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ISSUE # 27

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Tracy MacCharles

Navigating Her New Normal

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Many Thanks

As I've said with a smile many times, next to my dad and my adult son, the two most important men in my life are my plastic surgeon – bursas and bone spurs of course – and my prosthetist.

The function and independence, and stylish socket artwork, that I enjoy every day is definitely dependent on the expertise, creativity and empathy of my prosthetist Marty. For me, that's always recognized and celebrated.

In September, Orthotics Prosthetics Canada, with its role to advance the profession through credentialing, education and awareness, celebrated too by premiering National O&P Day in Canada. I was privileged to chair the first National O&P Day Committee.

This inaugural O&P Day celebrated the contributions of orthotists, prosthetists and technicians in large part with a series of powerful impact statements and testimonials from us, their patients and clients.

And while clinics and facilities were celebrating the Day in their local communities, National O&P Day was being officially recognized in the House of Commons on Ottawa's Parliament Hill – a historic milestone for the profession.

The Day, September 19th, was accentuated with a virtual Meet & Greet event that featured messages from practitioners and end-users, including special guest Tyler Turner, gold-medal Paralympic snowboarder, sky diver, Amazing Race Canada contestant, and double leg-amputee. Tyler eloquently emphasized the invaluable contribution that our prosthetists, orthotists and technicians make in our lives.

National O&P Day was an important day, but any day is a good day to say "thanks" for our prosthetic fit, function and fashion. Visit opcanada.ca for the YouTube link to the Meet & Greet... terrific presentations, including Tyler's.

Jeff Tiessen, *publisher* • jeff@thrivemag.ca



thrive founder and publisher, Jeff Tiessen

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GLUCKSTEIN
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ORDER OF CANADA FOR LIMB DIFFERENT ARTIST

Renowned London, Ont., mouth artist Theresa Helen (Susie) Matthias was recently named to the Order of Canada, one of the federal government's highest honours, for her contribution to the arts. Born without developed arms and legs, she's been an artist for decades.

Matthias is a member of the Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists which supports more than 500 artists worldwide by marketing reproductions of its members' art. "Some say I have a gift to be able to paint or draw, but I think everyone is talented in some way," said Matthias. "Society's attitudes have changed. The doors for disabled [people] are being opened a little. We must push for them to be opened wider."

The mouth painter's creations have taken her around the world – featured in galleries, and on greeting cards and a Canada Post stamp.

Matthias is a survivor of thalidomide, the drug given to pregnant women in the late 1950s and early 1960s for nausea and morning sickness before it

was discovered that it caused limb malformations.

"I'm stubborn," she admits. "I don't like to give up. When I was little, I knew I was different from everyone else and had to overcome challenges in my life, but through the encouragement of my family I've been able to be independent." In addition to a successful art career, Matthias has pursued activities like electric wheelchair hockey, swimming and boccia ball.



Tiger painting by Matthias. Photo courtesy of MFPA Canada.



Photo: Isha Bhargava/CBC

Taking a **STAND**

Formerly known as Legs4Africa, and now called STAND with the tagline “We Walk Together”, the global non-government organization’s (NGO) mission remains the same: recycling unwanted prosthetic legs to support prosthetic users in sub-Saharan Africa.

With a team of retired volunteers dismantling donated legs, and checking the components for suitability, STAND sends the parts to partners in Africa “to transform lives through improved mobility and independence,” explained Tom Williams, the NGO’s founder. “STAND rescues approximately 2,000 prosthetic legs from landfill every year, which amounts to about 8,000 kg of componentry.”

STAND’s work also includes tackling the issues and impact of diversity and gender representation in the prosthetics and orthotics sector. “Without diverse perspectives, the unique experiences and needs of female patients may not be fully addressed, leading to gaps in rehabilitation services,” shared Williams. To that end, STAND produced an exceptional seven-part impact video series featuring a selection of amputees who have benefitted from its services.

One such beneficiary is Oumie, whose path to becoming a technician began after she lost a leg in a childhood car accident. Oumie’s determination led her to pursue a career in prosthetics, driven by her desire to make a difference in the lives of others facing similar circumstances. Thanks to the training funded by STAND, Oumie is now an accomplished technician working at the Rehabilitation Centre in Banjul. Learn more at <https://stand.ngo> and meet Oumie at <https://stand.ngo/hd8973s>.



Join the **PAAC**

The PROTEOR Amputee Alliance Council (PAAC) is a vibrant community looking for your feedback to make PROTEOR’s products even better. Plus, fun virtual and in-person meetups, peer-to-peer mentorship, and sharing of advice and stories. Join today at <http://my.community.com/proteor>. Respond with PAAC Ready when you get the text!





Another Shot of Gold

Greg Stewart successfully defended his Paralympic title from Tokyo three years ago in the men's shot put (F46 classification) at the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games. The seven-foot-two thrower from Kamloops, B.C., won gold with a season-best toss of 16.38 metres. The 38-year-old returned to major competition in May after retiring in 2022. Stewart, who was born without his lower left arm, says there is still more to come. "I am going to go on to L.A. [2028 Games]," he said. "I wanted to come back and continue supporting the Paralympic movement any way I can."

Support for Partial Hand Amputees

The Finger and Partial-Hand Amputee Peer + Support Group is a safe space to find valuable tips and emotional encouragement. Connect with a community that truly understands: [facebook.com/groups/fingerandpartialhandamputees](https://www.facebook.com/groups/fingerandpartialhandamputees).





Photo courtesy of Canadian Paralympic Committee

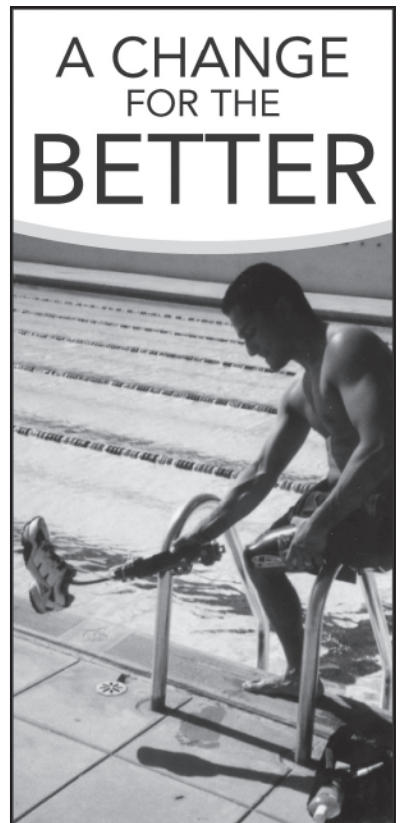
PARALYMPIC FLAG BEARERS

Represent Canada and Amputee Community

Patrick Anderson and Katarina Roxon led Canada's Paralympic Team into the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games' Opening Ceremony. Anderson (Fergus, Ont.), a world-renowned wheelchair basketball sensation and bilateral lower limb amputee, and Roxon (Kippens, Nfld.), a swimming star with upper extremity limb difference, are both Paralympic champions with accomplished and storied careers.

