

TRY AND BE POSITIVE

The Movement and the Message

By Jeff Tiessen

Swimming pools, shower stalls, and sleep-overs. Three of my harshest childhood fears. After I lost both arms I mean. It's hard to think back four decades and remember exactly why those three things brought on such abject anxiety. But I do know that vulnerability was involved. So was utter self-consciousness and insecurity.

It was scars and skin flaps on display. Just-one-quick-look stares from kids who knew me but couldn't help it. I get it, I'd have to look too. Totally looking away and pretending oblivion would've been just as weird probably.

Or maybe, it was as simple as being the only kid with no arms in the pool. But not a cool thing to be so different like the gal in town with some wicked ink, both arms sleeved in Sailor Jerry tattoos. Or the guy who works at Tim's with the slick lime green mullet cut. A dubious celebrity for all of us the same. The difference though, is that they chose to solicit attention. We, with

amputations or limb difference, mostly did not.

Public pools and busy beaches today still conjure a twinge of those childhood anxieties. Maybe for some of the same reasons and maybe some new ones too. I just don't like taking my arms off at any time or place during the day. My aluminum hands and plastic elbows are important parts of my body. They are my independence and my identity. I am not comfortable leaving them laying around on a chez lounge or a beach towel.

Or maybe it's the reverse farmer's tan that amputees are susceptible to that I'm not keen

on sporting. You know, the lovely summer tan to the top of our socket trimlines, and the fish-belly white stump inside of it!

It's much different for me today. Those stomach-cramping fears and tears associated with swimming with peers or bedtime at sleep-overs are long gone. Somewhere, sometime thereafter, I became more confident in my changed body. I became accepting of its differences, and appreciative of its strength and durability, and the unique opportunities it affords me when I let it. Body-positivity, in some form, is what that is I suppose.



Research shows, and bear with me on this comically-obvious academia, "amputation represents a drastic impact on the patient's body and perception... body image and self-esteem" (Front. Psychol., 11 January 2021, Sec. Health Psychology). Add to that from Sarah McDonald et al., from the University of Sydney in Australia: "Research indicates that with body image disturbance, the poorest body image reported is for individuals with visible bodily changes." Uh, right you are.

So, enter Body Positivity, a social movement that argues for the acceptance and celebration of all body shapes and sizes. It's not driven by therapists, but mostly by social-media-savvy individuals with atypical bodies and real-life experiences. It's all about finding your own path toward emotional wellness and well-being.

The body-positive movement is not new. It has gone through three

waves since the mid-twentieth century. The 1960s saw the rise of the first wave of body positivity. It was hinged on a fat acceptance movement, bringing public attention to the mental health issues around beauty and weight loss. It called out the toxicity of media beauty standards and societal body shame, and heightened awareness about the dangers of diet culture and eating disorders. The concern was the prevalence of negative body images, especially among young women and adolescents.

The second wave of the body positivity movement, in the 1990s, evolved to focus on exercise inclusivity. Proponents of the movement emphasized exercise for all body sizes and shapes and aimed to create safe, inclusive spaces where individuals of any body type could exercise comfortably without body or fat-shaming.

The body positivity movement has evolved again in recent years

to respond to the influence of social media and edited photos. The movement now focuses on body functionality, self-esteem, and loving your body regardless of perceived flaws.

Interestingly though, the body positivity movement is considered to come with pros and cons. Benefits include drawing attention to beauty standards as a social construct. What that means is showing people that modern beauty standards derive from cultural expectations rather than objective truths about bodies and appearance. This helps break down the idea that your body somehow falls short of the ideal or that it needs to look different to look beautiful.

At its core, body positivity means self-love, and that can help many people achieve a positive body image — feeling more at peace with themselves and appreciating it for its unique traits. And many beauty standards in



the media are not only unhealthy but unattainable, made possible through digital photo editing techniques. The body positivity movement emphasizes realistic bodies.

But there are criticisms. One concern is that the body positivity movement can encourage individuals to ignore physical health. Some suggest that extreme body positivity can enable the rejection of professional opinions on healthcare and lifestyle.

