



# 7 TIPS FOR SUCCESS

AS A  
Medical Tattoo Artist

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LUCY THOMPSON



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Set yourself up for success and make a positive difference with your skills, with advice on some of the most frequently asked questions about starting out in medical tattooing, from one of the leading artists in this field.



**LUCY THOMPSON** is a multi award winning medical and mastectomy tattoo artist who began her tattoo career in 2012 and early on took a keen interest in working with scar tissue after her peers advised against it due to the challenging and unpredictable nature of the skin.

Since then, she has immersed herself in working with scar tissue, particularly that from post-mastectomy and creating hyper-realistic nipple tattoos to cover them. After providing her aunt, a breast cancer survivor, with a nipple tattoo, she realised the incredible impact of this work.

In order to help as many people as possible, she founded [The Nipple Innovation Project](#) (NiP) charity in 2018, which works with a directory of accredited artists to fund these tattoos for those who most need it. She has become an ambassador for the industry, speaking at Women's Institutes, on local news and the European Oncology Convention to educate people about this life-changing service.

She is now setting up her [Areola Training Academy](#) to set the definitive standard for areola tattooing, to grow the number of expertly trained artists able to offer this service, and as a result, help more breast cancer survivors to reclaim their bodies and confidence post-mastectomy.

**This guide shares seven key advice points from Lucy, for tattoo and PMU artists wanting to start in the challenging but extremely rewarding area of medical tattooing.**



## What skills do I need to set me up for success?

Before we dive in to more detailed advice, having the following will help set you up with the best possible start in medical and mastectomy tattooing:

- ◆ **At least 3 years proven experience** with tattooing consistently and full time alongside strong fundamental tattoo skills.
- ◆ **Artistic flair is a bonus** or at the very least a willingness to focus on honing drawing skills. Drawing realism is a huge part of this process much like traditional tattooing. Before completing a tattoo we have to do our homework and create the blueprint for a tattoo, and replacing a body part via tattooing is no different.
- ◆ **Experience with scar tissue** is always preferred as it helps give you the knowledge and understanding of how the skin will react and accept pigments.
- ◆ **Experience in traditional body art tattooing** will give you an immediate understanding of machines and larger configuration needles however this can also be taught to the right applicant who is willing to learn.
- ◆ **Compassion and an emotional understanding** to what the client goes through during breast cancer is a huge part of this too. It's so important that we respect the process and feelings they go through after losing their breasts and that we have the skill set to be able to support them through this final and important stage.

These are the basic fundamentals, and we'll now expand on these plus some additional points. You should reach the end of this guide feeling more confident that you're on the right path to being a successful medical tattoo artist, and as a result, changing people's lives for the better.



## Drawing 3D Realism

**Drawing skills are a must when it comes to this work**, especially considering we have to work with unilateral native nipples and recreate what we see on the skin as a 2D image that gives the illusion of a 3D protrusion.

**It's important to always draw from a photograph** when seeking to recreate realism on paper. Every spare moment should be spent working on depth and texture.

**Take your time to note all of the details** that create a working, protruding Nipple and Areola Complex, observe the nipple and areola closely including Montgomery glands, creases, veins and perfect imperfections that make up every individual unique person and their bodies.





**There are no stencils that can be used as a one size fits all** when it comes to this type of work, the work has to be put in on paper.

**There are no set rules** when it comes to this treatment and everyone likes to look at things from a different perspective. To create natural and realistic results, we must focus on working from photographs.

**Having experience with larger needle configurations** and understanding them, taking time to practise on fake skin is a crucial part of learning safe techniques too.

**When working with a unilateral nipple tattoo**, it means you need to be able to think on your feet and adapt to recreate what you see in real life right in front of you to recreate that 3D illusion on a flat surface.



**TIP:** The Instagram account [@genderless\\_nipples](#) is a great online resource for nipple reference photos.

## Scar Tissue & Post-Surgery Experience

**Work on gaining experience with scar tissue.** This will stand you in good stead when you are working with post mastectomy patients.

