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Exploring the Psychosexual Impact of Dermatological Conditions and the Path Towards Integrated Interventions

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Abstract

The psychosexual impact of dermatological conditions constitutes a critical and expansive field of study that examines the profound effects of skin disorders such as acne, alopecia, vitiligo, and genital skin disorders on an individual's self-perception, body image, and intimate partnerships. This literature review analyses the existing research to delineate the psychosocial obstacles that individuals with dermatological issues encounter, highlighting the intricate dynamics between one's physical appearance and their sexual health. Furthermore, it advocates for the creation and application of holistic psychosexual interventions specifically designed to meet the distinctive requirements of dermatology patients. These interventions strive not only to diminish psychological distress but also to promote sexual well-being. Future research should assess the effectiveness of such therapeutic strategies, develop innovative solutions for reducing psychosexual distress, and evaluate their long-term impact on affected patients' quality of life and intimate relationships. This paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on enhancing healthcare outcomes for individuals grappling with the psychosexual ramifications of dermatological conditions.

Introduction

Dermatological conditions impact the lives of millions of individuals each day, with many conditions posing profound impacts on an individual's psychological and sexual health. It is estimated that at least 30% of patients with dermatologic conditions present with significant psychological morbidity [1]. Often, the increased psychological distress associated with the disorder leads to worsening of the dermatologic condition, notable in cases of psoriasis, acne, atopic dermatitis, and many others [1]. Dermatologic disorders such as psoriasis, vitiligo, lichen simplex chronicus and other genital skin disorders have significant impact on a patient's self-esteem and confidence, which have a vital role in the sexual health of an individual and, therefore, have the power to shape a patient's quality of life and symptom progression [2].

Focusing on the currently available literature, this comprehensive review serves to highlight the psychological obstacles of those with dermatological conditions and detail the profound impact certain conditions can have on a patient's sexual health. Furthermore, this paper will advocate for the development of holistic psychosexual interventions that seek to promote sexual well-being and minimize psychological distress that accompanies dermatological disorders. From understanding the emotional impact of dermatological disorders on intimate relationships and sexual functioning to the in-depth analysis of conditions such as acne, atopic dermatitis, psoriasis, vitiligo, and genital skin disorders, this review synthesizes the existing literature in an effort to enhance patient quality of life and health outcomes.

Discussion

The psychosexual implications of dermatological conditions encompass a broad area of inquiry, intertwining the psychological and physiological aspects of skin disorders. Conditions such as acne, atopic dermatitis, psoriasis, alopecia, vitiligo, and genital skin disorders not only prevail widely across different populations but also bring about distinct psychological challenges, as highlighted in the literature [3, 4, 5]. Central to this discussion is the significant emotional toll these conditions exert on an individual's self-perception. For instance, acne, often dismissed as a mere cosmetic issue, has been shown to lead to severe psychological distress, including depression and anxiety, profoundly affecting one's self-esteem and body image [6, 7]. Likewise, conditions such as alopecia and vitiligo have been associated with significant emotional burden, impacting patients' social interactions and overall mental health [8, 9]. A notable study by Thompson et al. (2022) further highlights this concept, finding that adults with vitiligo encounter a 23% to 25% increased risk of a comorbid diagnosis of depression and anxiety, of which can escalate to 72% in individuals with skin of color [10].

Furthermore, the impact of dermatological conditions extends into the realm of intimate relationships and sexual functioning, where the physical symptoms intersect with psychological vulnerabilities. This influence is particularly pronounced with conditions that affect the genital area, whether they stem from broader skin diseases including vitiligo or psoriasis, or are related to sexually transmitted infections. Studies have established a direct correlation between genital skin conditions

and sexual dysfunction, encompassing issues such as erectile dysfunction, decreased libido, sexual avoidance, and feelings of embarrassment and stigmatization [4, 11, 12]. The anticipation of rejection or fear of exposing one's condition can lead to avoidance of intimate encounters, further exacerbating feelings of loneliness and depression [11]. This comprehensive exploration underscores the necessity for a nuanced understanding of the psychosexual impact of dermatological conditions, highlighting their far-reaching effects on individuals' mental health and quality of life.