Overemphasis of positive feelings has its shortcomings as well. Occasional negative feelings are a natural part of the human experience that encourage us to enact positive, healthy change in ourselves.

What's for sure is that our bodies are much more than their appearance. And physical and emotional self-care practices can help you recenter yourself and remember to appreciate your body for how it is.

Some say it's all about self-love. But on that point, body acceptance doesn't have to be

self-love at all, says Ginelle Testa who describes herself as a queer gal whose passions include recovery and sobriety, social justice and intersectional feminism.

"Body acceptance is damn hard," says Testa. "I didn't find relative peace with myself overnight. Even with finding some peace, I'm not 'cured.' I don't have a magic dose of body love all of a sudden." She goes on to explain that body acceptance can be a moment-to-moment thing rather than a state of being. "It's something that has to be fought for but is sometimes settled on."

Petra Scott, a Registered Holistic Nutritionist who helps women create a strong self-image through wholesome eating, says that thinking that you'll never be happy because of your looks is a gut-wrenching thing. "It's isolating. It's maddening. It's frustrating and a thousand other things," she emphasizes.

Scott argues that accepting that you don't like everything about your body is the first step toward having a more positive frame of mind. "It's about acknowledging that you may feel 'meh' about some parts of your body, but not letting that stop you from doing things you want to do," she shares. "Be kind to yourself. Be gentle and remind yourself of all the other things that you love about yourself."

While it is sad that anyone is emotionally wrapped up in appearance, it's not just a female problem. The body positivity movement's raison d'être is to embrace all physical forms, irrespective of build, colour, gender, disability or anything else. It's not, in theory, a gendered campaign. But, so far, it has focused on women. It is an unfortunate fact that women's bodies (unlike men's) have always been up for public discussion.

Writes Jamie Waters from *The Guardian*: "There is a long history of admiring shapely female forms... think of the voluptuous Renaissance portraits; the fuller figures revered in

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many African societies; or previous body-positive waves in the 1960s and 1990s. For men, though, lean has always been in – from Da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man and ancient Greek statues to the moustachioed Marlboro man and Diet Coke hunks.”

And, because men typically aren’t comfortable talking about appearance, the grassroots campaigning that sparked the women’s body positivity movement hasn’t been mirrored by men.

From the male amputee perspective, Great Britain’s Jamie Gane shares online about his personal journey with body image. He has experienced that how we think and feel about our bodies is ever-evolving and can be heavily influenced by others and the media.

Jamie Gane



And he understands that even with the promotion of body positivity and difference, many amputees still struggle with the mental health implications of body image.

“Since my amputation,” he says, “my body confidence has increased significantly and now I happily and proudly wear shorts most of the time. But when I am feeling tired or with general leg

discomfort, I am very self-conscious if I limp slightly. The wandering eyes of the public and pointing hands of children affect how I feel about my body.”

Gane notes that when he’s active and being seen as an ‘able-bodied amputee,’ he feels confident and happy within his body. On the flip side, when he’s seen as disabled and unable to perform certain tasks, he takes on negative feelings about his body image.

When Gane finds himself struggling with amputee-related body image issues, he reminds himself of the advice that he offers others. “Give yourself the time and space to come to terms with your new body. Time is a real healer, especially as a new amputee. Allow yourself to feel the emotions and ride the wave until you’re ready to talk to someone for support.”

Toni Furmanski, a body-positive blogger and Instagram influencer

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in the U.S. who lives with limb loss, encourages her fans and followers to think differently about body acceptance and body liberation and how we feel about who we are. Now thirty-something, she has been an amputee essentially all of her life, after surgery was decided upon to remove her shorter leg when she was just 13 months old.

In a 2020 interview with Carol Blymire and the Amputee Coalition, Furmanski spoke about the importance, for her, of self-care and kindness. “Sometimes self-care is whatever makes you feel better at the time,” Furmanski said. “I think we hear ‘self-care’ and we think of getting our nails done, doing a face mask, a little retail therapy, maybe a game of golf. And it can totally be all those things. But I think self-care should also be a deeper level of taking care of yourself.”

