

BEING AN AMPUTEE – THE EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

Having an amputation is unlike any other surgery. With most types of surgery you leave the hospital looking the same and in a short space of time you are mobile and able to get on with your life. Having an amputation is not like that.

It affects your appearance and your mobility if you're a lower limb amputee and your manual dexterity if you're an upper limb amputee. Because of this it affects every area of your life and requires adjustments and changes to be made. Most people are not happy when they have to make changes in their lives especially when they don't want those changes. Statistic tables show that moving house and getting divorced are two of the most stressful events we experience in our lives. I feel that being an amputee could be at the top of that list because it's not just about losing your limb it's about losing a lot more and not knowing whether you'll be able to get any of it back.

What have you lost? Well, when you leave the hospital and come home you realise that you have lost your independence, having to ask for things e.g. drinks, food etc, having to ask for help e.g. going to the toilet, taking a bath etc. You may feel frustrated sitting there while everything is going on around you, other people doing your jobs in the home that you used to do, and not doing them like you would have done.

You may have friends coming round trying to make you feel better saying, "Once you get your limb you'll be back to normal". Some friends don't come round because they feel uncomfortable and don't know what to say. People don't understand and you say you're 'fine' when really you're frustrated at not being able to do anything for yourself. You're hurt that people you have known for years don't seem to understand and you're frightened for the future.

What is it like to wear a prosthetic limb? What will I be able to do? Will I be able to go back to work? How comfortable are they to wear? All the questions are going around in your head and you don't have the answers yet.

Coming for treatment can give you mixed feelings, although you don't have to put on an act there. You may feel some anxiety, hoping that your limb will fit, that it will be comfortable and that it will enable you to pick up the pieces of your life that have been on hold for a while.

Once your new limb is made, if you are a lower limb patient, you may attend physiotherapy to learn how to walk and control it. You may find that it is not that easy having to get your balance, get used to the weight of the limb, be taught to walk and get used to the socket. Attending physio is frustrating for many people because you may want to go at a faster rate than you physically are able to do and this can get you down. It's hard work.

If you're an upper limb patient you will see the occupational therapist to learn to use various attachments with your limb. This can take a while to reach a level of dexterity that allows you to use the limb for many tasks throughout each day.

Once you have your limb at home the real work starts, having to integrate yourself back into your life style e.g. going back to work, socialising, driving, holidays etc. Before your

surgery you just got on with these things without a second thought. Now you feel apprehensive about trying these things even though you have waited so long to get to this point. Life requires more planning initially e.g. how much walking would you need to do if you went back to work? Could you do it? How do you get round a supermarket when you can only walk for 10 minutes? If you're an upper limb patient you may have concerns about eating out or shopping etc.

It's not just work and daily tasks that you have to get back to. Your hobbies and interests may have been put on hold since your surgery and these are the activities that you enjoyed doing and may have been looking forward to getting back to. Your relationships with partners and children may have changed as a result of the emotional rollercoaster you have been on. You may have changed and your family and close friends may have taken the brunt of your frustrations and anxieties. They will have been affected by what has happened to you as well.

As you start to get back to your activities you will find that you can do some of the things that you did before. Some of the things you may not be able to do and others you may be able to do if you can think of another way of doing them. It's time to make adjustments and many people find this the most difficult time.

It is at this point that you will need to accept your new life and your new 'normal' and let go of the old activities that you are no longer able to do. This can be very stressful if you can't continue with the thing that you loved doing. If you feel that you are unable to let go of these activities you could end up stuck in feelings of anger or depression that could continue for a long time.

All new patients are on an emotional rollercoaster fluctuating between anger/frustration and depression. This rollercoaster levels out once you get your limb and you begin to make the adjustments to your life style to allow you to be as active as you are able.

Some patients are unable to have a limb. This could be due to their poor health. The level of energy required to use a prosthetic limb may put their health at too great a risk. It may be that their remaining leg would be at risk if they were walking on it particularly when trying to learn to walk with a prosthetic limb. Sometimes patients are not able to understand and remember how to put a limb on, remove it or remember how they have been taught to walk. For these patients being given a limb would put them in danger of having an accident when not being constantly supervised.

For this group of patients having to accept the decision from their clinicians can be very upsetting. However, attempting to wear a limb would be even more distressing, trying and trying only to have to abandon the idea at a later date. Again as with limb wearers there needs to be a period of adjustment to life without a limb and it takes time.

It's an emotional journey being a new amputee as well as a physical one. If you need help along the way please ask for it. Having someone to talk and listen to you can really help you to see things more clearly and perhaps help you to move on. Please ask your treating clinician for details.