

Going Public: Overcoming the Emotional Barriers That Keep You Inside

by Warren Sumners, MA

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Why is it so difficult for many amputees to go out in public?

Why was it so difficult for me to go out when I first became an amputee?



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



No doubt, there are physical barriers, but the most difficult barriers for many of us are the ones in our minds. We can find ways to deal with the physical barriers if we can get a handle on the emotional ones.

We know that we should leave the house, and we want to, but we don't know how we will be able to get along in the world as amputees. And it's easy to see why this "new world" is so scary. As new amputees, we must deal with the trauma of our amputation, its impact on our job or career, its impact on our finances, the stress of daily living, depression and anxiety, concerns about sexual relations, our changed relationships with family and

friends, our new self-image, and on and on. And even if we've been amputees for a while, these problems can periodically return to haunt us.

Still, getting out of the house can help us in many ways. It can improve our attitude, give us the opportunity to exercise, help us stay busy, give us the opportunity to be around others, help eliminate boredom from our life, help us get back to work, and help us build our support system. Usually, the busier we are, the better off we are physically and emotionally.

The Risks of Going Out

Certainly, when we first go out of our house after



our amputation, we are at risk for physical problems like falling, getting injured, difficulty finding a restroom, and even being stranded with no one to help us. Perhaps even worse, we are at risk for being rejected, being thought of as a “freak,” being ridiculed, being stared at, being laughed at, being pitied, having to answer uncomfortable questions, and being dependent on others. Even after a few trips out of the safety of our house, we may still be uncomfortable and filled with self-doubt in public. It will be even worse if we have had a bad experience the first time we ventured out.

I have several close friends with Parkinson’s disease and multiple sclerosis, and they tell me that they have the same types of fears. Even worse, people may think that they are drunk because of their loss of motor coordination and the “shakes” they experience. Yet, these friends still strongly agree that getting out and participating in life is essential to their long-term health.

Facing the Facts and Our Excuses

We must face the fact that we are going to be amputees for the rest of our life. Our

lost limbs won’t grow back! So unless we plan to stay home forever, we’re going to have to go out sooner or later.

We must also face the fact that we will always be physically different from others and then decide how we’re going to handle that. 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 becoming an amputee so why should we be defined in that way now?

We can define ourselves rather than letting others do so. We can decide if we are “handicapped,” “inconvenienced,” “disabled,” “a person with a disability,” or “a differently abled person.” It’s our choice. And it could affect the rest of our life since others tend to see us as we see ourselves.

Certainly, it takes hard work to have a positive attitude. We all have feelings of frustration, pain, depression, concerns about looking different, feelings of dependence, and the feeling that we are a burden to those around us. We can’t let those be the focus in our life, however.

We must also face our announced reasons, or excuses, for not going out today: “My stump hurts. It’s too hot or cold. I

don’t feel well. I’m tired. My hair is a mess. I’m waiting for a phone call. I need to polish and wax my wheelchair or prosthetic leg. I want to go alone. I don’t want to go alone.” Or whatever other excuse we can think of. Though there are times when our reasons are quite legitimate, we need to make sure that we aren’t just making excuses. Excuses are unacceptable when they prevent us from living the life we deserve.

The longer and more often we stay away from the public, the harder it gets to go out. Prepare yourself mentally, and expect the best. A friend used to say, “Don’t horriblize.” Don’t dwell on the negative things that might happen if you go outside. Not going outside also has a high price.

Small Victories

My life as an amputee has been a series of small victories. Like washing dishes, cooking a complete meal, traveling out of town on a business trip, taking my grandkids to Disney World. Learn to celebrate every victory! Going out of the house is a major victory that will have a long-term impact on your life and those around you.

My first trips from the house were just for short walks in the neighborhood. I felt like everyone was staring at me because I looked so different. I thought I was a freak! Actually, everyone just smiled and waved or stopped to talk and ask how I was doing. It was actually fun.

Next, I went to the grocery store with my wife. Many adults would not look at me and seemed embarrassed. Children were much more honest and stared at my empty sleeve. This upset some parents, but I just smiled at the kids, showed them my empty sleeve, and told them that I had lost my arm in an accident. Most would smile back and say, “OK.”

After that, I moved on to going to restaurants, to church, and to see friends. I also joined a Toastmasters club. The amputation did not hold me back or define me as a person.

I discovered that many people fear what they don't understand. They haven't been around amputees so they don't know how to act. We need to make the effort to help them understand and put them at ease.

What did you know about amputees before your amputation? Your family, friends and neighbors are your support system, but even they usually don't know what to say or do. Don't expect them to understand what you are going through without your help. Two-way communication is critical.

And one more thing: Don't take your problems out on them when they make simple mistakes. They did not cause your amputation nor are they bad people because they have all of their limbs.

“Horriblizing”

When you think of venturing out into the world, do you feel queasy thinking about all of the things that might go wrong? “I might get attacked because criminals might see my amputation as a weakness. I might get stranded and be unable to walk to get help.” These are certainly things that could happen, but the solution may be preparation rather than withdrawal from the world. Some companies, for example, will give you a free cell phone that only calls 911 in an emergency.

Although you might fear being attacked by a stranger, you will more likely be subjected to all kinds of acts of courtesy and kindness from them. There are many nice people out there. They open doors, offer to carry packages, or just want to help in any way they can. One amputee told me she was surprised to have a perfect stranger pull her out of a snow bank. Another said that she was offended at first when people wanted to help her, but she finally understood that they were just trying to be courteous.

Accept these kindnesses with grace, a thank you, and a smile. Note: I know that they are making that extra effort because of my amputation, but they just want to



be nice, and it makes them feel good. This is not pity. Remember, you are a person of worth.

Meeting Others

Support groups can be a wonderful addition to your life and a good reason to go out. At support group meetings, you will find people you can share your experiences and concerns with. You will likely develop special bonds with some of them. In addition, you will get the opportunity to enjoy special speakers and “amputee humor” that can only come from other amputees.

Don't expect a “pity party.” Most of these amputees don't have time for that in their lives.

I was not eager to attend my first meeting of Amputees Together in Tampa, Florida, because I felt that I didn't need support. Wrong! It was a great experience. Now, my wife and I look forward to each meeting. In that room, my wife and other nonamputees are the ones who are different.

If you can find a support group in your area, give it a chance. If not, contact the Amputee Coalition of America (ACA) to help you find or start one.

Otherwise, consider joining us in the ACA Online Support Group once a month.

We discuss all kinds of topics: going out in bad weather, driving a car, pain management, being a burden to those around us, and so forth. And there's also amputee humor, of course.

If you're not ready to go out yet, participating in the ACA Online Support Group is a great way to start meeting people again and preparing to “go public.” Lean on us a little. It doesn't mean that you are weak; it shows that you are smart.

Every day and every week, we should be adding good things to our life. Going out should be one of the things we are thinking about. Do it now. You can't do it any younger.

For more information about the ACA Online Support Group or to join, call 888/267-5669, or visit the ACA Web site at www.amputee-coalition.org

About the Author



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