Anderson, one of the best athletes to ever play the game of wheelchair basketball, competed in his sixth Paralympic Games in Paris. The 45-year-old has four Paralympic medals, including three gold. The 31-year-old Roxon made history in Paris as the first Canadian female para-swimmer to compete at five Paralympic Games, a gold medalist in Rio in 2016 in the 100m breaststroke. "This is a big honour and a special thing for a special country," said Anderson. "A huge privilege," added Roxon.

"With nine previous Paralympic Games appearances and six Paralympic medals between them, they are among Canada's most accomplished Paralympians ever," said Karolina Wisniewska, co-chef de mission of the 2024 Canadian Paralympic Team. "Beyond their athletic achievements, they have made a huge impact on the development of their sports and Para sport as a whole."



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Untapped 60

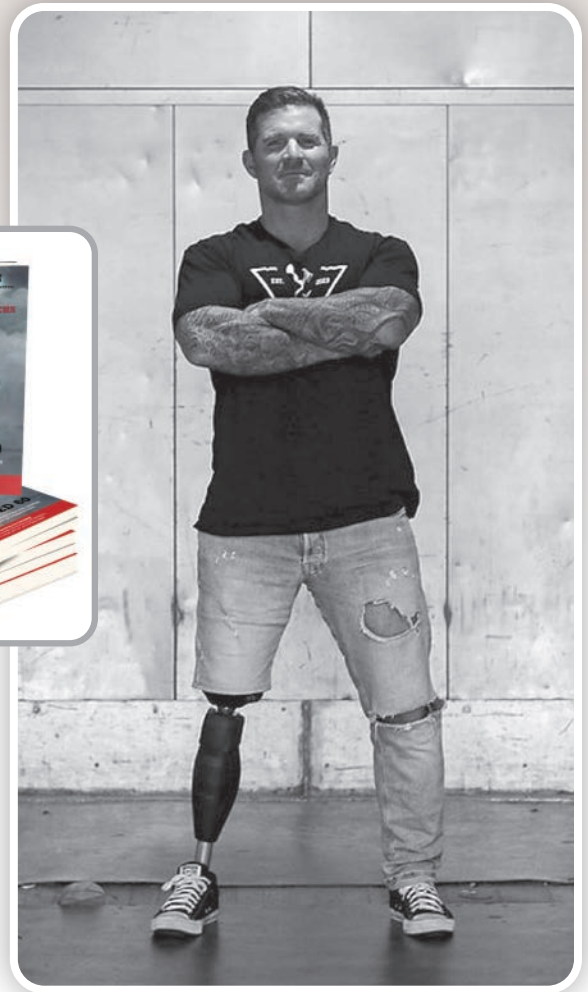
Motivational speakers Jarrett Robertson and Michael D.N. Laughlin have brought their extraordinary stories of trauma, love, resilience, hope and triumph to readers with their new book *Untapped 60* to encourage confronting fears, embracing vulnerabilities, and finding strength in the face of adversity.

A testament to the human spirit's capacity to endure, overcome, and find purpose even in the darkest moments, *Untapped 60* is a story of an incredible bond between two best friends and a powerful reminder that our potential is far beyond what we perceive; sometimes we just need someone to open those doors.

Laughlin is a full-time career firefighter with Kingston Fire & Rescue who has faced unimaginable personal and professional challenges all the while continuing to say, "I will be a firefighter again." Twice, he has returned to his beloved job after serious accidents, the latter resulting in the loss of his right leg above the knee. Laughlin is not the only above-knee firefighter in Canada (www.chriscederstrand.com) but he is Canada's only full-time, above-knee firefighter.

Order *Untapped 60* at untapped60.com/copy-of-book.

Follow Michael D.N. Laughlin: [instagram.com/firefighteramp](https://www.instagram.com/firefighteramp) or [facebook.com/michael.d.laughlin](https://www.facebook.com/michael.d.laughlin).



**STOP SEPSIS.
SAVE LIVES.**

September is Sepsis Awareness Month

Many lives and limbs have been lost to infection progression. Anyone can develop an infection. Any infection (viral, bacterial, fungal and parasitic) can progress to sepsis and septic shock. Sepsis is a life-threatening condition that occurs when the body's response to an infection injures its own tissues and organs. Learn more at canadiansepsisfoundation.ca.

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Learning to Live Life Anew

Before August 19th, 2023, most mornings I'd wake up to my alarm, swing both legs to the bedroom floor, stand up and begin my day. I always thought of myself as a regular guy. My life was good. I worked hard, had a good career, happy marriage and raised two great children. My life was blessed.

Eight years ago I was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes. I've always been health conscious and so my health became even more of a priority after the diagnosis. Many diabetics develop wounds on their feet and not even know they exist. Another enemy to a diabetic's foot is water. In all my years of being a diabetic no one explained how a cut, paired with water, can lead to an infection.

Last year my left foot began to swell and the ER doctor told me that a small cut on my foot had turned into cellulitis. According to the doctor, cellulitis is quite common for diabetics and treatable with antibiotics. But as the days passed, my foot transitioned from pink to greenish-black. I couldn't walk without excruciating pain. My wife rushed me back to the hospital where I was told that I'd die if an emergency amputation was not performed. And I had five minutes to decide.

It's amazing how in a blink of an eye your entire life can change. My lower left leg was amputated on August 19th, 2023. Three surgeries reframed my body. My life forever changed.

