



Together Again

Post-amputation intimacy: An amputee's case-sensitive investigation

by Elizabeth Bokfi

Suddenly they were coming at me from all directions: behind me at the mall, in front of me in grocery store line-ups and, piercing my eyes with their perfection, from within magazine pages at Walmart.

Long before reaching my peripheral vision, their sound – woody, clanging or ratcheting – would seduce my determination into finally looking. Across the ceramic-tiled mall floor they clanged, in all their tanned-calf adornment: sets of high heels. Beautiful specimens, all those muscular calves walking past. “Don’t hate me because I’m in heels!” they silently screamed at me, as I seethed inside my prosthetic limb.

Now a flat-heel convert, the trigger had been set. My mind strained to remember *The Evening Gown*; *The Mini Skirt Above a Set of High Heels*; *The High-Heeled Cowboy Boots My Levis® Used to Slip Over*. In my opinion, *The High Heel* has power enough to turn even a potato sack into a glamorous evening gown.

As one negative thought shot to another in a contagious frenzy, my memory landed at long-ago nights of abandoned sexual inhibitions and

micro-wispy barely-theres, pre-residual limb. Dangerous territory for an amputee barely off the ward.

At the tender age of 41, it's my heart and brain that matters to men, I tell myself over and over; then again, there's only so much heart and brain a man can take before testosterone rears its head.

To ameliorate my fledgling self-esteem, I turn the tables and imagine myself at the testosterone end of things. How do amputee *men* feel about *their* desirability and performance in the boudoir? While some women can fake it, there's no faking it for men.

Like any upheaval in a couple's life, amputation, whether the result of trauma or illness, can affect couple intimacy. In addition to the physical stress placed on the body by the actual accident or illness, amputees may also experience stresses related to body self-image and self-esteem. Physical pain aside, insecurities over physical appearance, desirability and sexual performance may infiltrate and threaten the intimate relationship between couples.

Body Image and Self-esteem

Often self-perceived as a mutation, amputation may negatively impact a

patient's body image, which in turn affects his or her self-esteem. Depression over visual deformity, the inability to perform daily routines that were once simple tasks and dependency upon others contribute to feelings of loss of control, loss of lifestyle and loss of self.

Men tend to equate the loss of a limb with loss of manhood; for sexually active women who want to continue to seduce and have men's attention, the impact on body image can be especially devastating. To what extent the amputee's body image and self-esteem play a role in a couple's intimate life depends upon factors such as the level of acceptance of the situation, whether the amputee is male or female, and age.

Sexuality

Every person who has a physical disability will experience, to some extent, physical restriction. Combined with a negative body image and a lowered self-esteem, intimacy levels in relationships are ultimately affected. It's important to address issues surrounding amputee sexuality. The lack of information on the topic leads to the conclusion that society has difficulty linking human sexuality to disability. Perhaps if society viewed

the disabled as *physically challenged*, and not *unable*, there would be less of a nonsexual stigma attached to people who are, in fact, physically challenged. For some reason, walkers and sex toys are an unlikely combination. When a person becomes physically challenged, does his or her sex life need to end?

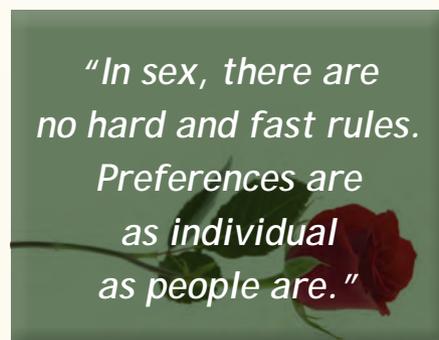
Humans are a sexual species. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, our primary instincts tend to be sexually driven. It begins at birth. We have a need to touch and be touched. At some level we all have a need for approval and acceptance, and humans, however deeply buried it may be, have a need for intimacy.

The amputee may experience a wide range of emotions and anxieties over his or her sexuality, post-amputation. For men, anxiety over sexual performance is a major concern. Women may feel they are less attractive visually. Medications can affect libido. Heavily medicated patients may experience decreased sexual desire, slower body function, the inability to achieve and/or maintain erections, and failure to achieve orgasm. Adaptive changes to sexual positions may also be necessary to facilitate physical comfort. Partners to amputees may also experience difficulties of acceptance when it comes to a lagging sex life. Understanding, adaptation and acceptance are keys to gaining confidence in the bedroom, post amputation. After all it's more than just sex – it's sharing; intimacy; emotion. Beyond just physical pleasure, sex is also about exchange and bonding. Emotionally supporting the amputee spouse and giving them sexual space by demonstrating less demand is very important. Adaptation becomes a necessary component to succeed in all facets of the amputee's life: emotional, social and physical. There are no easy hurdles.

For men, the desire for sex is still there, dependent upon whether or not the amputation is upper- or lower-limb. For those with upper-extremity amputations, it is worse. Not only are they affected visually by the missing limb, but they also have difficulties physically. For many,

because a large part of sex involves touch, they experience difficulties when trying to satisfy their partner when they only have one arm, for example. It becomes a challenge – balance, touch, everything. Male wheelchair users tend to feel less a man – if they are able to stand [during the act of intercourse], they tend to have a better self image.

For women, age comes into play. Older women, in their 70s and 80s, tend to care less. Many want autonomy at that age, and acceptance comes more easily.



Mature women with spouses – 40- or 50-year-olds that have good relationships with good communication – are just happy to be alive. They know they are loved, regardless of the amputation. For some younger women, sex may become less important as they immerse themselves in their career or profession. However, some women that have lower-limb loss are very affected. Legs comprise a large part of a woman's sexuality. It all depends on how she defines herself. Does she define herself as a mother, career woman or wife?

Let's Talk About Sex, Baby

Amputees and their partners may feel embarrassed about discussing sexual concerns with each other. Fears over having their feelings and needs trivialized may prevent open communication. Using a healthcare professional as a liaison helps to break the ice.

Sometimes partners of amputees are afraid of hurting the residual limb during sexual interaction. Healthcare professionals can give information to that spouse through the physiotherapist or

health practitioner. Nurses are also able to discuss couples' concerns.

Keeping an open mind can help couples through challenging transitions. The use of sexual aids such as vibrators, erotic literature and even fantasy might help couples reintegrate sexual activity in their lives. The use of sexual paraphernalia, once considered only for the sexually adventurous, may be used by couples as practical tools.

Sexual positions that were once comfortable may now need adapting. Leg amputations make standing positions challenging. Side-lying positions might be more comfortable, where removal of the prosthesis eliminates uncomfortable pressure points created from inadvertently twisting inside the socket. Ordinary pillows may also be used as support platforms to facilitate sexual activity between partners.

Although sex may need to be put on the back burner immediately following surgery, it can slowly be integrated back into the conjugal relationship as pain, swelling and general physical discomfort subsides. In-depth discussion beforehand about fears and anxieties may help to relax both partners. Placing emphasis on nonsexual contact such as massage and nonsexual caressing helps to relieve "performance pressure". The absent expectation of sexual success (orgasm) in any relationship paves the way to a trusting, comfortable atmosphere, which ultimately is conducive to good sex, whether couples have physical limitations or not.

Setting the mood is also very important. After years of being in a committed relationship, it's easy for couples to keep the candles packed away, to grab sex on the go, and if they're too tired from the day's activities, to forego sex altogether. It might help to view reconnecting as an opportunity to rediscover passion for each other.

In sex, there are no hard and fast rules. Preferences are as individual as people are. Some like their bagels toasted, some don't. So, in what position does that leave me? For now, in flats, and in no position at all. 🌀