Online psychosocial support for young people with appearance concerns due to a visible difference: A randomised control trial (RCT)

An estimated 1 in 44 people have a condition that affects their appearance (www.changingfaces.co.uk), also known as a visible difference. A visible difference can have a profound impact in a society with a massive emphasis on appearance, especially during adolescence, when appearance is the greatest contributory factor to self-esteem. A visible difference may be the result of injuries (burns, accidents), treatment (cancer), or congenital anomalies (birthmarks, craniofacial conditions). For those who have an appearance that attracts staring, questions, or teasing, life can be difficult, and trigger body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, self-consciousness, and unhealthy coping strategies that may impact on health-related quality of life, friendships, school work and aspirations. Innovative, cost-effective, accessible, and specialised interventions are therefore required.

Based on a successful adult version, the Centre for Appearance Research (University of the West of England, Bristol, UK) has developed an online intervention for adolescents with appearance concerns, aged 12-17 years, which has been translated into Norwegian (www.ungfaceit.no). With 7 weekly sessions (each take 45 minutes to complete), Ung Face IT provides easy access to specialist advice and support via a home computer, using information, videos, peer support, and interactive activities. It provides advice, teaches coping and social skills, hence strengthening psychological adjustment to a visible difference.

A pilot study (2016-2017) has investigated the feasibility and acceptability of Ung face IT. A systematic RCT evaluation of the Norwegian version is the next step to test the intervention’s potential as an available intervention tool. Ung Face IT could potentially address unmet needs, provide a cost-effective tool to reduce the need for “face-to-face” psychological and surgical/medical services, and contribute to make online health care available for young people with a visible difference.