Acne vulgaris

Acne vulgaris is a prevalent dermatological condition that significantly diminishes the quality of life in affected individuals, often leading to mild to moderate symptoms of depression and anxiety [13, 14, 15, 16, 17]. A cross-sectional study by Golchai et al. (2010) reports a 68.3% prevalence of anxiety in acne patients, significantly higher than in controls [18]. Acne can also contribute to lowered self-esteem and self-confidence, manifesting as negative social comparisons, poor body image, and feelings of shame and embarrassment [15, 16, 19, 20, 21]. Acne may even confer a more severe psychological burden to patients, such as self-injurious behavior and suicidal ideation [6, 15, 20]. Social perceptions further complicate these issues, as individuals with acne are often incorrectly viewed as shy, less successful, and less attractive, while those with clear skin are perceived as healthier, intelligent, and more confident [7, 22]. Such stereotypes are reinforced by unattainable beauty standards seen in social media and advertisements, further perpetuating this negative social implication of acne.

Acne has also been associated with sexual dysfunction, impacting levels of sexual activity. The quality of sexual life is severely decreased among acne patients, with these impacts strongly linked to depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation [23]. Interestingly, the sexual dysfunction observed is not necessarily correlated with the clinical severity of acne itself, leading to increased concern of this psychosocial implication among all patients with acne [24]. One proposed thought regarding this perception of decreased attractiveness due to acne may discourage sexual interactions, and coupled with low self-esteem and increased feelings of embarrassment and shame, leads to a negative self-image and a tendency towards assuming rejection [7, 16, 19, 22, 24, 25, 26].

The primary treatment for the psychological effects of acne involves successful treatment of the skin condition itself, which has shown to improve self-esteem, mood, and social interactions [15, 27]. There are many treatment options for acne, including topical and oral therapy that have different efficacies based on the patient. The gold standard for the treatment of acne is oral isotretinoin and in a study by Marron et al. (2013), it was observed that patients with moderate acne experienced significant reductions in depression and anxiety after 30 weeks of isotretinoin therapy [28]. While there is an efficacious treatment option for acne, the long-term psychological effects of chronic acne may persist despite resolution of physical symptoms, highlighting the importance of early and sustained treatment interventions [1]. Along with monitoring treatment, monitoring the psychological impacts of acne is crucial, which was highlighted in a pilot study by Hefez et al. (2022), which advocated for the integration of the Adolescent Depression Rating Scale (ADRS) to initiate discussion regarding the risk of depression among acne patients [29]. Beyond dermatological treatment, some patients may even benefit from psychotherapy and psychotropic medications to manage the psychiatric effects of their skin condition [1]. Even cosmetic interventions, such as the use of makeup to cover acne lesions, have been found to increase self-confidence and reduce anxiety in female patients [30]. Acne can have a wide range of effects on a patient's overall health and perception of themselves, and as such requires an integrated approach in its treatment and management.

Psoriasis

Psoriasis significantly affects the psychological well-being and quality of life of patients. Its impact is often correlated with disease severity, genital involvement, and intensity of pruritus [31, 32]. Patients with psoriasis commonly experience increased rates of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, alcohol use disorder, and self-injurious behavior [33, 34, 35, 36]. The psychiatric comorbidities associated with psoriasis not only increase the burden on healthcare systems due to more frequent hospitalizations for mental health disorders but also elevate the cost of inpatient care [37]. However, despite symptom resolution, feelings of self-consciousness, embarrassment, and frustration often persist, exacerbated by skin-related shame, higher levels of internalized stigma, and lower self-esteem and body image [38, 39, 40]. Self-stigmatization, which involves negative beliefs about self-worth, also predicts the presence of anxiety and depression in psoriasis patients [41]. Over 90% of these patients experience social stigma, leading to self-stigmatization and further reinforcing internalized stigma and anxiety, which fosters shame and fear of future social rejection [42]. Higher perceived stigmatization escalates concerns about appearance and negatively impacts social interactions, significantly influencing the development of negative self-perceptions and reduced social involvement [43].