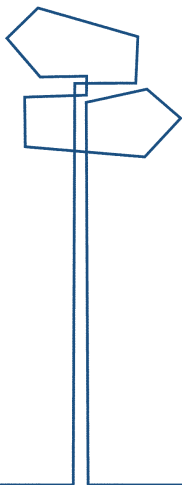
I've been asked how hard it was to make that decision. I can honestly say it wasn't that difficult

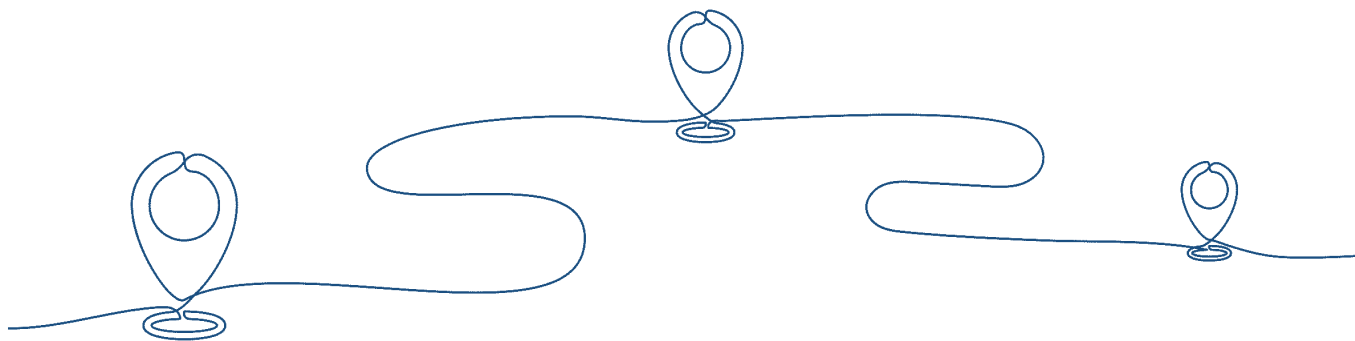
for me. I heard what the surgeon told me. I looked over at my wife and thought about our life, our kids, and I knew that I was not finished living. I told the surgeon: "Do whatever you need to do to save my life."

In a weird way the amputation gave me a clearer picture of life. I am not by any means suggesting that living with a leg amputation is easy. It comes with challenges, hence this article. Phantom limb pain is a real kicker.

Like all amputees, my amputation story is unique to me. We all have similarities but the details are what make our stories personal. Recovering is not just physical but also heavily emotional as you learn how to return to your life with a new body.

Coming home from the hospital made for immediate challenges. Getting up the front steps and inside the house took about fifteen minutes. I was the person everyone leaned on. Now something as simple as going to the washroom required help. A wheelchair gave me some independence of mobility. With a pharmacy of meds, a nurse visited every day for ten months. With a supportive family, I never really mourned my loss. I was still Tony, but a new Tony.





“Some people in my life assumed that with my first prosthetic leg that my life would pick up where I left off. Far from accurate in my case.”

I remember, in the beginning, not looking at my amputated leg; I knew my lower leg was gone but to look at it and touch it... I just couldn't bring myself to that point. I would ask the nurse how it looked. It was weeks until I could sum up the courage. “Give yourself time Tony,” the nurse would say.

I knew my life would be different. But I was alive. My priorities changed and what was important to me became clearer. Prior to my amputation I would get up, shower, dress and go. Now I needed a walker to get to the shower, a chair in the bathroom, a shower bench, hand bar, and a freezer bag to keep my limb dry... and packing tape.

I remember the day that I was fitted for my personal wheelchair: being asked what type of tires, seat, and arm rest I wanted... it was like ordering a car. My wife and I decided to go big. I went with Ferrari Red, and boy do I stand out.

I admit that it was hard accepting the constant stares. I remember one day that my wife convinced me to go out. Things were going well until a woman, in tears, yelled from her car, “I feel sorry for you, look what God did to you. I'll pray for you.” At first, I was so embarrassed. Then I was self-conscious

because everyone in the parking lot was now staring. Moments like these made me realize how the age-old adage of judging a book by its cover holds up. Instead of looking at me and thinking negatively, what about the second chance God gave me – the opportunity to live.

Rehab challenged me. Some people in my life assumed that with my first prosthetic leg that my life would pick up where I left off. Far from accurate in my case. Before my amputation I never thought about being limited. I was active: skiing, golf, tennis and cycling. I had to rebuild my strength and endurance. Now I need to ask myself if I can do certain things. I walk a whole lot slower. I move aside when I hear the huffing and puffing of people behind me. I get looks and comments. Sometimes I am not too sure what to say... like the woman hollering out her car window that a brain tumour left her with a limp, and losing her leg would have been easier.

Another time, my slow walking was frustrating a couple behind me and the man accused me of faking my amputation.

But I learned that being an amputee does not define who you are or what you're limited to in life.

Yet, there have been positive experiences, and one in particular outweighing all the negative ones. I was sitting at the mall with my prosthetic leg off when a young boy ran over to me truly fascinated. I immediately noticed that he was a double-leg amputee. We talked about our prostheses and when I looked up at his father, he gave me a look of “Thank you.”

It's moments like that, and the hard work through a most difficult year of my life, that make things easier. I am not fully independent. I cannot stand for long periods, walk fast or far. I cannot walk and carry anything heavy because of my balance. I avoid slopes and when walking to a curb I need to remember the rule: up with the good, down with the bad. I climb steps very slowly, holding the banister for balance. I require constant breaks.

But my body is learning to adapt and accomplishments that some may think are small and frivolous are important to me. I am not afraid to ask for help. I'm not afraid to admit I cannot do it... yet. I am learning to live my life the best way I can and my amputation will not stop or define my life.

Tony Korosak
Instagram: @al3gup



Stop Saying “I’m Fine” When You’re Not

IT’S OKAY TO
HAVE FEELINGS

By Raphaela Browne

“I’d rather be honest and authentic and disappoint some people than exhaust myself trying to keep up the façade of perfection.”

~Crystal Paine

So many people walk around each day masking their true feelings because they are considered the “strong one,” “the upbeat, bubbly one.” Or, since they give so much of themselves supporting others, they’re not seen as having any emotions other than happy. If you’ve ever felt like you had to hold it together all the time to keep up a façade for others, there’s freedom in letting people know that you have feelings too.

Keeping it together has always been my thing. You know the phrase “never let ‘em see you sweat”? Well, even in my worst moments, I would keep it all in place and poised for the public, but I’d be secretly dying on the inside because of the pain or challenges I was going through.

It can catch some people off guard to see you be real, revealing that you don’t have it all together, and at times their responses can leave you wounded. I know that feeling all too well.