**Nothing can beat hands-on experience** when it comes to scar tissue as there are no set rules for how it reacts to being tattooed. Of course we can anticipate some elements and use proven techniques and approaches to certain types of scar tissue.

**If you have no scar tissue experience** I would recommend putting yourself out there and offering your tattoo services discounted to models and be honest and explain that it's to help you gain experience.



**People with scars often feel nervous or anxious** when it comes to the thought of having to explain where their scars are from, they feel shame from them, no one should feel that way. Tattoos are for everyone and are incredibly empowering, especially when it covers up a past trauma with some positive and beautiful artwork.

Having scar tissue experience will stand you in good stead when it comes to tattooing post mastectomy patients, so it's even more important to be well prepared and suited with knowledge.

Working on one scar tissue case a week is a great start.

I would recommend **only offering scar cover up tattoos if you have been tattooing for a minimum of 3 years** and had time to learn the fundamentals and get a real grasp on working with skin all over the body.

**If you offer permanent makeup tattoos,** I strongly recommend seeking a tattoo apprenticeship from a reputable tattoo artist to learn the fundamentals of tattooing healthy skin first.



**TIP:** Microneedling is a great way to get a safe feel for scar tissue, to feel how it reacts to controlled trauma.

**It's important to educate yourself on the vast variety of available mastectomy and breast reconstructive surgeries available.**

All have different processes and healing times, some may need additional surgeries to smooth out lumps or bumps or to rectify asymmetrical results from multiple surgeries.





**It's good to have an awareness of what options are available** so you can recognise reconstruction sights, delicate and fragile scar tissue, traumatised and damaged skin.

Having awareness of the vast variety of mastectomy and reconstructive surgery options available will help you when you meet clients and discuss their medical history and consult with them.

**Learn about surgical nipple reconstructions** and how they are created and their success rates. It's important to learn about the vast amount of invasive treatments available that are used to fight cancer and the side effects each treatment can cause.

**Radiation** for example, can cause a variety of issues that may not be visible to the eye or your client, your client may not be aware of any damage during treatment which can cause quite bad burns, weakening the structure of the skin and compromising the integrity so it's important to know what to look out for with each client you meet.



**ABOVE:** An example of a nipple tattoo covering mastectomy scars and nipple reconstruction surgery





# Collaborating With The Breast Cancer Community

**Something I often hear is:** “I want to work in hospitals offering this service”.

This was also a dream of mine.

However the rules and regulations in most hospitals restrict this from happening unless you have certain medical qualifications.

As it stands, the majority of medical professionals (nurses and surgeons) who offer this service in hospitals offer a semi-permanent and basic option with little to no artistic skill.

**There is a myth that tattoo pigments are carcinogenic**, and this can and has had a detrimental effect on tattoo artists receiving referrals for this type of work.

We also find we are faced with stereotype judgements of old school tattoo studios being filled with bald smoking bikers which isn't the case.

I started [NiP, the UK's first nipple tattoo charity](#) in 2018 , to provide a directory of trusted artists who have been vetted, checked and all work to the same consistent standard so the charity can be a trusted resource in the breast cancer community and the medical field.

**Gaining trust from the medical field is possible** though, you are more likely to establish connections with private hospitals through proven results, healed results, live client testimonials – in short your work really speaks for itself.

**Taking the time to perfect your technique, learning from your healed results can really help set you up for success.**



## Work With Charitable Organisations

**Lots of people who do this work start off by offering their work for free.** it's good to collaborate with local organisations to let them know you are offering this service for free.

The UK's first mastectomy tattoo charity [NiP](#) recognises how much hard work goes into creating these challenging tattoos and offers options to pay artists to offer free treatments to those who may need some financial assistance when you start to take private appointments.