Psoriasis is linked to a range of negative psychological impacts, including sexual dysfunction, which manifests as decreased sexual frequency, loss of libido, erectile dysfunction, and increased sexual distress [23, 32, 33, 44, 45, 46, 47]. A comparative study found that psoriasis patients were 5.5 times more likely to experience sexual dysfunction compared to controls [48]. The impact is notably more severe in males, as evidenced by a survey which highlighted that 44.7% of men with psoriasis had experienced rejection due to their condition, leading to a subsequent avoidance of sexual activities [49]. Another survey discovered that 43.8% of men with psoriasis reported erectile dysfunction [32, 49, 50]. Factors such as age, hypertension, and psychiatric comorbidities are likely mediators of erectile dysfunction in psoriasis patients [51, 52, 53]. Although the relationship between the severity of psoriatic symptoms and erectile dysfunction is debated, some studies suggest that the severity of psoriasis correlates with the degree of sexual dysfunction experienced [47, 54]. Genital psoriasis, in particular, greatly impacts sexual intimacy and often results in exacerbated psoriatic symptoms post-intercourse [44, 55]. Moreover, lesions located on the abdomen, chest, lumbar region, and buttocks are associated with a significant increase in sexual dysfunction, affecting the quality of intimate life [48, 56].

Addressing the psychological and sexual impacts of psoriasis requires effective and multifaceted treatments. Pharmacological interventions, such as the monoclonal antibodies ixekizumab and secukinumab, target interleukin (IL)-17 and have shown rapid improvement in symptoms and sexual activity [57]. Topical treatments such as calcipotriol/betamethasone also

improve adherence to therapy and enhance quality of life and symptom management [58, 59]. Additionally, non-pharmacologic interventions, including psychotherapy and mindfulness, have demonstrated efficacy in improving the quality of life for psoriasis patients [60, 61]. Techniques such as meditation, biofeedback, and hypnosis can also mitigate psychosocial impairment and alleviate itching and psoriasis severity [62]. Educating patients to dispel misconceptions about psoriasis can further enhance their quality of life by reducing internalized stigma and improving social perceptions [63, 64].

Atopic Dermatitis

Patients with atopic dermatitis often experience a higher prevalence of psychological disturbances including depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and even suicidal behaviors [65, 66]. A study involving 120 adolescents with atopic dermatitis highlighted that 21% of participants experienced depression, 33% experienced anxiety, and 23% experienced stress which directly related to their condition, underscoring the profound psychological burden of this dermatological condition [67]. Additionally, there is an elevated prevalence of alcohol use disorder among these patients [36]. Factors such as social isolation, stigma, and reduced quality of life also significantly contribute to the development of anxiety, depression, and suicidality in atopic dermatitis patients [68, 69]. Pruritus and excoriations are the primary symptomatic factors affecting those with atopic dermatitis; greater pruritic intensity is closely linked with depression and an increased risk of suicidal ideation [65, 70]. Furthermore, self-stigmatization plays a critical role in the psychosocial impacts of atopic dermatitis. It is closely linked with anxiety and depression, especially as stigmatization correlates with the extent of skin involvement [41, 42].

Atopic dermatitis adversely impacts patients' sexual health. A study found that 57.5% of participants with atopic dermatitis reported decreased sexual desire [71]. There is an association with erectile dysfunction, although the literature presents mixed findings regarding this relationship [54, 72]. The location of lesions significantly mediates sexual dysfunction; lesions on the genitals, breasts, and visible areas lead to higher levels of sexual dysfunction, decreased self-esteem, and increased stigmatization [73, 74]. Affected individuals may perceive themselves as less sexually attractive, feel anxious about being seen naked, and anticipate hesitation from sexual partners, leading to intimacy avoidance [25, 75].

Effective treatment of atopic dermatitis and its impact on quality of life and sexual health necessitates both medical and psychosocial interventions. Dupilumab, an injectable monoclonal antibody targeting IL-4 and IL-13, improves quality of life and alleviates anxiety and depression in patients with moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis, while also decreasing sexual dysfunction, enhancing sexual desire, arousal, satisfaction, and self-perception [75, 76, 77, 78]. These benefits are likely mediated by the medication’s ability to reduce disease severity and pruritus. Non-medical approaches are also pivotal in enhancing quality of life for those with atopic dermatitis; psychotherapy can significantly improve quality of life by increasing mindfulness, self-compassion, and decreasing psychosocial impairment and pruritus [62, 79]. Moreover, patient education about the pathophysiology of atopic dermatitis, skin care, and psychological coping mechanisms can improve the management of pruritus [80].