A few months back, I attended an event to support a colleague and I bumped into someone I knew well. He asked me how I was doing, and I responded honestly with “I’m hanging in there, but I’m fine.” He immediately made a face and seemed disturbed by my response. He said, “Woooooah, you gotta change that. You sound too defeated and that’s not what I want to hear from you.”

He went on to say, “What you said makes me want to back away from you and go the opposite direction. It’s too much for me. You should always answer with a positive response.” He then went on to provide ways for me to respond in the future.

What this person didn’t know was, I was feeling down and discouraged because I felt I wasn’t as far as I should be in my life and business. I had poured all of myself into doing things to get the business running consistently; however, whenever I looked at all the effort I put in and saw things not happening as quickly

as I thought they should, I felt as if I’d failed. So, it was a tough time as I sorted through those different emotions.

At first, I felt lousy about my response, because with me being considered the “upbeat, strong one,” always smiling and helping others to feel better, there is an assumption of how I should be at all times. I thought I had somehow let that person down by revealing my true feelings in that moment. I also felt embarrassed, because I’d exposed a small part of myself and felt like I was rejected and told how I should sound.

But after I thought about it, I realized that I was fine with my response because it was a genuine answer. I am on a path of making true connections with others, and I no longer want to “act” and pretend to be fine when I’m not.

While this person didn’t have any ill intent and actually thought he was being helpful in telling me how I should respond, it clearly made it uncomfortable for me to open up to him the next time around. It made

me think about why some people try to force others to hide behind a mask. Why do people expect you to always be “on”?

This was a moment for someone to find out what was truly going on with me, and to find out why I seemed so down and to make a true connection, instead of offering me another mask to wear in his presence.

This led me to wonder, when we ask people “How are you doing?” are we really open to an honest response or are we looking to hear the template reply that we so often hear, “I’m fine”?

I also thought about how many people wear a mask every day or keep a façade to avoid showing their humanity and potentially making others feel uncomfortable. The people whom we interact with every day are carrying worries, concerns, and emotional pain within, and we cannot ask them to put on a fake smiley face and tell them to be on their way. These people need someone to truly see them.

If you sometimes hide your true feelings behind a mask, here are a few ways to begin opening up.

Practice honestly connecting with people, even if you start small.

As psychotherapist Barton Goldsmith wrote, “When you open your mouth, you’re also opening your heart. And knowing that someone truly hears what you are feeling and understands you is soothing to the soul.”

If you’re not accustomed to opening your heart to people, start small by sharing one thing you’re thinking or feeling but may be tempted to keep inside. Opening up to others will allow you the space to be yourself, and from there you’ll clearly see who’s willing to receive what you have to say with an open heart. You’ll also begin to forge deeper relationships through your honest connections.

Also, be the person who allows others the space to just be, and offer support and guidance as needed. Ask about their lives, and let them know you’re happy to be a nonjudgmental ear. Giving people room to share pieces of themselves lets them know that you’re there for them and they can be honest with you.





Allow yourself space to feel.

Many times when we avoid sharing our feelings with others, it's because we haven't given ourselves space to identify and process our emotions. We try to cover them up or engage in activities to mask the pain, but they don't go away when we do this. Left unprocessed, our feelings tend to leak out in other ways. For example, we may overreact in unrelated situations.

Give yourself permission to feel whatever you feel, without judgment, and learn to recognize when you're lying to yourself, telling yourself you're "fine" when you're not. The first step to being honest with others is being honest with ourselves.

Be kind to yourself.

We tend to beat ourselves up when we do not respond, act, speak, or think how others believe we should. This can put pressure on us to shift to meet everyone else's needs without truly acknowledging our own.

Get in the habit of checking in with yourself and meeting your emotional needs, whether that means processing your feelings in a journal or practicing self-care. The more you respect your truth and your needs, the better you'll be able to communicate them to others.



It's a heavy burden to hide behind a façade or wear a mask. Allow yourself to experience the freedom of being authentic in each moment and making genuine connections with people who can receive your feelings. There's power in putting down your superhero cape, being vulnerable, and sharing your truth. You don't have to hide, pretend, or feel badly about not always being the "strong one." You're not weak, you're human, and you never have to apologize for that.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Raphaela Browne is a Certified Transformation and Career Coach and Nonprofit Organizational Consultant, committed to supporting professional women and organizations with embracing change and transitioning seamlessly to their next big thing. Visit her at www.raphaelabrowne.com for more information.



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"I joined PAAC to connect with the amputee/limb difference community! I hope to make some great connections and be able to provide new amputees some tips and tricks I've picked up over the past 20+ years, along with learning some new things myself!"

SCAN NOW
TO JOIN!



7 HABITS

That Keep You Strong

(Even When Things Go Wrong)

By Linda Wattier

“I’m stronger because of the hard times, wiser because of my mistakes, and happier because I have known sadness.”

~Unknown

It’s happened to most of us. Despite our best intentions, something goes dreadfully wrong. You suffer a heartbreaking loss, make a terrible mistake, or get blindsided by an injury. In disbelief your mind cries, “Wait. What?” And then, “No, no, no, this can’t be happening.”

After the initial shock, when the surge of stress hormones has subsided, you realize that yes, this is happening.

And you can't help thinking: "But how could this happen? It's not fair. I can't bear it. Why me? Why now? How will I ever get through this?" Your mind is reeling. You feel anxious and dejected.

I've had plenty of negative, angry, and despairing thoughts vying for my attention over the years. And I definitely felt weakened by those experiences. But as soon as I could, I consciously returned to the habits I've created over time that keep me strong no matter what shows up in my life.

1 Use your power of choice.

No matter what your circumstances, you have the power to choose your direction and how to use your energy. You can choose to use your energy in positive, productive ways or in negative, destructive ways. Either way, the choices you make now determine your future.



Practice choosing to focus your energy in positive directions until it becomes a habit. Once it does, you will be more empowered and experience less trouble in your life. You will feel like you are living on purpose, taking charge of your direction rather than viewing life as something that just happens to you.

3 Be grateful.

Besides enhancing your everyday life, finding things to be grateful for can help you cope during hard times by giving you a wider perspective that helps you feel less overwhelmed by difficult circumstances.

Practice focusing on what's going right. Notice things to be grateful for every day. Soon, finding something to be grateful for will become your automatic response to anything that happens. And eventually you'll find that your gratitude habit brings more joy into your life.

2 Accept what is, no matter what.



Try to not mentally label what happens as good or bad; just let it be.

Accepting what is, instead of judging it, puts you in a state of inner non-resistance. You can still want to change things, but you have a calmer attitude, and any action you take to improve your situation is more effective.