It's good to put a value on this work as its challenging work, it takes two sessions and a high level of skill and knowledge about post mastectomy tattoos and scar tissue to execute a long lasting, safe and realistic tattoo without overworking the skin.



NIPPLE INNOVATION PROJECT

[NiP](#) can help give you credibility to be a part of a trusted directory throughout the UK, as they become a trusted resource in the breast cancer community as more of the artists receive regular surgeon referrals as a collective that work hard together to offer the highest level of treatment for those who deserve to feel good in their bodies.



## Studio Environment

**Consider your working environment.** It's important to have a safe, quiet place to offer this service from.

**People who need this service more often than not have never had a tattoo before** and the thought of going to a tattoo studio can feel overwhelming.

After personally offering this service from a variety of different locations during my career I would conclude it's ideal to have a private, warm and welcoming space to work from that you feel comfortable in, and you know you can help your client find comfort too to embrace this final part of their journey.

In my experience, **clients do not like returning to hospitals for repeat tattoo treatments** as it brings back emotional trauma.

It's a true gift to be able to use your art to help someone take ownership of their body again, in the right environment with the right support – you can give them a beautiful experience and help them leave feeling empowered and beautiful – it's the least they deserve!

Compassion is a must. Privacy is incredibly important, your client may be feeling vulnerable being undressed and they need to feel at ease.





## The Responsibility This Service Holds

**It's important you understand the emotional impact and responsibility offering this treatment holds.**

Medical tattooing is different to traditional tattooing and cosmetic tattooing as its usually done to replace a body part that has been removed or altered due to surgery or a condition.

Tattoo skills have evolved so much now that true realism can be achieved which enables the wearer of these tattoos to accept their body after potentially going through a traumatic experience that altered their appearance and had a negative impact on their self-esteem and confidence.

Negative feelings can and often have a negative impact on mental health and close relationships.

**It's important to understand the negative impact a poor or fading nipple tattoo can have on a person's self-esteem** which then had a negative impact on other areas of their life such as relationships and work.

After everything a person has been through after enduring breast cancer treatments, a nipple tattoo is often fondly referred to as the "icing on the cake" or "the cherry on top" as it symbolises the end of an arduous journey.

**Often breast cancer survivors have had minimal choice or say in what happens to their body.** It's a lot to process and carry. This final stage is a chance to accept their new bodies and move on with life post cancer.

We must recognise the importance and responsibility of having the correct skill set, fundamentals and knowledge in place to be able to perform this life changing treatment safely.



## Beyond Nipples

**Medical tattooing is not limited to just breast cancer patients.** It's a tool that is versatile and is often used by people in the trans community after top surgery and failed nipple grafts.

**Other things medical tattooing can help with include:**

- Scar camouflage
- Microneedling – relaxing scars
- Syndactyly webbed toes tattooing
- Belly button restoration
- Radiation nutriling
- Toenail tattooing
- Gender reassignment surgery
- Top surgery
- Phalloplasty

It's a true gift to be able to use your art to help someone take ownership of their body again.

[The Lucy Thompson Areola Academy](#) is here to offer comprehensive training and help you elevate your skills to be able to offer life-changing work for your clients.

If you are interested in taking your skills to the next level to become a successful medical tattoo artist, I'd love to hear from you!

Please email [lucy@nipcharity.org](mailto:lucy@nipcharity.org)



## About Lucy

Lucy Thompson is a Multi Award winning Medical & Mastectomy Tattoo Artist who began her tattoo career in 2012 and early on took a keen interest in working with scar tissue after her peers advised against it due to the challenging & unpredictable nature of the skin.

Not to shy away from a challenge, she felt that people with scars maybe felt they needed tattoos for cover ups maybe more than the average person – she understood the emotional importance and power a stunning design could have on the wearer and the positive emotional impact wearing a beautiful design over scarring to cover a past trauma.

