

COPING WITH AMPUTATION

INTRODUCTION

Amputation poses challenges on many levels: physical, emotional, social, spiritual, financial and may affect one's ability to think clearly and solve problems. Emotional responses to amputation are different for every individual and their family. It is common, however, to feel a sense of grief and loss. How people respond to their amputation depends upon their unique make-up (personality, values, attitudes), previous life experiences, their support systems, and the meaning they give to their amputation.

What Might I Expect to Feel After Having An Amputation?

People may experience feelings of anxiety, anger (directed toward self, family or caregivers), depressed mood, shock, denial, ambivalence, hopelessness, helplessness, numbness and disconnection. Some people report feelings of relief as their amputation was expected and resulted in freedom from pain with improved function. These feelings can be frightening and overwhelming and people often believe they are going crazy. This is not so!

People often compare their feelings to being on a roller coaster ride. Like a roller coaster, they feel they have little control over their lives. They may experience "highs and lows" ranging between optimism and despair. The ranges of feelings you may experience are normal and expected and part of the healing process.

These new feelings may affect how you normally cope with daily living. For example, many people read as a way of coping with stress. After an amputation, it is common for people to find it difficult to concentrate. If reading is a way of coping with stress, they may not be able to use this to help them. You may need to develop new ways of coping to help with feelings and stress related to your amputation. These intense feelings will settle over time.

What Helps?

1. People say that what really helps in the long term is to find positive meaning and purpose after their amputation....

“I had no idea that I am a strong person!”

“I've discovered that I have a creative side and can find new ways to do things!”

“I took things for granted until I lost my leg, now I realize what is important to me.”

Amputation is a profound loss that affects both the individual and family on all levels. How you choose to deal with your amputation will help determine the quality of your life. It really is up to you!

2. Being dependent and feeling a loss of control over their lives is one of the most frustrating changes that people experience after amputation. It is important to recognize what you can control and what things are beyond your control. Regaining control over your life can begin in small ways:
Eg. - Take control of decision making as soon as possible. Family may have had to make decisions for you while you were ill.
 - Be clear with yourself and others as to what you are capable of doing for yourself and how they can help if need be.
 - Recognize that your frustration at being dependent on others will lessen as you regain your independence and feel more comfortable asking for help when needed.
3. Taking care of your spiritual needs is a way of connecting with your inner self. Spirituality provides a deep connection to something bigger than your everyday life. Spirituality can be developed through religion, meditation, music, nature, being with other people and having hopes and dreams. Spirituality helps people recognize that their physical appearance is but a small part of who they really are.
4. Talk to people who are good listeners, have a positive outlook and who have your best interests at heart. Ask for honest feedback. It is through being listened to that people come to understand how they really feel, what their amputation means to them and how to move forward with their lives.
5. Appreciate how your body still works for you. Recognize what you have, rather than what you have lost. Consider the strength it took to get as far as you have and give yourself well-deserved credit!
6. Letting go of the past (the way things used to be) can help change your focus to the possibilities of the here and now and the future. Living in the here and now will help you accept what has changed and can help you make the most of your life today.
7. Keep a journal to record important phone numbers, dates of important events, resources and so on. People report that recording their feelings (challenges and successes), goals, and hopes for the future is helpful in seeing how far they have come since their amputation.
8. Try not to worry about others accepting your amputation. People generally interact with you with the same level of comfort that you have with yourself. It is important to cultivate a positive attitude towards yourself ... it's catching!

9. People often report that their first public outing is very scary. It might help to rehearse the outing. Go to the place and check out the washrooms, parking, stairs/elevators and see how accessible it is. Decide who will accompany you and what equipment you will need. This rehearsal should help eliminate unforeseen challenges and make your first outing a positive experience.

10. Taking care of yourself physically is now more important than ever. The single best thing you can do for your remaining leg is to quit smoking! Overuse and abuse of alcohol and medications will increase your risk for falls. As difficult as it may be, find new ways to exercise so that you can maintain the fit of your prosthesis and/or wheelchair. Watching your diet will help maintain your overall health.

11. Know when to ask for help. If you think you might be depressed or family/friends have concerns about how you are coping, you may want to consider talking to a health care professional such as a Social Worker. You can contact your local hospital or mental health clinic to find out about counselling resources.

PREPARED BY: SHERRY MAC PHERSON, M.S.W., R.S.W.
PENNY DURNFORD, M.S.W., R.S.W.