

Beautiful inside... and out!

These three women may not fit society's idea of conventional beauty but they radiate inner strength and confidence. Here, they reveal how they've learnt to be truly happy in their own skin...

“People's stares don't bother me any more”

Alison Edmonds, 43, lives in North Yorkshire, with her husband David Hull, and their children Ewan, 10, and Eliza, 5. Alison is an administrator at York University and a volunteer with Changing Faces, the charity helping people with facial disfigurements

When I was 18 months old a family dog jumped up and took a chunk out of my face. I don't remember anything but apparently I was a mess. The wound went from the inside edge of my right eye across my cheek and down into my mouth. I was rushed to hospital where I was patched up pretty well. Even so, there was permanent damage as the nerves in my face had been severed. I couldn't blink on that side and my smile was lopsided. And, of course, once the wound healed I had a big scar.

I knew I was different from an early age but I don't remember being concerned. My mother told teachers what had happened before I started school and everyone was pretty sensitive. When I started going to birthday parties, my mother would use a really thick

concealer foundation I'd been given by the hospital to try and disguise my scars. I hated it and would make such a fuss that by the time I was six or seven she gave up. That might be why I hardly wear any make-up now. David says he prefers me without, which is a relief, though I do apply a little eyeshadow and mascara when we go out.

Because my father was in the Air Force, we moved around a lot when I was a child and in a way it helped me get used to having to face new people and make friends.

The summer after A-levels when I was 18, I had major reconstructive surgery to smooth the scar tissue and disguise the lines of my scar into the developing lines of my face. Although quite a big operation, I felt it was the first step in a new direction for me. It was a real success and made me look more

normal, although the timing meant I started university with new red scars that took a while to settle.

I met David when I was 21 through our shared hobby of bell ringing. At first we were just friends and it was six years before we started going out together. By then David already knew what had happened to me and to be honest none of it was an issue.

In my role as Guide at York Minster, I do quite a lot of public-facing work and it doesn't frighten me any more. My scar has definitely shaped the person I am. I think I'm braver because of it, less afraid to speak up for what I believe in and more empathetic towards people with issues and problems. The only thing that bothers me now about my appearance is my size – I'd quite like to go back to being the skinny teenager I hated. Typical, isn't it!



Alison wears:
Top £79, XS-L, Phase Eight.
Trousers £59, 8-18, Phase Eight. Necklace £12, Next.
Shoes £55, Simply Be

“My scar has definitely shaped the person I am. I'm less afraid to speak up for what I believe”

Emma wears: Top £69 XS-L, Phase Eight. Scarf £29, Mint Velvet. Trousers £59, 8-18, Mint Velvet. Shoes £36, Next



“The big turning point came when I was 11. From that moment I decided I was going to stop being a victim”

“I’m 100 per cent confident with my body now”

Emma Andrews, 43, lives in East Sussex, with her partner Hilary Brooker, 49, and daughter Jodie, 18, from a previous relationship. Emma runs her own company alongside raising money for the children’s charity Whoopsadaisy

Even though I was born with cerebral palsy. I consider myself lucky because I can walk and talk and lead a fairly normal life, unlike so many others with the condition. Yet strangers often talk about me as if I’m not there. Others assume I’ve had a stroke because of my limp and the fact that one arm is usually locked across my chest.

In my case, it’s only my right side that’s affected. One leg is shorter and weaker and my right hand is like a child’s. Doctors were very negative when I was born and said I’d never be able to do anything for myself but my grandmother, who was a nurse, refused to accept their prognosis – and look at me now!

Thanks to her I had lots of physiotherapy and took my first tentative steps at the age of three. I can’t say walking is easy and I still lose my balance and have to hold on to things sometimes, but I lead a very independent life and can do most things I want.

I haven’t always been so happy and positive. I was a very shy child – I got badly bullied at school because I was different. Kids would call me ‘Hopalong Cassidy’ and follow me round, imitating my gait. I couldn’t hold a pencil properly in my right hand, so my writing was very bad and I was the last in class

to receive a fountain pen, which gave the bullies more ammunition. My parents split up when I was four, which didn’t help. I stayed with my mum while my dad moved away and I had few friends. I remember standing in the playground watching other children’s games and I always seemed to be on the outside. The big turning point came when I was 11 years old. My father sat me on his lap and said, “Emma, you’ve got to believe in yourself. Your life’s not going to be an easy ride but you need to be strong and you’re going to choose your personality from now on.” His words really struck home and I’m so grateful to him. From that moment I decided I was going to stop being a victim and start getting out there and sticking up for myself.