Alopecia

The impacts of alopecia are more pronounced in women, individuals experiencing relationship stress, and those with a self-perceived severity of hair loss [81, 82, 83]. Alopecia affects various aspects of life including personality, emotions, behaviors, and social functioning, highlighting the influence of multiple factors on the well-being of alopecia patients and the protective role of social support [84]. Elevated rates of anxiety and depression are common in patients with alopecia, with depression rates ranging from 20% to 68% [81, 84, 85, 86, 87]. Self-esteem plays a central role in mediating the psychological impacts, as alopecia can lead to reduced self-esteem and significant concerns about self-image, causing embarrassment and self-consciousness [88, 89]. The psychosocial effects of alopecia extend to employment, with higher levels of unemployment, reduced work productivity, and negative workplace experiences such as bullying and exclusion prevalent among these patients [81, 85, 90, 91]. Interestingly, the psychological impact of alopecia is not always proportional to the extent of hair loss; there is a greater impact on quality of life impacts in patients with less than 94% scalp hair loss compared to those with more extensive hair loss [92].

Alopecia is linked with sexual dysfunction and affects desire, arousal, satisfaction, and erectile function; these issues are often exacerbated by moderate to severe psychosocial impairment [52, 93]. In female patients, sexual dysfunction is linked to a negative body image which is influenced by perceived decreases in attractiveness and negative social comparisons [94]. Interestingly, the treatment of alopecia with 5-alpha reductase inhibitors, although effective, has been found to result in an increased risk of sexual dysfunction [95, 96, 97]. Significant sexual adverse effects were noted with finasteride use, which can persist even after medication discontinuation; it was found that 11.8% of young adult males taking low-dose finasteride experienced persistent sexual dysfunction, encompassing issues such as low libido, erectile problems, decreased arousal, and orgasm difficulties [95, 96, 97]. Anxiety and depression may further mediate these persistent effects, suggesting that addressing these psychological factors could help mitigate sexual dysfunction [98].

Along with pharmacologic treatment of alopecia, there are other options in managing the appearance that accompanies this condition. Hair transplantation has been shown to significantly improve quality of life, reduce anxiety and depression, lessen self-consciousness, and decrease feelings of loneliness, thus enhancing self-perception and social engagement [99, 100, 101]. Coping strategies, such as the use of wigs, headpieces, and scarves, can effectively address negative social perceptions and boost self-confidence [102]. Psychotherapy and peer support groups have proven beneficial in improving self-confidence and reducing the subjective burden of living with alopecia [86, 103]. Together, these strategies form a comprehensive approach to managing the complex impacts of alopecia in the lives of these patients.

Vitiligo

The impact of vitiligo often correlates to the extent of skin involvement and is influenced by factors such as gender and subjective disease severity [104, 105]. Patients commonly experience psychological impairments including anxiety, depression, adjustment disorders, sleep disturbances, and relationship difficulties [106, 107, 108]. Notably, female

patients, those with visible or genital lesions, and severe cases of vitiligo report greater psychological distress [106, 109]. Stigmatization and embarrassment, especially during interactions with strangers, are prevalent among vitiligo patients, adversely affecting relationships, sexual life, and can lead to psychiatric comorbidities [106, 110, 111]. These experiences contribute to increased social isolation and negatively impact self-esteem, often beginning with negative social interactions [109, 112].

Vitiligo is associated with various forms of sexual dysfunction and relationship challenges [106, 109, 113, 114]. Research indicates a wide variance in the prevalence of sexual dysfunction among vitiligo patients, ranging from 2.7% to 82%, with multiple facets of sexual function potentially impacted, including desire, arousal, orgasm, and satisfaction [115, 116]. Women with vitiligo experience greater difficulties in sexual arousal and orgasm compared to men [114]. The higher rates of anxiety and depression in vitiligo patients offer a potential explanation for increased sexual dysfunction. Furthermore, low self-esteem associated with visible skin involvement can increase stress during sexual encounters due to the emphasis on appearance in social and intimate settings [104, 111].