Allow things to be as they are, rather than resisting them. Once this becomes a habit, you'll find yourself calmly thinking of effective solutions for problems that used to be overwhelming.



BE POSITIVE.

4 Neutralize the negative.

Sometimes our thinking is directed by our inner critic, who can say some harsh things. But when you pay attention, you can recognize unhealthy thoughts and change them to more positive statements.

Always question your negative thoughts, and practice changing them to positive, helpful statements. Once this becomes a habit, you'll find that negative thoughts lose their power to upset you. Over time, you will be able to more easily let them go, and your mind will become more peaceful.

5 Return to the present moment.

As human beings, one of our favourite mental activities is to get lost in thinking about the past or the future. Remembering to bring your attention back to “now” sweeps the debris from your mind and returns you to a state of simplicity.



As you go about your daily activities, keep your full attention on whatever is happening here and now rather than getting lost in thought. Once this becomes a habit, you will be

more connected to your inner wisdom. You will notice that decisions are easier to make, and life begins to flow more smoothly.

7 Forgive.

True forgiveness means that you accept the reality of what happened without an emotional charge. You recognize the healing and growth you have achieved from working through the upsetting experience, and you wish healing and growth for the other person.

Practice forgiving others and releasing the toxic resentment that hurts your heart. Forgive yourself too; we all make mistakes at one time or another. Making a habit of forgiveness frees you to move on with your life and experience higher levels of inner peace.



6 Trust yourself.

Sometimes it's better to trust in your own feelings and intuition — even if you make mistakes along the way — than to look outside yourself for guidance.

Remember to always tune in to your inner wisdom for help. Once you make this a habit, you will feel less stressed and more positive. You will have a sense of inner security and self-contained confidence that is not based on the approval of others.





Life's hard when things go wrong. Feeling shocked, anxious, and dejected is no fun. But practicing these habits when times are fairly good will enhance your life and help you stay strong during the hard times.

Imagine being in the middle of a disappointment or a crisis and being able to move swiftly through the shock and stress rather than getting stuck there. Imagine

feeling calm, clear, and confident during difficult circumstances instead of confused and overwhelmed. Imagine even reaching a state of inner peace as you take action to make things right again.

Some of these concepts are easier to turn into habits than others, and they all take time to master. But if you pick even one and start practicing, you will become stronger, wiser, and more resilient no matter what life throws at you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Linda Wattier helps women over fifty design their most authentic, meaningful, and fulfilling experience of midlife and beyond. She's a personal coach, writer, and founder of *How She Thrives*, a free email newsletter with advice on how to keep growing strong and free as we age into our true selves. Visit <https://howshethrives.com>.



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Photos by Gena Little

Tracy MacCharles

NAVIGATING HER NEW NORMAL

An Interview with Jeff Tiessen

Tracy MacCharles, the former Ontario Minister of Accessibility, never planned to be a politician until she saw a newspaper article reporting that the then-current MPP was going to retire. She wondered what it would take to work as a Member of Provincial Parliament. She liked public service and had worked for 10 years in the Ontario government before moving to the private sector as a Human Relations professional in financial institutions like National Trust and Manulife and climbing the ladder to a Vice-President position. She understood government from a bureaucratic point of view, but didn't have any political experience. She knew lawn signs but didn't know about political parties or even how to get nominated. AND SO, HER POLITICAL JOURNEY BEGAN.



Tracy MacCharles never planned to be an amputee since being just hours away from a scheduled amputation of her left leg. She was diagnosed with bone cancer in her left leg when she was a teenager. At the last minute, her surgeon connected with an American colleague who had developed a limb-saving surgery for young cancer patients. Her femur and knee were replaced by a rod and hinge cemented to her shin bone. Thirty years later, as a young mother of twins, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. More surgery and more chemotherapy. At age 59 she became an above-knee amputee. She knew disability well, personally and professionally, but didn't know much about living with an amputation. AND SO, HER LIMB LOSS JOURNEY BEGAN.

thrive: *You said that this interview would be a real coming out for you as an amputee. What do you mean by that?*

Tracy: What I mean is that I have not fully embraced being an amputee, partially because it's been a massive learning experience and somewhat overwhelming. And, also learning to deal with the fear of the unknown. Learning to accept my new reality when I didn't really understand what my reality was, and not wanting to tell my story over and over again. I feel like I'm just starting to come out through my work with the Amputee Coalition of Canada, connecting with other amputees and accepting my new normal. I've avoided a lot of one-on-one conversations with people I don't know well.

thrive: *Yet, there's irony in that. You were Ontario's first Minister of Accessibility. You've worked and volunteered in the disability community for years. Your husband has a disability, as have you since you were 17 years old. Disability is not new to you.*

Tracy: The irony isn't lost on me. Public figures, politicians, we do look for anonymity and privacy too. And in my situation, while I've had leg-saving surgeries for years, I was doing a smoke and mirrors routine, even in politics, because I didn't look "disabled". I looked "able-bodied", right? I had a leg made of artificial parts internally, but I don't know if I ever really embraced being a disabled person, then, and as of last year, becoming an amputee.

Being an amputee is all new to me. Getting stared at is new to me. My leg is out there. Hiding it under clothes would make things more difficult. But I see the contradiction. Not only did I spend a lot of time working and volunteering in the disabled community, but I advocated for our children who had different kinds of challenges. And I helped create Ontario's accessibility legislation.



Tracy with husband Stephen Little

thrive: *Did you identify with having a disability before your amputation?*

Tracy: Yes and no. We're all different, right? Whether you have a physical, mental health, cognitive, sensory, or whatever challenge, everyone's experience is different. I was pleased and honoured to take the reins as Minister of Accessibility and move the agenda forward in Ontario. But I did struggle with the stereotype of the disabled person becoming the Minister for Accessibility. I remember a well-meaning person saying to the Premier, right in front of me, "that's so nice that you hired this woman to do this." I was like, what? Like, first of all, I got elected by my community, a duly-elected politician who won the nomination in my riding. I won a general election twice. Of course, the Premier decides who's going to be a Minister. I did have mixed feelings about the role though. Was I progressing on my own merits, or was it tokenism? I've always struggled with that. And because my former limitations as a disabled person weren't evident to people, I wasn't disabled in their eyes. So, I think I've always struggled with my identity.



