

### Caring for your Mental Health

Limb loss is a major event that will affect you and those close to you. Your body structure has been permanently changed and that will require physical, psychological and social adjustments to establish a new normal.

#### Normal emotional reactions to limb loss

Limb loss can result in a wide range of uncomfortable emotions. However, not every person responds in the same way to their amputation. The emotions that someone experiences vary depending on things such as age, life stage, social roles, overall health, mental health history, personality, and mindset. Be aware that you may experience:

- **Disbelief and shock:** Some people experience limb loss very suddenly while others have known it is coming for a long time. Give yourself time to make sense of why and how this loss occurred.
- **Relief:** There are some people who feel relieved after their amputation, especially if they experienced a lot of pain prior to surgery. There is nothing wrong with feeling relief.
- **Sadness or grief:** It is normal to feel sad when we have lost something important to us. When you have an amputation, you are grieving the loss of your limb. But you may also grieve your loss of independence, loss of relationships, loss of a certain lifestyle, or the loss of the ability to relate to others. Grief is often characterized by longing for what was lost.
- **Despair and hopelessness:** Some amputees feel overwhelmed by the prospect of finding a new normal. It can feel like there is no hope or reason to go on with rehabilitation.
- **Disgust:** People sometimes feel disgusted or repelled by their amputated limb. You may not want to look at or touch your limb. It may affect your overall body image.
- **Anger:** Limb loss often blocks a person's goals and can involve feelings of injustice which can result in anger, frustration and resentment. Amputees can feel angry toward themselves, family, clinical staff, or the circumstances that led to their limb loss. Sometimes anger masks other vulnerable emotions such as anxiety or helplessness.





- **Guilt:** You may feel that your amputation is a personal failure or punishment. It is common for people to feel like a burden when they suddenly need help from their loved ones or professionals.
- **Shame:** In the early stages of recovery it is common for some people to feel like their amputation says something bad about them as a person. For example, limb loss might make a person think they are weak, unlovable, unattractive, or less than.
- **Anxiety or worry:** All humans are threatened by the unknown and there is typically a lot of uncertainty about the future after an amputation. People may be anxious about how they will manage, how others will react, or if they can return to their former lifestyle. Concerns look different for everyone.
- **Embarrassment:** Amputation will make you stand out from others and for some people this can lead to embarrassment.

It is important to identify, acknowledge and express your thoughts and feelings about your amputation. This can be a very uncomfortable process, but avoiding your feelings is typically ineffective and unhelpful in the long run. You can process your emotions with loved ones, with a professional, with other amputees, or all of the above. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.

## Coping with limb loss

Coping skills are what we use to get through challenging moments or periods of life. A good question to ask yourself to identify your existing coping skills is: “what do I typically find helpful to do when I am having a hard day?” Limb loss often (over) taxes a person’s existing coping skills, so it may be necessary to work on building new coping skills you have not needed in the past. How can you do this?

- **Seek information:** It is important to ask questions and collect information to help you make sense of your amputation, adapt to your new normal and plan for the future. You can seek information from your medical providers, organizations that support amputees, or peers who have also experienced limb loss.





- **Lean on others for support:** Family, friends, peers, and professionals can provide practical and emotional support as you adjust to your amputation. You may need to work on increasing your comfort asking for help.
- **Clarify your values:** Limb loss can make you question who you are as a person. Some people find it helpful to reflect on what is important to them and what kind of person they want to be moving forward. Understanding your values can help with setting appropriate goals.
- **Set reasonable goals:** Your goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-based. Be cautious about not setting too many goals at once, as this can lead to feeling overwhelmed. You may need to break it down into immediate, short-term, and long-term goals.
- **Problem solve:** Limb loss can create a lot of challenges and hassles in daily life. Over time, you will become an expert in finding ways to go around or through these barriers. It may require you to do things in a different way than you did before your amputation. You may need to rely on others in ways you did not before.
- **Engage in self-care:** Taking care of yourself can help buffer you to the stress of living with an amputation. Self-care looks different for everyone, but can involve making time for relaxation and pleasant activities, spending time outside, socializing, or looking after your body (example: sleep, hydration, nutrition).
- **Practice self-compassion:** The opposite of self-criticism is self-compassion. You may need to practice being nice to yourself or cutting yourself some slack. Consider whether the comparisons you make to your old self or others without amputations are fair.
- **Rebuild body image and self-esteem:** Limb loss often changes the way people perceive their body image, self-esteem, and functional capacity. Gradually starting to do daily activities that are important to you and returning to your previous social roles can help you find a new sense of self that includes your amputation.



## When to seek professional mental health support

Adjusting to limb loss does not always require professional mental health support, but some amputees may require clinical guidance to navigate the adjustment process. If you experience any of the following, you should speak to your care provider about accessing mental health supports:

- If you are feeling low, down, blue or hopeless most of the day, nearly every day for at least two weeks.
- If you are feeling unmotivated to engage in rehabilitation activities.
- If you are having thoughts of hurting yourself or ending your life.
- If you experience intense and persistent worry about a number of things for several months.
- If you are having panic attacks.
- If you are feeling chronically irritable or are regularly losing your temper.
- If you find yourself over-relying on substances to help you cope (example: alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, prescription medications).

*Are you struggling with your mental health?*

*Do you have questions about the adjustment process?*

...

*Please contact your clinical team. They can connect you with important resources to help.*