Addressing the psychological and sexual impacts of vitiligo necessitates effective interventions. Reducing visible depigmentation through treatments like depigmentation therapy and ultraviolet (UV)-B therapy has been shown to improve social comfort and overall quality of life [117, 118, 119]. Cosmetic camouflage, such as makeup especially for those with facial involvement, significantly enhances quality of life and mitigates the sexual impacts of vitiligo by reducing feelings of embarrassment and self-consciousness [105, 120]. Psychotherapeutic strategies including group therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and self-help programs aid patients in developing coping skills and reducing stigma, and therefore improve overall quality of life [110, 121]. Group therapy offers the added benefit of community support among fellow vitiligo patients, while CBT and self-help interventions can decrease social anxiety, facilitating easier social interactions [122]. Additionally, pharmacological treatments, such as tricyclic antidepressants, may be necessary to manage depression in vitiligo patients [110]. These comprehensive approaches aim to address both the physical manifestations and the deep-seated psychological effects of vitiligo, improving patient quality of life and social functioning.

Genital Skin Disorders

Genital skin disorders profoundly affect patients' psychosexual health due to the significant role genitalia play in one's cultural, self, and sexual identity [123]. Any disruption in the normal function or appearance of the genitalia can deeply influence a patient's mood and intimate relationships, potentially leading to psychological disorders such as major depressive disorder [124]. Women with these conditions often experience heightened feelings of insecurity and guilt within their relationships [123]. For men, disorders such as erectile dysfunction can severely diminish overall quality of life and affect long-term partnerships [72].

Specifically, conditions such as psoriasis, atopic dermatitis, and lichen simplex chronicus in males have been linked to erectile dysfunction [44, 72, 125]. Systemic sclerosis is particularly debilitating, potentially causing erectile dysfunction in up to 81% of affected men due to impaired blood flow resulting from myointimal proliferation of small arteries and corporal fibrosis [111]. As mentioned previously, studies have noted a significant association between atopic dermatitis and erectile dysfunction [72]. Women also face challenges with sexual function, such as decreased arousal, lubrication, and satisfaction, particularly noted in conditions such as lichen sclerosus [126]. Psoriasis can lead to dyspareunia and a reduced frequency of intercourse, with genital involvement in psoriasis associated with a more severe impairment of life quality than other bodily involvement [44]. Gupta et al. (1997) found that nearly 41% of patients with psoriasis reported a significant decline in sexual activity since the onset of their disorder, indicating that the psychological impact, such as effects on social functioning and self-image, is often more significant than the physical symptoms themselves [44, 127].

The treatment of genital skin disorders is particularly challenging due to the sensitive nature of the skin in this region. Topical corticosteroids, while often the gold standard, are used cautiously because of the risk of skin atrophy. For genital psoriasis, some recommendations include the short-term intermittent use of moderate-potency corticosteroids, transitioning to weaker, lower-potency steroids, or intensive, short-term use of high-potency corticosteroids [128]. Additionally, coal-tar preparations and vitamin D analogues are prominent non-steroidal treatment options for this sensitive area [128].

Discussing genital involvement in dermatological conditions is crucial yet challenging. Many patients hesitate to openly discuss their condition with their healthcare provider, often downplaying the psychosexual impacts [44]. However, when physicians initiate conversations about sexual dissatisfaction stemming from dermatological issues, patients are statistically more likely to actively engage in managing their condition [72]. This highlights the need for increased physician awareness and patient-centered communication to better manage these complex conditions and for further studies to explore new treatments that specifically address the efficacy of therapies targeting genital skin disorders.

Integrated Psychosexual Interventions for Dermatology Patients

Integrated psychosexual interventions for dermatology patients are currently sparsely accessible; there is a need for further exploration and investment in their development and further implementation [129, 130]. Considering the potential impact of dermatologic conditions on sexual health, it is imperative to ensure that adequate treatment options are readily accessible [2, 131]. Current treatment options include pharmaceutical, therapeutic, and aesthetic interventions The comprehensive care provided to patients impacted psychosexually by dermatologic conditions encompasses not only the evaluation and treatment of physical symptoms but also needs to address the psychological and sexual repercussions experienced by both the affected patient and their partners [132]. The implications and insecurities that accompany psycosexual dysfunctions are complex and pharmacotherapy alone is likely insufficient, necessitating various forms of therapy including psychotherapy, behavioral therapy, and/or psychosexual therapy [2]. Other specific forms of therapy that have been used by patients experiencing dermatologic psychosexual impacts include CBT, arousal reduction, and hypnosis [133]. There are various forms

of psychotherapy available to patients and their utilization is paramount in the treatment and possible resolution of their symptoms.