"I chose the internal prosthesis, and it was a good decision, but it also came with a lot of limitations that I accepted but maybe didn't reveal."

thrive: *Let's talk about your previous disability, before your amputation.*

Tracy: I always struggled with telling my story. I'm still struggling with it, maybe more now as an amputee, because my story is long and complicated. I don't feel I can do it justice in a few sentences when it's a story of a lifelong challenge. But here goes.

I had bone cancer when I was 17, the same year that Terry Fox was running across Canada. I was scheduled for an amputation. I had the NPO sign at the end of my hospital bed... "Nothing by Mouth. Amputation." Canada wasn't doing limb-saving surgery yet, but my surgeon at Sick Kids had a relationship with a surgeon in Philadelphia who did. Dr. Hugh Watts, who amputated Ted Kennedy's son's leg, was tired of amputating young people's limbs. Osteosarcoma, the bone cancer I had, was more prevalent in young people. So, he developed this new internal limb-saving prosthesis. And so, instead of the amputation the next day, I was whisked off to Philadelphia for limb-saving surgery. My femur and my knee were replaced by a steel rod and a metal hinge cemented to my tibia. I came back to Sick Kids in Toronto for chemotherapy and watched Terry Fox run down University Avenue in front of my window.

thrive: *Any regrets in going the innovative procedure route?*

Tracy: Honestly, I was a selfish teenager and wanted everything over with. I would have just gone with the amputation because I wanted to get whatever was happening to me behind me. My father insisted that I do the limb-saving surgery. "You can have your amputation later if you want," he said. It turned out to be the best decision. The internal prosthesis that Dr. Watts put in lasted for 30 years before it broke. So, I had a good run with it. I carried my twins on it before my troubles with it began. I got it replaced in Canada but immediately after my first election, it snapped in two. Thank goodness I was at home and not at an event. While doctors were figuring out how to get that 30-year-old prosthesis out of me, and replace it with new technology, I was also recovering from a second cancer surgery, breast cancer, a year prior.

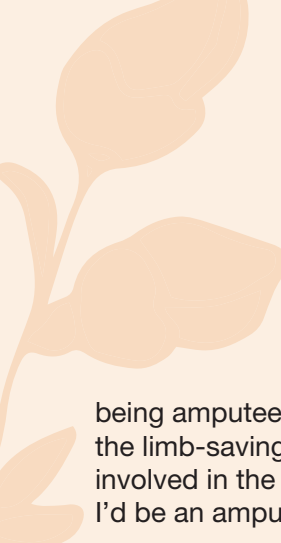
All of that said, I could walk, but not quickly, especially with the replacement. Every step took a lot of energy, mentally and physically. That's part of my irony. I appeared able-bodied, but I wasn't. If I chose amputation initially, I probably would have had a more carefree lifestyle and would have been able to do more sports. I chose the internal prosthesis, and it was a good decision, but it also came with a lot of limitations that I accepted but maybe didn't reveal.

thrive: *I know that you never planned on becoming an amputee, but at any point did you start thinking that it was inevitable?*

Tracy: My leg replacement surgery worked well for about six years, until 2017 when some of the cement that was binding things together cracked. I had to have some revision surgeries. Infections ensued, and a couple of operations. That's when I decided not to run for re-election. I was on a series of suppressive antibiotics and didn't think I'd have the energy to mount a successful campaign. In 2022 I had massive reconstruction. All the parts came out and I went into a wheelchair with basically a nail for a leg inside. The new prosthesis started dislocating. It wasn't the fault of the new technology. I was older. I didn't have the muscles and tissues to sustain the new one. With the dislocations and infections, which can be catastrophic, my surgeon started talking about quality of life, because at that point, my quality of life was not good. Another tough decision, but it was the right one.

I bought a lot of time, and I'm very grateful for it, but I never imagined being an amputee. I knew intellectually that it was the right decision, and my surgeon was spot on. It was time for quality of life; time for a new normal. But I hadn't thought about





“I’m learning to navigate that new normal. Learning to be an amputee. It’s hard. It’s way more complicated than I understood.”



being amputee since I was 17. I was always on the limb-saving journey, acting able-bodied, very involved in the disabled community, never thinking I’d be an amputee one day.

thrive: *You talk about a new normal. What does that mean to you?*

Tracy: I didn’t know it would be an opportunity to redefine myself. I look at it – my whole journey actually – as survivorship. I mean, two rounds of cancer, two rounds of treatment and a mechanical leg that worked magnificently for 30 years.

I’m learning to navigate that new normal. Learning to be an amputee. It’s hard. It’s way more complicated than I understood. And I think I’m a reasonably intelligent person who knows how to navigate systems from my personal and professional experiences in life and work. But it’s a hard journey that no one is really helping you navigate. You have to figure it out. But I’m very grateful that I have an amazing team to rely on, including my surgeon, my prosthetist, and my physical therapist who works almost exclusively in the amputee community. I need a massage therapist for some radiating spinal nerve pain associated with the amputation. And my chiropractor helps with that nerve pain and my hip contracture which is probably from improper walking for so many years.

I’m learning to embrace my amputation. I’ve always taken pride in myself for being independent. I get through things. Politics is a team sport and so is being an amputee. Having a team around you is critical. My new normal also means accepting that everything takes me longer to do and takes more energy. I wasn’t always the most patient person.

thrive: *You talk a lot about learning and navigation. What were some of the first things you learned as part of your new normal, that being a new amputee?*

Tracy: I need to accept setbacks. This is not a linear process. Adjustments to the prosthesis. Volume management. Skin problems. I thought that “you have an amputation, recover, slap on your new limb, and off you go.” Way more complicated, way more involved. It takes a lot of patience and time. You have to accept help, and you have to figure out how

to navigate it all, and you have to give yourself the time to do that.

I’d say only a few friends and family really understand how challenging life is as a new amputee. I have a good team, and I’m very grateful for all that. But I quickly learned in the amputee world that it takes a lot for other people to understand it because it’s so foreign. People want to understand and want to support you but it’s complicated. Even simple things like going out for coffee. Well, okay, where are we parking? How’s the accessibility? How many steps are there to get in? Is the washroom accessible? How am I going to carry my coffee to the table because I’m still using a walker?

