

Emotional Considerations After Upper Limb Loss

Each person who undergoes an amputation has a unique experience and journey. It's natural to feel a range of emotions as you adjust to the changes in your life. This process is challenging, but it's important to know that healing takes time, and you don't have to go through it alone. It's also important to recognize the stress of absorbing and processing all of the new things you need to learn, from navigating social settings to activities of daily living.

You may expect to feel grief and sadness, perhaps even depression. In our experience, many other emotions come into play as well. These can include:

- Despair, hostility, negative thoughts
- Uncertainty, anxiety, panic, asking yourself, "Who am I now?"
- Frustration, irritability, anger
- Overwhelm, feeling out of control
- Guilt, shame
- A desire to isolate and retreat
- Relief, especially if the procedure resolves chronic pain
- A desire to overcome adversity

Whatever you're feeling, remember that it's valid. These emotions are part of your journey. An amputation represents a major life change, and it is important to recognize and take care of your emotional well-being. It's also important to understand that this healing journey is not linear. There will be ups and downs. Progress is not measured daily but over the long haul. This is true not just

with functional improvements, but also with physical and emotional symptoms.

PHYSICAL SIGNS OF EMOTIONAL STRESS

- Too much sleep or insomnia/sleep disturbances
- Appetite changes
- Increase/decrease in body temperature
- Panic attacks or heart-racing sensations
- Tension in the jaw, neck, & other joints
- Headaches
- Restlessness, difficulty focusing

STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL EMOTIONAL RECOVERY

Emotional recovery takes time — probably longer than you think it should. It's important to have compassion and patience with yourself.

Begin using your prosthesis as soon as possible. Research has shown that the sooner a prosthesis is used, the better, from an emotional and physical recovery standpoint.¹ It might feel strange at first, but with time, it can become part of your routine.

Work on resuming the previous roles you played in your life. Take one step at a time. You don't have to tackle everything at once. Focus on small, manageable tasks/goals each day. Even simple things like returning to a typical household chore, such as cooking, can help. Your physical therapist and/or occupational therapist can help you brainstorm ideas and develop new ways to resume important roles. Reconnect with what matters to you. Try returning to activities you enjoyed before like cooking, hobbies, and social gatherings. Even small steps can help you feel more like yourself again. It's



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normal when you first return to a hobby or activity that it doesn't feel the same as it did. That's ok. Keep at it. The normal feelings and emotions will return as you recover.

Resist the urge to isolate yourself from family and friends. It can be tempting to isolate yourself, but spending time with friends and family can make a big difference. Strong social ties help with healing. Don't forget to involve your family and friends in your healing journey and let them provide emotional and physical support when needed.

Stay involved in your care. Ask questions, keep notes, and make appointments for yourself. Following amputation, many people feel a lack of control over their circumstances. Taking charge of as much as you can helps alleviate this feeling of helplessness and improve your overall well-being.

Feel the feelings, then move on. Denying uncomfortable emotions can often make them last longer. Instead, take note of how you are feeling, adjust your expectations for the day, and move on.

Maintain your spiritual practices (or embrace new ones). Meditation, prayer, creativity, or simply spending time in nature can really help restore a sense of connectedness and calm. Meditation and other mindfulness techniques, such as guided imagery and breathwork, help the mind and body relax, which may also help lower your perception of pain and increase your mobility.

Connect with others who have limb loss or limb differences. Engaging with people in a similar situation to yourself is very meaningful. The AMPOWER® peer-to-peer

support program can connect you with a mentor who's been where you are and can share how they made it.

WHEN AND HOW TO REACH OUT FOR PROFESSIONAL HELP

Research has shown that levels of anxiety and depression can be significantly higher in people who have had amputations.¹ If you experience chronic worry or depression and it is affecting your life for an extended period of time, talk to your care team.

Asking for mental health support is especially important if you experience suicidal thoughts, flashbacks, exaggerated startle reactions, feel outside of your body, or do not know where you are. These are signs of suicidal ideation or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and should be treated immediately. Your doctor or social worker can help connect you with a trained counselor or mental health care practitioner.

Like any other health issue, mental health challenges are a normal part of life. Reaching out for support is a sign of strength, and there are professionals ready to help. Don't hesitate to reach out — help is available.

You're not alone. Your emotional recovery is just as important as your physical healing. It's okay to take your time, ask for support, and celebrate every small victory along the way. You've got this, and there's a whole community ready to cheer you on.

¹Roșca, A. C., Baci, C. C., Burtăverde, V., & Mateizer, A. (2021). Psychological Consequences in Patients With Amputation of a Limb. An Interpretative-Phenomenological Analysis. *Frontiers in psychology*, 12, 537493. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.537493>



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