To aid in the treatment of patients, partner and physician support should be encouraged [132]. A holistic approach recognizes the interconnectedness of their experiences and focuses on understanding and managing these impacts through a comprehensive perspective, which emphasizes the dynamics and mutual influence within the intimate relationship [132]. By considering the holistic well-being of each patient, healthcare professionals should offer individual support and interventions to promote healing and enhance the overall quality of life for those affected by dermatologic conditions [132]. When taking a history from a patient experiencing genital dermatologic conditions, a thorough psychosexual history should be taken and include a focused medical history, past social history, and past sexual history [132]. The presence of dermatologic conditions, whether localized genitally or elsewhere on the body, can significantly impact a patient's overall well-being [132]. Additionally, engaging the patient's partner in the treatment plan can be beneficial for the patient, as it can add another layer of support [132]. Cognitive coping strategies and support from the sexual partner have demonstrated efficacy in aiding adjustment to certain diagnoses [129]. The psychological adaptation to dermatologic conditions depends on various factors, including the presence of empathy during diagnosis, access to accurate and current information, the availability of pharmacotherapy when necessary, and psychological support [129]. Additionally, problem-solving skill-based treatments, in conjunction with psychosocial interventions, have shown promise in facilitating emotional adjustment and potentially reducing the frequency of genital dermatologic conditions [129].

Another avenue of management for patients with dermatologic conditions affecting their self-esteem, sexual intimacy, and overall well-being involves aesthetic procedures [130]. The treatment approach for individuals facing psychosexual and dermatologic conditions should be comprehensive and personalized to each patient. Additionally, adopting a multidisciplinary approach involving the patient's dermatologist, psychiatrist, and psychologist is essential in providing adequate and holistic healthcare [2]. Current interventions encompass diverse therapeutic modalities, pharmacotherapy targeting the underlying disease, and aesthetic procedures [129, 130].

Future Research Directions

Psychosexual counseling is tailored to patients on an individual basis but can incorporate elements such as medical adjustments, psychoeducation, couples therapy, and desensitization treatment [134]. A randomized controlled trial involving 158 women diagnosed with lichen sclerosus revealed that psychosexual counseling improved not only sexual functionality but also overall quality of life in these women [134]. A case-controlled study including 40 psoriasis patients undergoing adjunctive CBT found a decrease in psoriasis severity, anxiety, depression, psoriasis-related stress, and disability at both the 6-week and 6-month follow-up compared to those receiving standard treatment alone, further perpetuating the need for inclusive treatment options for patients with these dermatologic conditions [135]. Addressing both the physical and psychological components of psoriasis markedly enhances patient management of the condition [135]. It has been proposed that integrated psychosexual interventions for dermatology patients should incorporate various forms of therapy such as psychotherapy, behavioral therapy, or psychosexual therapy [2]. Multidisciplinary approaches involving both the dermatologist and psychiatrist are critical for providing adequate care for patients experiencing psychosexual adverse effects from dermatologic conditions [2]. There is a scarcity of literature addressing sexual dysfunction in skin disorders, particularly beyond psoriasis [136]. Comprehensive qualitative and longitudinal research is essential to bridge healthcare gaps in this area [136].

Conclusion

This literature review has elucidated the profound psychosexual impacts of various dermatological conditions such as psoriasis, acne, atopic dermatitis, vitiligo, and genital skin disorders, emphasizing their significant psychological distress and effects on self-esteem, body image, and intimate relationships. The findings highlight the necessity for healthcare providers to adopt a holistic approach, integrating the treatment of physical symptoms with psychosexual health considerations. Clinicians should screen for psychological comorbidities, employ multidisciplinary teams, and refer patients to psychosexual therapy as needed. Future research should focus on developing therapeutic interventions that address both the dermatological and psychosexual aspects of these conditions, standardizing treatment protocols to include psychoeducation and cognitive behavioral strategies. Additionally, increasing public awareness about the psychosexual impacts of skin disorders can reduce stigma and improve patient care, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for those affected and fostering a more empathetic societal view.

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