

## The Rise of Psychodermatology Gives a Whole New Meaning To ‘Stress-Relieving Skin Care’

By Zoe Weiner

Americans are stressed—according to the American Psychological Association’s 2022 Stress in America survey, nearly a third reported stress levels so high “they can’t function”—and the effects are written all over our faces. Meanwhile, a StyleSeat survey conducted in August found that 32 percent of Americans report experiencing a stress-related skin problem in the past year (including acne, dryness, dullness, and blotchiness) making it abundantly clear that “skin health” and “mental health” should no longer be thought of in isolation. Our collective complexion crisis has placed the brain-skin connection—known in the scientific field as psychodermatology—squarely at the center of the beauty conversation, and come 2023, it will take the industry by storm.

“The brain and the skin are inextricably connected,” says Amy Wechsler, MD, a board-certified psychodermatologist, author of *The Mind Beauty Connection*, and a Well+Good Wellness Trends Advisor. “They are actually formed from the same layer of cells embryologically, and they have many nerve, blood-vessel, and hormone connections. One affects the other, and vice versa, in both positive and negative ways.”

What does this look like? Exposure to stress spikes a hormone called cortisol, which activates a fight, flight, or freeze response in our bodies. Though this response is meant to only last a few minutes, chronic stress can keep cortisol levels elevated for extended periods of time, which shows up on your skin in a few different ways. A surplus of cortisol causes inflammation throughout the body, which explains why stress has been linked to inflammatory skin conditions like acne, rosacea, eczema, and psoriasis. It can also weaken your skin barrier, which can cause dryness and sensitivity, as well as degrade collagen, leading to fine lines and wrinkles.

Not only can skin issues take a toll on your mental health and self-esteem, but being stressed about the way your skin looks or feels can then exacerbate your skin issues.

In the past few years, new research makes clear that this mind-skin connection is too important to ignore. An [August 2021 report](#) from the *International Journal of Dermatology* noted that “the impact of skin alterations on the mental health of dermatological patients should be a central concern.” Not only can skin issues take a toll on your mental health and self-esteem but, as we know, being stressed about the way your skin looks or feels can then exacerbate your skin issues. A [July 2022 review](#) of studies of sensitive skin syndrome in *The Journal of Cosmetics* (conducted by Proctor and Gamble) called this a “vicious cycle.” “In order to better understand the [sensitive skin] individual, we need to also be aware of the psychological factors that can trigger and/or worsen this skin condition,” the study author noted.

While scientists investigated stress and skin in the lab, many of us came to the same realizations with our own complexions at home. “Lockdown created a new awareness of the impact of stress on our skin. We were at home, often wearing less or no make-up, and more of us than ever saw the impact on our skin in stress-driven breakouts, inflammation, and signs of aging,” says [Kat Bryce](#), co-founder of [LOUM Beauty](#), a skin-care brand developed in partnership with a psychodermatologist, a neuropsychologist, and a mindfulness coach that launched in 2020.

“Since the pandemic, I have seen a huge increase in patients coming into the office for stress-related rashes,” confirms [Joshua Zeichner, MD](#), a board-certified dermatologist based in New York City, naming acne and rosacea as the two most common concerns he’s seen over the past few years.

THE EXPERTS TAKE



Amy Wechsler, MD

*Psychodermatologist*

“It’s taken a long time for Americans to believe in the mind-skin connection...But [with this trend], people can learn more about their bodies and their minds and how they’re interrelated.”

This increased awareness around skin and stress has catalyzed a shift throughout the skin-care industry, with a growing number of brands placing mental health at the forefront. In the last few months: [Tatcha](#) released a [report on skin care and self care](#), which introduced people to “Step 0,” or taking time to “breathe and connect with the present” at the start of their skin-care routines to make the experience more mindful; board-certified dermatologist Whitney Bowe, MD, introduced a [relaxation capsule](#) into her eponymous skin-care line; and celebrity hairstylist Adam Reed brought [Arkive](#), a UK-based “head care” brand that emphasizes the need to care for yourself mentally, to the U.S. market.

“In this post-pandemic world, we see health and beauty brands being particularly mindful of mental and emotional health when planning their future developments since, for consumers, their skin no longer falls into the domain of just the dermatologist,” says Anne-Catherine Auvray, executive editor at data aggregation and trend-forecasting platform [BEAUTYSTREAMS](#). “Increasingly, consumers understand and are enthusiastic about the connection between mind and body ...Therefore, cosmetic products inspired by the psychodermatological approach become more popular, bringing skin care efficacy while at the same time boosting well-being and encouraging positive feelings.”

Stress-relieving beauty has long been rooted in sensory experiences (think: lavender-infused body lotions or bath salts that make you feel like you’re in a spa), but the most exciting innovations in the space go beyond calming scents and textures. “Neurocosmetics,” a class of ingredients that stimulate a response in the nervous system when they’re applied topically, have begun to make their way into skin care. Research has shown that certain [neurocosmetics can influence one’s mood](#) when they contact nerve endings in the skin, and while Dr. Wechsler notes that more research needs to be done to confirm if these actives are truly as game-changing as they seem, brands are finding exciting new ways to include them in their formulations.

LOUM’s products feature a neurocosmetic called Neurophroline, which blocks the production of cortisol and prompts the skin to release natural, mood-enhancing neuropeptides called beta endorphins while also visibly improving skin tone (Trinny London’s [BFF De-Stress Serum](#), which launched in 2020, also uses the ingredient). [Selfmade](#), another psychodermatologist-developed line that launched in 2020, introduced its third product, [Corrective Experience Comfort Cream](#), in September, which employs an ingredient called Cortinhib G that’s been proven to [control the underlying causes of cortisol production](#). And [LAST Skincare](#), which launched in 2021, uses adaptogens and aromatherapy to boost beta-endorphins and stimulate the release of relaxing neurotransmitters.

Next year, neurocosmetic offerings will continue to grow. LOUM, which currently only offers facial care products, has hinted at plans to expand into hair and body care in the future. Selfmade will introduce a new formula that focuses on strengthening the skin, and is also considering entering new categories. And LAST will launch two new hero products with “even more potent ingredients to decrease cortisol and raise beta-endorphin in skin,” says founder [Katarzyna Janocha](#).

Beyond just selling products, brands are also working to break the stress-skin cycle by pouring resources into initiatives that address the mental health concerns at the root of it. In May, Gen-Z focused acne brand [Skin Proud](#) partnered with [Sad Girls Club](#) to develop a Twitter bot that responded to posts about skin care and stress with advice from mental health advocates. For 2023, the brand is hoping to launch real-time mental health support on other social media platforms. In 2020, Selfmade launched The CommonRoom, a digital program that provided tools and resources to bolster users’ confidence, which it used as a proof of concept for a larger community-based mental health initiative that is actively in development and will be formally announced next year. And in October, Maybelline announced [its partnership](#) with The Jed Foundation (JED) to create Brave Talk, an expert-developed training program that gives college students the skills they need to support their peers who are struggling with their mental health. In 2023, it will be available for free to all college campuses globally.

“This is a trend that’s not going to be short-lived, because it’s based on facts,” says Dr. Wechsler. And our skin—and mental well-being—will be better for it. †