I’m learning that my job now is to work on my recovery and to embrace the team and the help, but that is very resource consumptive. Multiple appointments every week. I do it because I want to live my best life. It’s an investment in me right now. And I’m learning to be open with people who genuinely want to be supportive.

thrive: *Again, the irony. You were the Minister of Accessibility, had a lot of experience with disability and are married to a well-known advocate and wheelchair user in the disability community. Wasn’t any of this experience transferrable to your “new normal”?*

Tracy: It’s funny, when I started dating Stephen [Little] I was really nervous and at a loss for words. I was a bureaucrat when I met him, not a politician. He worked in the former Office of Disability Issues. We were both civil servants at the time. But there’s a huge delta between being involved in the disabled community, doing work in it, working with colleagues who have a disability, and developing a relationship and dating someone from the disabled community. A whole other ballgame. And remember, I’m not really accepting my own limitations, and here I am having a relationship with a paraplegic, right? I was very unsure how to navigate that at first. I was intrigued with his independence, his ability to navigate his work in the community, being an advocate, you know, all things that attracted me to him. But it’s really about the person and similar goals, one of ours being that we both wanted to become parents. That was our big joint initiative as a couple. And amputation is a whole new ballgame too. A whole new journey, even with my experience with disability.

thrive: *What's the next step for you? What does the near future look like?*

Tracy: Maybe it's an aging thing more than an amputee thing, but to pause and really take a hard look at what's next in my life. I'm a recovered – or recovering at least – workaholic. Right now, I teach part-time at the University of Toronto. I do volunteer work. I've been asked to consider becoming a Justice of the Peace.

My interest level is super high, but my capacity to do a lot of things has changed. I need to be accepting of that. I guess there's been a change in perspective for me during this last year of reflection and speculation. But it's not Pollyanna-ish in that "Oh, I'm so grateful to be alive. I kiss the ground every day." It's not like that, because I still have my faults and bad habits. I'm very compliant, but not perfect.

But I am reevaluating life as an amputee and how I spend my time. I think I'm bolder now in some ways. As a politician, there's a certain amount of caution. As a public figure, you have to, you know, keep your views within a certain framework sometimes. I think I feel a little more liberated to be myself and to do what I want to do at this stage of my life, and maybe battle hard for amputees by dealing with some of the systemic problems.

A lot of my goals are focused on my physical recovery and being able to walk well or as well as I can and reach whatever potential that is. But also, you know, doing things differently, embracing invitations to be involved in some projects. I work as a Peer Visitor with the Amputee Coalition of Canada, and I'm now a member of its Board of Directors and that's very exciting.

thrive: *Last question. You received peer support after your amputation and now you are a Peer Visitor, which is really valuable I think for a new amputee to hear from a peer like you who is relatively new too. What's your message to someone who is just starting on their amputee journey?*

Tracy: We're all different. And that it's a lifelong journey. A good team is key. It's a constant calculus of risk and reward in terms of your recovery... like, how much time can you tolerate on your artificial limb. Whatever assumptions people have about amputees, they may not apply to you or me, and you can't expect people to understand that. There will be challenges and there will be new opportunities too, in terms of new friendships and new connections.

The medical team can be really good at doing what needs to be done, but this system doesn't really address mental health, and you need to be open to getting that kind of support too.

You're going to have to advocate for yourself. Yes, there are professionals who can give you advice, whether it's a PT or a prosthetist, or other people in your circle, but amputee peers are so important too... someone around the same age or stage of life who is relatable in terms of what you're going through.

It's going to be hard, and you're going to have successes, but you're going to have setbacks too. It's so different for everyone, but learning to accept help and getting that good team around you are critical in those early days.



Photo courtesy of Tracy MacCharles

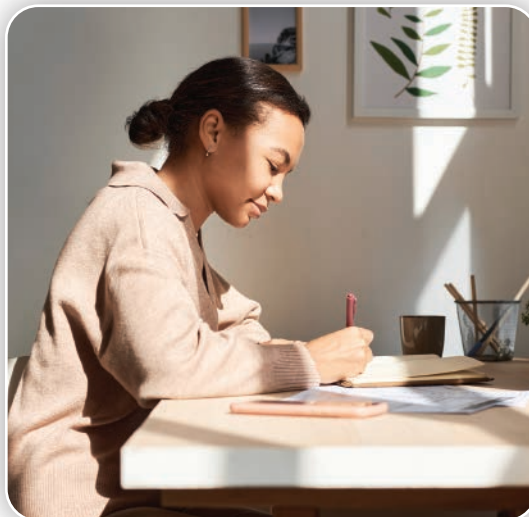
Unlock Your Potential



10 WAYS to Achieve Your Health and Fitness Goals

By Megan Williamson, BA, CPT

In my 14-year career as a fitness coach, I've had the privilege of working with a wide range of clients, all striving to achieve their health and fitness goals. Whether you're a competitive athlete or a wheelchair-user soccer mom, the successful habits for achieving your goals are remarkably similar. Here are 10 key strategies to help you succeed.



1

Write Down Your Goals

Goals are just dreams until we write them down. Learn how to turn your dreams into actionable objectives.

.....

2

Assess Your Goals: Are They SMART?

Learn how to transform vague aspirations into clear, actionable objectives using the SMART criteria: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely. Explore the significance of each of these and how they guide you toward your aspirations.

Specific... “I want to get into shape” is an example of not being specific. Take this further: What does “shape” mean for you? What does this look like in your daily life?

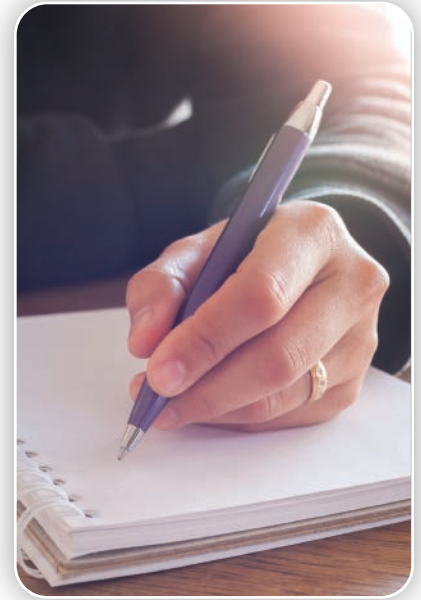
Measurable... Can you measure it? Is it a distance, a weight, a repetition amount, a time? Make sure you have a way of tracking your progress.

Attainable... Is it realistic for you? If unsure, start smaller than you planned. Then, set a bigger one once you achieve the first one!

Relevant... Is this a goal that comes from what you want deep down? Or is this a goal that is influenced by others? If we aren't intrinsically motivated, chances are that we won't have the motivation down the road to continue working toward it.