Lucy worked with the BBC on a short documentary surrounding the impact of scar cover up tattoos after fleeing domestic violence [which you can see here](#).

After starting the Scar Cover Up Project in 2016 where Lucy gave out one free scar cover up a month to those who weren't in a financial position to commit to getting a tattoo, Lucy wanted to give something back to her community and gain further experience with scar tissue. Through this work Lucy was asked to do a nipple tattoo.



After doing her research she was shocked to find only basic options available, and all were done with semi permanent pigments meaning the tattoos would fade. Lucy, knowing her auntie had had a mastectomy 10 years previously, wondered if this was something her aunt had experienced.

Lucy was shocked and upset to hear her aunt's story of her tattoo experience in a hospital. The tattoo process was incredibly painful and caused excessive bleeding and discomfort which shocked Lucy to her core. The tattoo then faded away after a few months. As an experienced tattoo artist, she knew a tattoo should not cause this much mental or physical trauma. Her aunt then decided it was too traumatic to go back for a repeated visit and decided to put the trauma behind her - this included not looking at her reconstructed breast in the mirror for ten years. When Lucy heard her aunt's story she knew this wasn't right and her heart ached for her and other women that had been through this. She knew change needed to be made.

Lucy found an artist in the USA in 2016 that was offering a 3D permanent and realistic training options. The artist she found was a veteran tattoo artist who had had a mastectomy herself and experienced extremely low quality nipple tattoos which caused further damage to her skin, she decided change needed to be made and started a training academy to train experienced heartfelt practitioners.

In 2016 Lucy reached out and started her journey with studying and learning about 3D nipple tattoos. In 2017 Lucy left her son at home with family and made the solo trip to San Antonio, Texas to take part in a 3day intensive 3D Nipple Tattoo training course where she completed her training and flew back to England to start helping survivors feel empowered in their skin. The BBC covered her story [here](#).

Lucy offered all her 3D Nipple tattoo treatments out for free to help as many people as possible until she became overwhelmed with requests for free hospital tattoo fix ups from people throughout the whole of the UK who were willing to travel for this free service.





Lucy wanted to figure out how she could help more people with this service and thought it would be a great idea to have a pot of money to fund these treatments for people who needed them. Therein the idea of a charity came about and in 2018 [The Nipple Innovation Project](#) was born.

The Nipple innovation Project is the UK's first Mastectomy tattoo charity which was founded to provide funding for 3D Nipple Tattoos and also a directory of specially trained artists throughout the UK who worked from the same high standard as Lucy did. The thoughts behind this was to make this high quality service more accessible to the breast cancer community throughout the UK.

Lucy has extensive proven experience with working with fragile, delicate reconstructed skin including a variety of different scar tissues. She has honed her skillset and knowledge to be able to turn her hand to any challenging scar tissue she has faced over the years including necrosis which is essentially the death of body tissue, skin that's been damaged by radiation treatments and skin with reduced blood flow. There are so many variables to consider when it comes to this work so its important to be fully armed with all the knowledge possible.

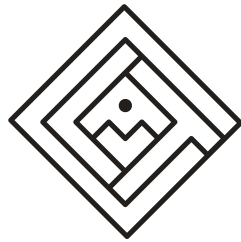
Lucy is developing her 3D Nipple Tattoo training programme which will be available Summer/Autumn time 2022.

Lucy has been featured in BBC Breakfast News, Sky News, Inked Magazine, Telegraph & Argus, The Daily Mail, BBC Sounds, expert on BBC Radio Leeds, BBC News, spoken at the Womens Institute, held a lecture at the European Oncology Convention and has won awards at an international tattoo convention for most realistic bilateral tattoos, and at the Simply Ladies Awards for 'Agent Of Change' for all the hard work shes put into making change for the breast cancer community.

**CONTACT LUCY**



## Links & Resources



LUCY  
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SPECIALIST TRAINING FOR  
TATTOO & PMU ARTISTS

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