Not long after this, I met a girl called Sam at secondary school and we became great friends. We’re still best mates to this day. Sam was gorgeous and everyone wanted to know her. She made sure I was included in everything and soon I had lots of other friends, too.

As we got older, Sam taught me how to use make-up and do my hair. She had a huge wardrobe of trendy clothes, which she’d let me borrow, advising me on what looked good but also what didn’t. I do remember sometimes wishing I had beautiful

healthy arms and legs like hers, but she was so generous and fun I couldn’t be envious for long. Even so, I was still shy about my body and didn’t meet my first proper boyfriend until I was 17. I think I was just so grateful someone was paying me attention that I was blind to his faults, and looking back he wasn’t good for me. Later I got together with Mark, Jodie’s father, who was the exact opposite and although the relationship didn’t last we managed to have Jodie, the most wonderful thing that’s ever happened to me. I’ve been with Hilary for 11 years now, and these days I’d say I’m 100 per cent comfortable with my body. He loves me for who I am and believes I’m beautiful. I used to really mind that I couldn’t wear certain clothes or stilettos like other women but now, at 43, I know exactly what makes me feel good and I never feel bitter. I still remember how I felt as a little girl, though, and I’ve written a children’s book called *Dilly’s Dog’s Disguises*, about a girl with cerebral palsy who gets bullied at school just as I did. I hope it raises awareness of the condition and helps other CP sufferers who may be going through what I did. Because although my life isn’t always easy, cerebral palsy has made me who I am.

As told to Emma Burrell. Stylist Justine Brennan. Photos: Liz McAulay. Hair & make-up Charlotte Foster-Brown and Annabel Hobbs. For details of where to buy Emma’s book visit dillysdog.co.uk

“I’ve never let my disability hold me back”

Jackie Coventry, 51, a counsellor, lives in Hampshire, with her husband Stuart, an environmental director, and their sons Dan, 25, Tobi, 22, and Josh, 16. Jackie was just 11 days old when her left leg was amputated below the knee

When I look back, I think I was born with a certain amount of inner confidence, though my parents helped a great deal with it too. Because I developed blood clots in my legs soon after birth and had to have my amputation so young, I never knew what it was like to have both legs. People often assume it’s been easier for me because I was able to adapt from birth – the truth is, losing a limb is hard whenever it happens.

Despite my disability, I managed to walk at eleven months with the aid of a prosthesis. I never wanted to use my leg as an excuse not to do things, and if anyone said I couldn’t do something it would only make me more determined. Once I hit puberty I hated my shiny pink NHS prosthesis and spent ages trying to find tan tights that masked the colour of the false leg underneath to make it look more real. I never wanted to hide my disability – I was proud of how well I coped – but I didn’t want to look ridiculous either.

When I was 19 I trained to be a nurse, then in my 30s, when I was training as a counsellor, I had some counselling myself. It made me realise I’d never had the chance to feel sad and miss my leg – it was a relief to be allowed to grieve at last. I’d spent my life covering up a lot of the hurt and it was good to acknowledge the difficulties at last. I think it helped me.

In my 40s I campaigned for a silicone leg on the NHS – and won. It was fitted at Dorset Orthopaedic Clinic, and it looks so much more real than the old one. Now I can paint my nails on both feet and wear open-toe sandals for the first time since I was a child. I even have different legs for different height heels!

As I’ve grown older, I’ve developed joint and back pain because of my leg as well as arthritis, so I find walking

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harder, although I do have four brightly designed walking sticks – who said sticks had to be boring!? I also manage to go to the gym two or three times a week and I’d like to try skiing. I’m proud I’ve done such a lot despite my disability and love the fact there are more things still to try. All of us have to work with what we’re given and I hope I’m living proof to other amputees that you can have a full and happy life.

Jackie wears: Dress £89, 8-18, Mint Velvet at House of Fraser. Ring £10 Ribbon & Asher at Dorothy Perkins. Bangles £12.50, Wallis. Earrings £6, Next. Shoes Jackie’s own

