

Living Well with a Disability

How to Cope with Limitations, Overcome Challenges, and Build a Fulfilling Life



Adjusting to life with a disability can be a difficult transition. We all tend to take our health for granted—until it's gone. Then, it's all too easy to obsess over what we've lost. But while you can't go back in time to a healthier you or wish away your limitations, you can change the way you think about and cope with your disability. You are still in control of your life! There are many ways you can improve your independence, sense of empowerment, and outlook. No matter your disability, it's entirely possible to overcome the challenges you face and enjoy a full—and *fulfilling*—life.

Is it possible to live well with a disability?

Most of us expect to live long, healthy lives. So when you're hit by a disabling injury or illness, it can trigger a range of unsettling emotions and fears. You may wonder how you'll be able to work, find or keep a relationship, or even be happy again. But while living with a disability isn't easy, it doesn't have to be a tragedy. And you are not alone. Millions of people have traveled this road before you (the CDC estimates that 1 in 5 Americans is disabled) and found ways to not just survive, but thrive. You can too.

Learn to accept your disability

It can be incredibly difficult to accept your disability. Acceptance can feel like giving in—throwing in the towel on life and your future. But refusing to accept the reality of your limitations keeps you stuck. It prevents you from moving forward, making the changes you need to make, and finding new goals.

Give yourself time to mourn

Before you can accept your disability, you first need to [grieve](#). You've suffered a major loss. Not just the loss of your healthy, unlimited body, but likely the loss of at least some of your plans for the future.

Don't try to ignore or suppress your feelings. It's only human to want to avoid pain, but just like you won't get over an injury by ignoring it, you can't work through grief without allowing yourself to feel it and actively deal with it. Allow yourself to fully experience your feelings without judgement.

You're likely to go through a roller coaster of emotions—from anger and sadness to disbelief. This is perfectly normal. And like a roller coaster, the experience is unpredictable and full of ups and downs. Just trust that with time, the lows will become less intense and you will begin to find your new normal.

You don't have to put on a happy face. Learning to live with a disability isn't easy. Having bad days doesn't mean you're not brave or strong. And pretending you're okay when you're not doesn't help anyone—least of all your family and friends. Let the people you trust in on how you're really feeling. It will help both them and you.

Coming to terms with your new reality

It's healthy to grieve the life you've lost, but it's not healthy to continue looking back and wishing for a return to your pre-disability "normal." As tough as it is, it's important to let go of the past and accept where you are.

- **You can be happy, even in a "broken" body.** It may not seem like it now, but the truth is that you can build a happy, meaningful life for yourself, even if you're never able to walk, hear, or see like you used to. It may help to search out inspiring stories of people with disabilities who are thriving and living lives they love. You can learn from others who have gone before you, and their successes can help you stay motivated during tough times.
- **Don't dwell on what you can no longer do.** Spending lots of time thinking about the things your disability has taken from you is a surefire recipe for depression. Mourn the losses, then move on. Focus on what you can do and what you hope to do in the future. This gives you something to look forward to.
- **Learn as much as possible about your disability.** While obsessing over negative medical information is counterproductive, it's important to understand what you're facing. What's your diagnosis? What is the typical progression or common complications? Knowing what's going on with your body and what to expect will help you prepare yourself and adjust more quickly.

Find ways to minimize your disability's impact on your life

It goes without saying that your disability has already changed your life in big ways. It doesn't help to live in denial about that. You've got limitations that make things more difficult. But with commitment, creativity, and a willingness to do things differently, you can reduce the impact your disability has on your life.

Be your own advocate. You are your own best advocate as you negotiate the challenges of life with a disability, including at work and in the healthcare system. Knowledge is power, so educate yourself about your rights and the resources available to you. As you take charge, you'll also start to feel less helpless and more empowered.

Take advantage of the things you *can* do. While you may not be able to change your disability, you can reduce its impact on your daily life by seeking out and embracing whatever adaptive technologies and tools are available. If you need a device such as a prosthetic, a white cane, or a wheelchair to make your life easier, then use it. Try to let go of any embarrassment or fear of stigma. You are not defined by the aids you use.

Set realistic goals—and be patient. A disability forces you to learn new skills and strategies. You may also have to relearn simple things you used to take for granted. It can be a frustrating process, and it's only natural to want to rush things and get back to functioning as quickly as possible. But it's important to stay realistic. Setting overly aggressive goals can actually lead to setbacks and discouragement. Be patient with yourself. Every small step forward counts. Eventually, you'll get there.

Ask for (and accept) help and support

When struggling with a disability, it's easy to feel completely misunderstood and alone. You may be tempted to withdraw from others and isolate yourself. But staying connected to others will make a world of difference in your mood and outlook.

Tips for finding (and accepting) help and support

Nurture the important relationships in your life. Now, more than ever, staying connected is important. Spending time with family and friends will help you stay positive, healthy, and hopeful. Sometimes, you may need a shoulder to cry on or someone to vent to. But don't discount the importance of setting aside your disability from time to time and simply having fun.

Joining a disability support group. One of the best ways to combat loneliness and

isolation is to participate in a support group for people dealing with similar challenges. You'll quickly realize you're not alone. Just that realization goes a long way. You'll also benefit from the collective wisdom of the group. Support groups are a great place to share struggles, solutions, and encouragement.