What she means is: “Are you doing those things to avoid a problem? Are you digging deep inside to heal old wounds? For me, I actually feel like my Instagram has been such a great way to realize that I wasn’t as okay as I had assumed I was. The more I was posting, the more I realized that I had issues I was pushing down and hiding from. It’s almost like journaling for me.”

Furmanski also talked about kindness, to herself, something she finds to be very powerful. “It’s amazing how different my life got once I started to be kind to myself,” she shared. She started off with simple things like small positive affirmations. “Sometimes they felt phony and fake,” she admitted, “but eventually I started to believe them and I started to feel those positive things in my bones. And, wow, once I was kinder to myself, it was so much easier to be kind to other people as well.”

In her work as a blogger and influencer Furmanski is more

apt to talk about body acceptance and body liberation than body-positivity. She feels that the latter term has become watered down and almost always gets confused with self-love. “It lost its original meaning,” she explained.

“There is a difference between self-love and body positivity. Self-love is feeling good about who you are. It’s for every person. It’s what I think we should all strive for. The body positivity movement was meant to be a safe space for those who have marginalized bodies — for the people who society kind of looks down on, or rarely recognizes.”

Spring season always comes as a reminder to Furmanski. It’s shorts and dresses season again. “This means more chances for people to see my prosthesis and more stares and more comments,” she is reminded.

Furmanski said that she would do whatever she could to hide her prosthetic leg in high school, by wearing jeans, long dresses, or prosthetic covers. By her senior year, though, her outlook began to change. She stopped trying to hide her leg and began opting for whatever wardrobe choice felt the most comfortable. “I used to wear covers over my leg to try to blend



Toni Furmanski

in a little, but now I embrace my leg. I welcome the comments and look at them as opening a door to conversations and chances to normalize disabilities and differences.”

Furmanski said that she knows that most people don't stare and make comments to be rude. It happens because they are curious. “This may be our norm, but it isn't theirs,” she acknowledged. “So, I try to give people the benefit of the doubt and try not to think of it as them judging me, but as them trying to understand.”



Ella Dove is the host of ampLafy, a podcast from the U.S.-based Limbless Association's Young Ambassador Project. Focusing on key themes affecting amputees across the country, Dove welcomed Lianne Forrest as her guest in 2021 to explore the topic of body positivity.

Forrest shared that she struggled with body confidence for a long time after becoming an amputee. She couldn't look at her stump, let alone touch it. She avoided mirrors. She hid her prosthetic leg with baggy, shapeless trousers, and she walked with her head down in public places.

But she has now reached a place of self-acceptance. “I've revamped my wardrobe and, with it, my attitude,” she said. “I have learned to feel proud of every milestone I achieve. It has taken time, introspection and a real shift in mindset.”

Forrest was born with spina bifida, which left her with very little sensation in her right leg. She became a below-knee amputee as a child after contracting a bone infection and complications called for an above-knee amputation at the age of 18.

Lianne Forrest



Photo by DAN FROWLANDS

For many years, she hid the fact that she was an amputee. “I had spent years hiding my leg from the world, asking for a prosthetic leg that was skin-coloured and never wearing shorts. Then two years ago I got a new leg, called a C-leg, which was difficult to cover with the flesh-coloured silicone that I was used to. And yet, there was something liberating about having no choice.”

Her first outing with it was to go out for lunch with her family. “I put on my first pair of denim shorts, took a picture and gave myself a talking to,” she recalled. “I am going out, showing my leg and I'm going to let people stare, because this is me, this is who I am. I need to be proud.”

It was a teachable moment for her, from her. “You really need to

see that your body is unique; your body is yours. It's not for anyone else to approve of, or for anyone else to judge. Learning to love your body and embracing what you have sets you free.”

Changing the way we think about our body and how we look can take time. It can feel more difficult on some days than others. That's okay. Accepting your body is a process. If body-positive is a work in progress for you, being body neutral may be a good compromise – accepting your body even if you aren't 100 percent happy with it. Body Neutral – maybe the next wave?