

Towards Reaching “Normalcy”— Does It Really Matter?

by Donna R. Walton, EdD

Photos by René Alston

My journey towards trying to reach normalcy – which I used to define as “walking without a limp” – began 30 years ago when my left leg was amputated as a result of cancer. I was 18 years old, and I could never imagine leaving the house without my artificial leg. Just the mere image of my pant leg flipped under my waistband like a young man who we affectionately called “One-Legged Steve,” and who was my first encounter with an amputee when I was in junior high school, made me feel very, very uncomfortable and not normal.

Unfortunately, my amputation is very high above the knee and my residual limb is very short; in fact, I was just inches away from having a hip disarticulation.

Because I didn’t want to be perceived as an amputee over the years, I always dreamed of having an artificial leg that would allow me to walk without a limp; I wanted to just be Donna, not the object of everyone’s curiosity.

So you can probably imagine that I was very excited when I was recently fitted with a new four-bar pneumatic knee – the knee unit of choice for many transfemoral amputees. I thought that this new knee would help me better hide the fact that I am an amputee from the rest of the world.

Oh, but what an experience it turned out to be! You see, I had this fantasy that this leg would transform my gait from limp to saunter. I was so excited that I was graduating to a high-tech leg that would allow me to walk without a limp and without a cane. Unfortunately, I quickly became very disappointed and frustrated with the new knee.



Because my residual limb is very short, it causes all kinds of challenges for me and my prosthetists. I had been so caught up in the dream of walking smoothly, swiftly and without a limp that I didn't realize the challenges that I would have to deal with, such as the weight of the knee and the limitations inherent in having such a short residual limb.

My prosthetists probably knew that I might not realize my dream of walking without a limp, but they dared not tell me for fear of killing my fantasies.

I really wanted to be fitted with a computerized leg, but it wasn't an option because my insurance would not pay for it and I wasn't financially prepared to pay for one on my own. Such legs can cost more than \$32,000 – a very high price indeed to pay for “normalcy.”

It's not unusual for people with disabilities to have such dreams of being what the world considers “normal.” Perhaps you have them too.

Interestingly, I recently met another amputee who is in her 30s and had feelings very similar to my own.

She also wears an above-knee prosthesis because she doesn't have a hip, and she also limps dramatically when she walks.

“It isn't easy being a person with a disability,” she says, “much less someone with a very noticeable limp. When you walk into a room, you're never quite sure if people are staring at you because of how you walk or that fabulous new outfit you're wearing. You get used to the stares and whispers, but that doesn't make them right, nor are they something that you should really have to get used to. I always avoid, as much as I can, walking into a room full of people or moving across a room when I am presenting. The less walking I have to do, the better I am.”

Meeting new people is even more difficult, she explains: “I tried online dating for awhile, and when I met people in person, I did my best to arrive before my date and be seated when he got there so at least we could start off like things were ‘normal.’”

“Normal” is a relative term,” she continues, “but something that a lot of people want to be when they are younger. Throughout my academic career, up to college, I just wanted to be like all the other kids in my classes. Even when I wore exactly the same clothes or wore my hair the same way, I still wasn't like them.”

This young woman is a great example of how too much concern about one's differences can affect a person. “I have bouts of insecurity,” she admits, “and I have never been totally self-confident about anything, even things that have nothing to do with the way I walk or my artificial leg. . . . These are side effects of being a person with a disability, especially a noticeable one.”

My own difficulty in walking with my new four-bar pneumatic knee was also very frustrating and caused bouts of insecurity. I ultimately had to face the fact that I wasn't going to be able to function any better with it.

The important thing, however, is that I now know that doing this was not admitting defeat; rather, I was changing my goal. My quest for years had been to walk without a limp. I realize now, however, that my situation could have been much worse. I might not have been able to walk at all. Now, my quest is just to walk, with or without a limp. I realize now that there is a great value in that and that the rest is extra.

Over the years, I worked so hard to build self-esteem and confidence, and I almost risked losing it when I decided that I had to walk “normal” again. My gimpish gait is mine, and it is very “normal” to me.

Why should amputees even care about what others think about their gait? Just being able to walk or to get where we want to go, whether it is with a cane or in a wheelchair, is the point, isn't it? When we strive to make others comfortable, we sometimes lose our focus on what really makes us comfortable.

The young woman I met recently seems to have come to a similar understanding.

“I'm not happy about my limp,” she explains, “but I no longer let it define me. I am a person just like everyone else; I just happen to walk a little differently.”

She says that there needs to be a culture shift in how people view each other.

“You shouldn't base judgments on how people look, walk or talk but rather on their words and actions,” she says. “If you base your opinion of people simply on how they look or walk, you're missing out on a world of wonderful people!”

I think I can add something to her observation. Not only should we not judge others based on the way they look or walk, we should also not judge ourselves.

Any questions? ■



About the Author

Donna R. Walton, EdD, earned her master's degree in adult education from Syracuse University and her doctorate in counseling from George Washington University. Walton is the founder of LEGGTalk, Inc., a company she conceived 10 years ago under the name of Dream Reach Win, Inc., to motivate and empower individuals to conquer their personal limitations (real and perceived) and achieve their vision of success. A dynamic, award-winning speaker, Walton has spoken at the National Cancer Survivors Day Celebration, the Annual Conference on Disabilities, and at many schools, universities, and other institutions.

For more information about LEGGTalk, Inc., or to join the LEGGTalk blog, visit www.leggtalk.com