Accepting help doesn't make you weak. In fact, it can make you stronger, especially if your refusal to seek out needed assistance is delaying your progress or making you worse, either physically or emotionally. Let go of the fear that asking for support will inspire pity. Allow the people who care about you to pitch in. Not only will you benefit, it will also make them feel better!

Consider talking to a mental health professional. Having someone to talk to about what you're going through can make a huge difference. While loved ones can provide great support in this way, you may also want to consider talking to a therapist. The [right therapist](#) can help you process the changes you're facing, work through your grief, and reframe your outlook in a more positive, realistic way.

Find things to do that give you meaning and purpose

A disability can take away many aspects of your identity, leaving you questioning who you are, what your value is, and where you fit in society. It's easy to start feeling useless and empty, especially if you can't do the same work or activities as you did before. That's why it's important to find new things that make you feel good about yourself—things that give you a renewed sense of meaning and purpose.

Volunteer. [Volunteering](#) is a great way to feel more productive and like you're making a difference. And it's something you can do even if you have limited mobility or can't work. Pick a cause you're passionate about and then figure out how you can get involved. There are numerous opportunities out there—many of which can even be done from home.

Develop new hobbies and activities that make you happy. A disability can make the activities you used to enjoy more difficult, or even impossible. But staying engaged will make a big difference in your mental health. Look for creative ways to participate differently in old favorites, or take this opportunity to develop new interests.

Find ways to give back to those who help you. When you're disabled, you often must accept a lot of help from friends and family. This is not a bad thing! But it will make you feel good if you find ways to reciprocate. For example, maybe you're great with computers and can help a tech-challenged family member. Or maybe you're a good listener your friends know they can count on when they need someone to talk to. Even things as small as a thank-you card or a genuine compliment count.

Take care of an animal. [Caring for a pet](#) is a great way to get outside of yourself and give you a sense of being needed. And while animals are no substitution for human connection, they can bring joy and companionship into your life and help you feel less isolated. If you aren't able to have a pet, there are other ways to find animal companionship, including volunteering at your local animal shelter or veterinarian's office.

Make your health a top priority

In order to feel your best, it's important to support and strengthen your health with regular exercise, a healthy diet, plenty of sleep, and effective stress management.

Exercise

It's important to get exercise in any way that you can. Not only is it good for your body—[it's essential for mental health](#). Regular exercise helps reduce anxiety and depression, relieve tension and stress, and improve sleep. And as you get more physically fit, you'll also feel more confident and strong.

Start small and build from there. Don't jump too quickly into a strenuous routine. You're more likely to get injured or discouraged and discontinue. Instead, find ways to increase the amount of physical activity in your day in small, incremental steps.

Find creative ways to exercise. Instead of dwelling on the activities you can't do, focus on finding those that are possible. Even if your mobility is limited, with a little creativity, you can find ways to exercise in most cases.

Listen to your body. Exercise should never hurt or make you feel lousy. Stop exercising immediately and call your doctor if you feel dizzy, short of breath, develop chest pain or pressure, break out in a cold sweat, or experience pain.

Don't compare yourself to others (or to your past self). Avoid the trap of comparing your exercise efforts to those of others—even others with similar disabilities. And don't discourage yourself by comparing where you are today to where you were pre-disability. The only healthy way to judge your progress is by comparing where you are today to where you were yesterday.

Eat well to optimize energy and vitality

Nutritious eating is important for everyone—and even more so when you're battling physical limitations or health complications. Eating well will boost your energy and promote vitality so you can partake in the activities you want to and reach your goals. While eating healthy isn't always easy when you're struggling with a disability, even small changes can make a

positive impact on your health.

Focus on how you feel after eating. You'll start to notice that when you eat healthy, balanced meals, you feel more energetic and satisfied afterward. In contrast, when you opt for junk food or unhealthy options, you don't feel as good. This awareness will help foster healthy new habits and tastes.

Get plenty of high-quality protein. Protein is essential to healing and immune system functioning. Focus on quality sources such as organic, grass-fed meat and dairy, fish, beans, nuts and seeds, tofu, and soy products.

Minimize sugar and refined carbs. You may crave sugary snacks, baked goods, or comfort foods such as pasta or French fries, but these "feel-good" foods quickly lead to a crash in mood and energy. Aim to cut out as much of these foods as possible.

Drink plenty of water. Your body performs best when it's properly hydrated, yet many people don't get the fluids they need. When you're dehydrated, you simply don't feel as good. Water also helps flush our systems of waste products and toxins.

Don't underestimate the power of sleep

[Quality sleep](#) is important for flushing out toxins and protecting your brain. Most adults need 7 to 9 hours. Establish a regular sleep schedule, create relaxing bedtime rituals such as taking a bath or doing some light stretches, and turn off all screens at least one hour before sleep.

Make stress management a priority

Stress is hard on the body and can make many symptoms worse, so it's important to find ways to manage your stress, such as practicing relaxation techniques, carving out a healthy work-life balance, and learning healthier coping strategies.

Recommended reading

[8 Steps to Accepting Your Disability](#) - Amputee Darryl Partridge offers the eight things that helped him accept his disability, get over his anger and grief, and begin living the life he wants. (Think Inclusive)

[People with Disabilities](#) - CDC resource with information on healthy living, safety, assistive technology, educational options, and more. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

HelpGuide

[How to Emotionally Cope with Having Disabilities](#) - Packed with tips on how to cope with the difficulties that come with living with a disability, including dealing with insensitive comments, fighting stereotypes, and taking practical steps to make your life easier (wikiHow)

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