

Going Outside: Moving Beyond the Barriers That Keep You Inside

First Step - Volume 4, 2005

Original article by Warren Summers, MA

Translated into plain language by Helen Osborne of [Health Literacy Consulting](#)

Why do some amputees find it so hard to go outside? When I was a new amputee, I recall two types of barriers that kept me inside. These were physical barriers (such as stairs) and emotional barriers (such as feeling scared or depressed).



As new amputees, the outside world can feel scary. We are coping with the trauma of our amputation and how it affects our job and income. We are also dealing with concerns such as feeling depressed or anxious, worrying about family or friends, and being upset about how our changed body looks. These concerns may last months, or even years.

Despite these concerns, we know that going outside can help in many ways. Going outside can brighten our spirits and allow us to exercise. It can also

help us stay busy, be with others, and get back to work. We almost always are better -- both physically and emotionally -- when we lead busy, active lives.

Concerns about going outside

Yes, there are some very real concerns about going outside as a new amputee. These include the risk of falling, problems finding restrooms that we can use, or being stranded with no one to help. Even worse, some new amputees worry that they will be teased, stared at, laughed at, pitied, or asked too many questions.

But we cannot let these concerns be the focus of our lives. Two friends of mine have diseases that affect how their bodies work. One friend has Parkinson's disease and the other has multiple sclerosis. Despite their concerns, my friends agree that going outside helps them stay healthy and enjoy life.

Facts and excuses

We must face the fact that we will always be amputees. Our lost limbs will not grow back. Sure, we are missing a part of our body but the core of our being was not in that limb. We were not our leg, arm, foot or hand before. Why should we define ourselves that way now?

One way we can face this fact is by coming up with words to define ourselves. It is our choice whether to think of ourselves as “handicapped,” “inconvenienced,” “disabled,” “a person with a disability,” or “a differently-abled person.”

We can also figure out if any of our reasons for not going outside are just excuses. For instance, when we say “My stump hurts,” “It’s too hot or cold outside,” “I’m tired,” “My hair is a mess,” or “I need to polish my leg” – are these just excuses to stay inside? While our reasons may be real, sometimes they are excuses to keep us from living the life we deserve.



Warren Summers talks to his grandson Mitchell about their day out at Disney World.

My story

My story is that I had an accident which led to a right shoulder amputation. When I first went outside as a new amputee, I took short walks in the neighborhood. I worried that people would stare at me because I looked different. But this did not happen. Instead, people smiled, waved, and asked how I was doing. It

was really fun.

Next, I went to the grocery store. While some adults did not look at me, children did. If they stared at my empty sleeve, I would smile and say I lost my arm in an accident. Almost always, the children smiled back and said “okay.”

Now, I go outside – eating at restaurants, going to church, joining clubs, and seeing friends. My life as an amputee is filled with much success. This includes washing dishes, cooking meals, and even taking my grandchildren to Disney World.

Having an amputation does not hold me back or define me as a person. Here are two lessons I learned:

- Talk with your family, friends, and neighbors about your amputation. Explain what you are going through. You may be the first amputee they ever met and they might not know what to say or do.
- Do not take your problems out on others when they make simple mistakes. They did not cause your amputation nor are they bad people because they have all their limbs.

Get help when you need it

When you think about going outside, do you worry about all the things that could go wrong? I refer to this as “horriblizing” -- when people think only about the very worst that could happen. For instance, you might think “I could get attacked because criminals might see my amputation as a weakness and then I’d be stranded and not able to get help.” While awful things like this could happen, they are not likely to. Horriblizing is often just an excuse.

You are much more likely to be treated to acts of kindness. People may offer to open doors, carry packages, or help in any way they can. One amputee told me that a perfect stranger pulled her car out of a snow bank. Accept this kindness with thanks and a smile. People are doing this because they want to be nice and it makes them feel good. This is not pity. Keep in mind that you are a person of worth.

Local and Online Amputee Support

Groups

To me, an amputee support group is a great reason to go outside. At support group meetings, amputees can find others who



share the same experiences and concerns. You are likely to form special bonds with some of them. You can also learn from guest speakers and get a laugh from “amputee humor” (that can only come from other amputees).

What you won’t find at support groups meetings is a “pity party.” Most amputees do not have time in their lives for that.

When I was a new amputee, I did not think I needed any support and was not eager to attend a support group meeting. Was I wrong! My first meeting was great and now my wife and I look forward to each one.

I suggest you attend a local amputee support group and see how it can help. Contact the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) to learn where the meetings are near you. If there are no local meetings, ACA can help you start one.

Another option is to join me and other amputees in the “ACA Online Support Group.” We meet online (by Internet) once a month. We discuss many topics such as going out in bad weather, driving a car, dealing with pain, and being worried that we burden others. And, of course, we also share amputee humor. This online support group is a great way to meet people who can help you get ready to go outside. Lean on us a little. It does not mean that you are weak. Instead, it shows that you are smart.

Ways to learn more:

- Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) 1-888-267-5669 or acainfo@amputee-coalition.org



About the Author

Warren Sumners has a Master's Degree in Counseling, is a right shoulder amputee, and is the volunteer national facilitator for the ACA Online Support Group.

Translated from **Going Public: Overcoming the Emotional Barriers That Keep You**

Inside

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