

Body Image, Relationships and Sexuality after Amputation

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Amputations affect our lives in many ways – our body image, relationships, and even sexuality. Here is information about these issues along with ways to deal with them.


Body Image

We all think about how we look. Starting as children and throughout life, we have thoughts and feelings about body image – our shape, size, and other physical attributes (such as hair, teeth, and skin).



Our body image changes as we go through life.

Sometimes our body image suffers when we see a movie star or fashion model and think we need to be just as thin or pretty. Our body image can suffer even more after an amputation.



As amputees, we not only have to deal with changes in how our body works and feels but also how it looks. The more that we focus on what is missing – not just the limb, but also the things we could do before – the more likely we are to get depressed and angry. In fact, studies show that when amputees have a negative (bad) body image, they are less apt to be happy with life.

It does not have to be this way for you. Most amputees are well-adjusted and lead happy and full lives. Here are some ideas of things you can do:

- Know that you are still the same person inside that you were before the amputation. It may help to think of yourself as a whole person who just happens to have a missing body part.
- Focus on learning new ways to do things you enjoyed before. But sometimes you may need to be extra clever or creative.
- Don't limit yourself with the label of "disabled." The focus should no longer be on what is gone, but on the future.
- If you are learning to use a prosthesis, your body image is likely to change once you feel more comfortable with it. You will know this is starting to happen when you begin to feel naked without it!




Relationships

Relationships come in many forms. We can be very close to some people and just friends with others. No matter what kind of relationships we have, they almost always improve the quality of our lives.

People without relationships often feel lonely, isolated, sick, and depressed. When people have no one to talk with or nothing to distract them, they may think only about their problems and pain.

Some amputees avoid relationships because they are so worried about body image that they think other people won't like them. They may fear rejection and stay away from friends, relatives, and even strangers. But this fear is seldom true.

Studies show that being an amputee is no longer a cause of rejection. An example is Heather Mills (an amputee) who used to be married to Paul McCartney (a former Beatle).




Relationships help make us feel whole – both emotionally and physically. But this does not mean you always have to be part of a crowd. Here are some ways to have healthy relationships:

- Stay involved with people you already know and share feelings for.
- Join an amputee support group where you can meet other amputees who live full and happy lives. This way, you can know that you can do the same.
- Talk with important people in your life about your feelings as an amputee. This includes feelings of anger, fear and frustration. It also includes how the other person feels now that you are an amputee. Your relationship is likely to be stronger after open and honest conversations like these.

Sexuality

We are all sexual beings. This term refers to all the ways we express loving feelings and emotions. Our whole body responds to sexual attraction. Sexuality includes feelings of arousal (expressed by touching, kissing and caressing) as well as sex (sexual intercourse). Touching and being touched are basic human needs. In



fact, studies show that babies who do not get touched a lot develop later than those who do.

Some amputees say that limb loss limits their sexuality. This can be due to a negative body image. It can also be because people fear they will be rejected by their spouse or partner. It is important that you talk together about how your changed body looks, feels, and works. Talking about this now can help prevent misunderstanding or hurt feelings later on.

Our sensuality and sexuality always begin with us. Here are some things you can do:

- Focus only on the sensations of pleasure that you feel at the moment. Do not keep thinking about how you want to perform.
- Alternate between focusing on your partner's pleasure and your own sensations of arousal.
- Give yourself permission to try new ways of being sexual. After amputation, you may want to find new positions that are more comfortable. For instance, you could add some pillows if you have problems with balance.

- Explore and enjoy finding out ways that work best for you and your partner. Amputees all over the world have returned to loving, sexual relationships after their amputation. You can too. This will help with your body-image, relationships, and sexuality.



About the Author

Sandra Houston, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and retired professor of psychology from the University of Central Florida. She had a private practice for 30 years, specializing in marriage and sex therapy. She has been a hip-disarticulation amputee since 1982. With over 50 professional publications and presentations, she continues lecturing and writing in the field of rehabilitation psychology.

*Translated from **Altered States - Our Body Image, Relationships and Sexuality***

http://www.amputee-coalition.org/first_step_2005/altered_states.html