



## Body Image & Relationships

Amputees often find it difficult to share their concerns about body image and relationships. However, this is a topic that must be addressed in a person's adjustment to life as an amputee. For example, the mother of a 17-year-old young man was concerned that he had a negative attitude in this area. This young man, missing his leg below the knee as the result of an accident, believed he would never marry because of his amputation. Up until this point he had accepted his amputation and had a very positive approach, so his mother was upset that he was now concerned about intimacy with a partner. It is important to know that such feelings are not uncommon for new amputees or even for those in their teens or early twenties who have been amputees a long time. These feelings must be recognized though as they can affect the amputee's ability to form intimate relationships.



It is with physical intimacy that the amputee fears the greatest possibility of rejection. A partner, for example, who does not have a problem with the amputation and any resulting scars when dating the amputee may, unfortunately, find they actually do when they become physically intimate.

There are, no doubt, some people who cannot handle having a disabled person as a partner, emotionally or physically, but the number is small. Amputees say that this means that the amputation is really a blessing in disguise – it helps them weed out superficial people who they would not want to be with anyway. And when they find a mate who accepts them, they have truly found someone who loves them for who they are – the entire package.



### Fears of Rejection

When discussing dating, amputees often say “if someone does not want to date me because I’m an amputee, then it’s their loss!” This is certainly a super attitude – however, there is a difference between simply dating someone and having an intimate physical relationship with that person. It is often difficult for amputees, as it is for most people, to openly discuss their fears regarding physical intimacy.

Although ultimately the amputee can have a fulfilling intimate relationship, the amputee's fears and uncertainty are understandable. The female amputee, for example, must try to find her place in a society that puts a great deal of emphasis on physical beauty and a "perfect body."

Inevitably, the amputee wonders: *Why would anyone want me when there are so many people out there with all four limbs? Will he/she be repulsed when I take my artificial limb off in bed?*

It is the fear of rejection, and in an area where a person feels most vulnerable, that often prevents some amputees from opening up to someone as easily as perhaps someone without an amputation. However, in a loving, open, and committed relationship, these amputees learn that physical intimacy can be a very special part of their relationship, just as it is for those without amputations.

## A Positive Approach Matters

Unfortunately, a lack of confidence in the area of body image and relationships affects an amputee's attitude and the image he/she puts forward, often without even knowing it. Amputees may put up a wall, to protect themselves from rejection, which makes them "unapproachable." Someone who likes the amputee and is interested in a relationship may sense that the amputee is not open to an intimate relationship, and on that basis decide not to make advances in this regard.

For individuals who are already amputees at the time they enter a new relationship, their partner with whom they develop an intimate relationship deals with the amputation right up front and does not know the amputee any other way. For individuals who are already in a relationship when they become amputees, they often fear their partners will no longer find them attractive. The amputee has to work through his/her insecurities, and both the amputee and the partner must realize that the amputee may not feel comfortable with his/her new body image overnight and this

may take a little time. It is also important to remember that the partner is going through an adjustment period too, and he/she may feel helpless as to how to help the amputee feel better. Relationships go through adjustments, and sometimes they can be difficult, but the key is to communicate and work together, realizing that both individuals are entitled to their feelings.

No doubt, the physical limitations of an amputation may wreak havoc on a relationship. A leg amputee, for example, may not be able to spend hours out hiking like the partner wants, especially if they did this in the past. In a new relationship, you are so captivated with the other person that this may not be seen as a problem. Only time will tell, however, if the partner is really willing to work around such limitations or if the partner will come to resent the limitations the amputation puts on the relationship. If a relationship fails for this reason, that person was not someone you would want anyway. But regardless, the amputee's self-esteem may still be affected and he/she may feel unworthy of love.

Amputees sometimes say they meet people who want to go out with them because they feel sorry for them or want to "take care" of them. Everyone likes to be cared for but not with an "Oh, you poor dear" sentiment. On the other end of the spectrum is the amputee who is looked upon as almost "super human." Overcoming amputation is admirable, but sometimes it is seen as a phenomenal feat that others believe they could never have handled. Sometimes, the amputee is concerned that someone is attracted to them because of what they have overcome because of the amputation rather than because of who they are as a whole.



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Amputees appreciate understanding, but do not wish to be seen as stronger than others. They want to be treated equally. The amputation is a part of who they are but not the entire package. The amputee has to weed out these types of people too.

## Making Your Own Future

In summary, to form intimate physical relationships, the amputee faces two attitudes: the attitude of some members of society towards having a “disabled” person as a partner; and the amputee’s own inner attitude – the often subconscious fear of rejection during physical intimacy.

Each amputee must work through his/her own concerns regarding physical intimacy. This is as much a part of the acceptance process for an amputee as is adjusting to an artificial limb.

Before amputees can offer their best in a relationship, they must learn to be happy with themselves, both emotionally and physically. But remember, feelings and concerns about physical intimacy are natural and not uncommon, just difficult to share with others sometimes.

There are many great stories of amputees who are in wonderful relationships, and who are married and raising families of their own. Simply put, for amputees, an intimate relationship can be as exciting and fulfilling as you want.

