



Adjusting to Injuries

Adjusting to a deployment injury can be painful and difficult, particularly if the injury was disabling or disfiguring. Adjusting may take months, or even years. The good news is that many service members come through the adjustment feeling stronger and more confident than they did before the injury.

Stages of Acceptance

While accepting the consequences of an injury is an individual process, there are many aspects of healing that are shared among all persons who experience a deployment-related injury. On average, it can take from several months to two years for someone to accept the consequences of an injury. Acceptance is affected by a number of factors:

- The severity of the injury.
- The severity of the disability.
- The pre-injury characteristics of the individual.

The following steps to acceptance are similar to the steps associated with grieving:

- **Initial Reaction**—this can take two forms:
 - **Shock**—emotional numbness and difficulty comprehending the severity of the injury.
 - **Genuine Relief**—relief over surviving the event that caused the injury, or relief over no longer being in theater.
- **Denial**—the belief that the effects of the injury are reversible and pre-injury functioning and appearance will be fully recovered.
- **Anger**—feelings of rage at the unfairness of the injury, and blaming others, fate, or God.
- **Guilt**—feeling guilt either for some part of the event that caused the injury, or guilt for having survived the event when others perished (**survivor's guilt**).
- **Depression**—feeling hopeless or down about the injury, avoiding people, not wanting to get up in the morning, a “What’s the use?” attitude.
- **Acceptance**—successfully coming to terms with the injury and its future implications. With acceptance comes looking ahead – focusing on things other than the injury and a willingness to plan for the future and begin setting goals.



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The “New Self”

If you were disabled or disfigured during deployment, it's quite natural for you to compare your physical appearance or abilities to your pre-injured self, or to others. But to recover and thrive, you've got to let this go: you've got to develop a new image of yourself, a positive “self image” that doesn't depend on comparisons to anyone, including the “old you.” Why is this so important?

- To achieve the personal and professional goals you've set for yourself.
- To have healthy social relationships with family and friends.
- To promote your own health and recovery from injury.

Accepting a New Body Image

- Instead of comparing your body to that of someone else or to the “old you,” turn your attention to your personal development, including your talents, skills, abilities, desires, passions, interests, and strength of character.

- Look in the mirror at yourself each day for at least five minutes with your injuries fully uncovered and in full view. Repeat the following phrases:

- “I accept myself.”
- “I am strong.”
- “This body works for me and I work for my body.”



- Be assertive with people who are critical about your body.
- Seek out supportive relationships with people who accept you for who you are.
- Focus on what your body **can** do (such as touch those you love), instead of what it cannot do.
- Take good care of and respect your body. Make sure your body gets nourishing food, good rest, and whatever exercise your doctor approves.
- Look for the inner beauty in others rather than judging them by their outward appearance.
- Don't buy into the media images of perfection that constantly bombard society. Act self-confidently and unembarrassed about your appearance, and you will be **educating the public** and helping to overcome the unhealthy emphasis the media places on “physical perfection.”



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Making Sense of the Injury

Service members who can find positive meaning in their sacrifice and who can fit the injury and why it happened into their world view have a greater sense of well-being and fewer problems with anxiety and depression. Challenging yourself to think about the injury can have a positive effect on your life. For example, search for a positive direction to be explored because of the injury. Have you learned to appreciate small things that maybe you've taken for granted in the past? Many service members look to their faith to help them find meaning. You made a sacrifice...your job now is to discover what will be made better because of that sacrifice.



Setting Goals for the Future

Once you have accepted and made sense of your injury, ***you can begin to look at your life in terms of possibilities rather than limitations***, and you can begin to set goals for the future.

1) Choose the goal. Write it down. Make sure it is ***your*** goal, not someone else's goal for you.

2) Create a plan for completion. Write down all the intermediate steps you'll need to accomplish, put them in chronological order, and set a timetable for completion of each step. Schedule in time for unexpected setbacks.

3) Do a reality check. Your plan should be challenging but doable. It should be feasible as far as money and time are concerned.

4) Begin as soon as possible, but pace yourself. Try to march slowly and steadily toward your goal. Schedule the time into your calendar on a regular basis to make sure the journey toward your goal remains a priority.

Returning to the Community

After accepting your injury and setting new expectations for the future, your next step is to "get back out there." This includes returning to employment, enjoying recreational activities, and participating in community events.



Get back out there!



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Employment

Returning to employment will increase your self-esteem, increase your personal independence, reduce reliance on others, and help make you financially independent and secure.

- First, decide whether you are capable of returning to the job you formerly held. If not, are you able to work in some related area where your former expertise can be valuable?
- If you prefer to work in a different field from your former employment, what training or education will you need? Is it realistic to pursue this training?
- When taking a job, consider whether it will allow for advancement, training, or growth. You don't want to be stuck in an entry-level job for years.
- Do you have interest in this field or are you taking a job simply to have employment? You will perform better and find more satisfaction in a job that really calls to you.
- Remember that individuals with disabilities cannot be denied employment solely on the basis of their disability if they are otherwise able to perform the duties of the position.



Participating in recreational activities will enhance your self-confidence and self-esteem, increase your sense of independence, and enhance your strength and endurance.



Recreational Activities

Thanks to modern advancements in prosthetics, mechanical aides, specialized sports equipment, and access laws, individuals with burns, spinal cord injuries, and amputations have the opportunity to participate in a very extensive range of recreational activities, including team sports, golf, canoeing, dancing, cycling, skiing, wilderness trips, bowling, and ice skating, to name a few.



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Community Involvement

Getting active in your community is a great way for you to share your valuable knowledge and experience while getting to know your neighbors. What may seem like small beginnings can actually have a big impact, both on your own well being and the well being of your community and the world. Here are some ways to get involved:¹

- **Attend town meetings.**
- **Volunteer your skills.** There are many organizations that could use your help, even if you have a disability. Check out Volunteer Match at: <http://www.volunteermatch.org>.
- **Be a mentor.** Share your life skills with a young person who needs an adult in their lives. Check out Big Brother or Big Sister. <http://www.bigbrothersbigsisters.org>.
- **Volunteer to coach youth.**
- **Get involved with your child's school** through the Parent/Teacher Organization.
- **Get involved with a local faith-based organization.**
- **Participate in a community garden.** Check the American Community Gardening Association at : <http://www.communitygarden.org>.
- **Vote** in all local and national elections.



Getting active in your community is a great way for you to share your valuable knowledge and experience.

¹ University of Pennsylvania Collaborative on Community Integration. <http://www.upennrrtc.org/var/tool/file/29-CivicFS.pdf>.



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Seven Rules for Adjusting to Injury and Disability

1. **Focus on what you still have and on what you can still do.**
2. **Nurture your sense of humor.** Be prepared for stares and insensitive comments.
3. **Set goals for yourself.** Take it one day at a time or even one hour at a time.
4. **Seek balance.** Do not isolate yourself. Work but also play. Work but also rest.
5. **Learn empowerment.** Don't give your power away. Don't let others dictate your mood or actions.
6. **Be assertive.**
7. **Never give up.** You are valued as a human being. You are a precious, priceless person placed in the world for a limited time to learn to love yourself and others.



You have the power to choose how you want to see yourself and your situation. You have the power to think positively, negatively, or realistically. You have the power to choose your mood, attitude, or feelings. You have many choices. You have control over your own thoughts, feelings, and behavior.



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