schedule that I took my staff psychiatrist for an on-set consultation. It worked,” says Colbert, who also employs a masseuse and acupuncturist in his practice. Among his most popular remedies is the acupressure facial massage, which stimulates blood flow and reduces anxiety (and acne-promoting cortisol production). In Hollywood, it’s all in a day’s work.