



Limb Loss, Grief, and Coping

Amputation of a limb, whether due to trauma or disease, can have major psychological impacts. It is not uncommon for someone who has lost a limb to experience grief. Although grief is often associated with the death of a loved one, it is a normal emotional reaction to the loss of anything or anyone that is important to you.¹ This can include divorce, loss of health or safety, the belief that a lifelong dream will never be achieved, loss of a career, or in the case of amputees, loss of a limb.

Is what I am feeling normal?

While many people experience grief, everyone grieves differently, and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Many people go through various stages of grief, which may include^{2,3}:

- Denial – thoughts of “this can’t be happening.”
- Anger – the anger may be at a specific person or group, or generalized anger.
- Bargaining – thoughts of “make this situation go away and I promise I will...”
- Depressed feelings – some experience an emptiness or numbness, withdraw from family and friends, or do not want to participate in work or other activities.
- Acceptance – occurs when you accept the loss, have worked through the physical and emotional pain, adjust to life without the amputated limb, and begin to move on with life.
- Guilt - while not considered one of the stages of grief, feelings of guilt are not unusual. Feelings may include wishing that you had done things differently, or responded to a situation differently. It can also include “survivor’s guilt,” or feeling guilty that you survived when others did not.

Moving through the stages of grief is not a neat, orderly process. You do not have to move through the stages in order; in fact, some people may skip entire stages. It is even possible to bounce back and forth between the stages.

Growing and moving forward

Not only can you move past grief, there is growing evidence that many individuals who have experienced a limb amputation experience psychological growth.⁴ You are a warrior and have likely overcome many obstacles throughout your life, emerging a little stronger each time. This new chapter in your life is no exception. Examples of psychological growth following an amputation can include⁴:

- Greater resolve in pursuing personal goals
- Stronger relationships with loved ones
- Resilience and psychological adjustment beyond previous levels
- Improved coping abilities



- A more positive attitude towards life

When will I be able to move forward?

Much like everyone experiences grief differently, there is no set amount of time that the feelings will last. For some, it will take weeks or months for the grief to subside. Others may take years. The duration will depend on many factors including past experiences, culture, personality, and physical and psychological health prior to the injury. The time it takes to grieve is not an indicator of strength. Taking longer to come to terms with your amputation than someone else does not mean they are stronger than you.

What is the difference between grief and depression?

It is normal to have feelings of sadness, anger, or depressed mood after the loss of a limb, but there is a difference between grieving and clinical depression. Individuals who are grieving can still experience positive emotions such as peace and happiness. As the grieving process continues, there will be longer periods of positive emotions between the negative feelings. On the other hand, those who are suffering from depression have a difficult time feeling positive emotions at all.⁵ Symptoms of major depression not explained by grief may include⁶:

- Constant thoughts of being worthless or hopeless
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies
- Intense guilt over things done or not done at the time of the injury
- Difficulty sleeping, waking early in the morning, or over-sleeping frequently
- Extreme weight loss

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911. If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, seek assistance immediately by contacting the Military Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255. If you believe you are experiencing depression or would like to talk with someone about what you are going through, contact your healthcare provider or a member of the behavioral health team.

Additional resources

Regardless of where you are in your recovery process, there are resources available as you navigate this new phase of your life. Check out some of the resources below for tools, tips, and support:

- The Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center's [Psychological and Emotional Well-being for WII page](#) offers additional information on loss and grief, as well as resilience, navigating stress, and suicide prevention.
- [Afterdeployment.com](#) has a multitude of wellness resources for the military community, including a library of information for those overcoming [physical injuries](#).



- The [Military OneSource Wounded Warrior page](#) offers information for service members and their families to help understand benefits and identify counseling and advocacy resources.
- The [Wounded Warrior Project](#) offers a variety of programs, services, and events for wounded veterans.

References

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