Timely... Have you given yourself a timeframe for achieving the goal? If you haven't, set a due date. This makes the goal real!

Try and ask yourself how your goal fits into each of the above categories of SMART. If it doesn't, then re-evaluate or rephrase your goal so that it does fit. Need some help outlining your SMART goal? Get expert guidance and support on your health and fitness journey.



4

Maintain a Progress Journal

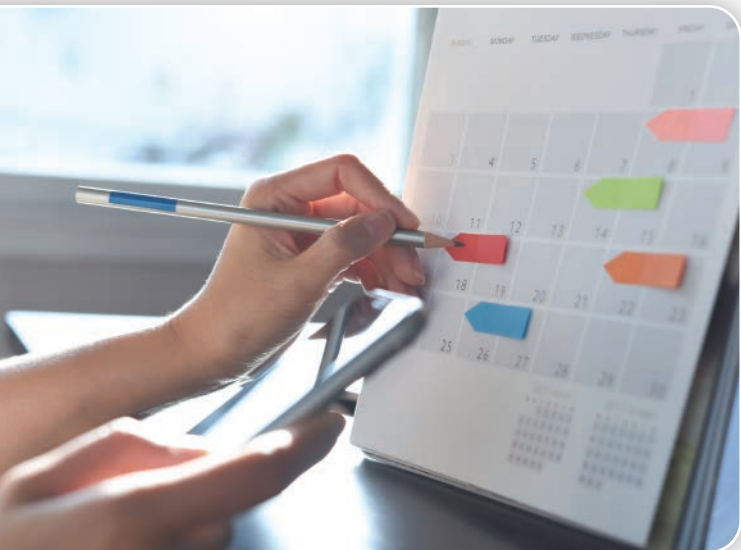
This allows us to know what works and what doesn't. It's all in the details. Our lives are busy, and we will forget week to week if X amount of cycling was too much, or if eating X before a workout really did make a difference with joint inflammation. Take out the guesswork.

3 Build a Support System

I can't stress this enough. It really does take a village. Whatever that looks like, utilize that support system!

There are so many modes of support now: partner, family member, coach, trainer, friend, workout buddy, social media, weight loss groups, boot camps, phone apps, etc. Why make the path harder for yourself than it has to be? Remember, everyone needs help and that is OK (we're human after all)! At the end of the day, all that really matters is achieving your goals.





5 Plan Ahead for Success

Planning is essential for achieving health and fitness goals and it keeps you on track. One week, one month, one day... it doesn't matter!

I love the cliché quote that says: "If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail." I couldn't agree with this more. Goals require 100% attention, especially at the beginning when the biggest changes happen. The act of revisiting your goal when it's written or typed brings our mind back to that visualization and creates space for our goal to take its place in our routines and mindset.

6 Visualize Your Success

Studies show that the best visualization techniques include all five senses (touch, taste, feeling, hearing, and seeing).

Try imagining what it feels like as opposed to observing a version of you going through the movements. It's these details that create a successful embodiment of energy for a beneficial visualization practice. I suggest doing this once a day.



7 Consistency is Key

The best results come from those who work on one habit at a time, a little bit every day. This is so important to understand, because otherwise we can be very hard on ourselves.

I'm sure you've known or heard about people who try to overhaul their entire life on a Monday? By the time the weekend rolls around, they are reverting to old habits (the Yo-Yo mentality). This person may say something like, "I tried everything and nothing seems to work to get my weight off..." Well, until you try it for at least six weeks consistently, then you're not really "trying" anything.

So, do yourself a huge favour and think small. Over time it will become a habit, and then you can add the next goal or target.

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8 Strive for Better, Not Perfect

Perfection isn't the goal; progress is what you want. Embrace small improvements as essential steps towards your ultimate achievement.

You skipped a workout today, but you ended up doing stretches at home. So, you split a dessert with someone after you planned to not have any at all. It wasn't perfect, but ask yourself this: Were you better than last week? "Better" is progress. We are not going for perfect because it is unachievable. Better is what we are striving for. Celebrate that!

9 Make It Fun and Exciting

Maybe you aren't stoked about having to lose weight or drop your cholesterol like your doctor recommended. But, we can try and make it fun!

Grab a workout buddy, join an online fitness subscription, or try making new, healthy dishes for dinner with friends or family members. Make your actions towards your health and fitness goals exciting and new. This will help keep your interest in the journey.



10 Forgive Yourself Along the Way

It's really important to show yourself compassion during your journey toward your goals. We are our own worst critics. I too am terribly hard on myself with my fitness pursuits.

Back when I was competing in fitness shows, I always thought I could do better. I would compare myself to other competitors and I would feel terrible about myself, discrediting all of the hard work I had put into achieving my goal. At that time in my life, it was one of the biggest feats I had achieved, mentally and physically! I now believe it to be so sad to not have celebrated those accomplishments because I was so caught up in things I thought I could have done better.

In your quest to achieve your health and fitness goals, remember that success is a journey, not a destination. With these 10 habits, you can set yourself up for long-term success. Be kind to yourself on your journey. You won't always clearly see all of the hard work you've done while pushing through, but when you look back on it one day you'll be happy that you enjoyed the process.

ABOUT OCEAN REHAB AND FITNESS:

Megan Williamson is a certified fitness coach through the National Academy of Sports Medicine and the head coach at Ocean Rehab and Fitness. Alongside her team, she offers adaptive training for those living with spinal cord injuries and many other physical disabilities. Her mission is to make exercise inclusive for everyone regardless of limitations.

For exercise ideas, workout programs or a consultation, visit oceanrehabandfitness.com.

Follow Megan's programs with an Ocean Insider Club membership subscription.



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To learn more about Antoinelle and her amazing story, visit: go.ossur.com/stories



Certified to **DRIVE**

Getting You and Your Vehicle **ROAD READY**

By Deborah Melamed, Occupational Therapist with Driver Rehabilitation Certification

Submitted by DriveLab Inc. with contributions from The War Amps

Whether you are already a licensed driver who has recently become an amputee, or an amputee going for your driver's license for the first time, you will likely have questions. Will you need special devices on your vehicle? Will you need special driver training? What will obtaining or renewing your driver's license look like? Will you have any restrictions on your license?

Of course, most amputees are still able to drive. Depending on the level of amputation, some individuals can still drive unmodified vehicles. For those who cannot, there are modifications available for most vehicles that can accommodate different levels of ability.

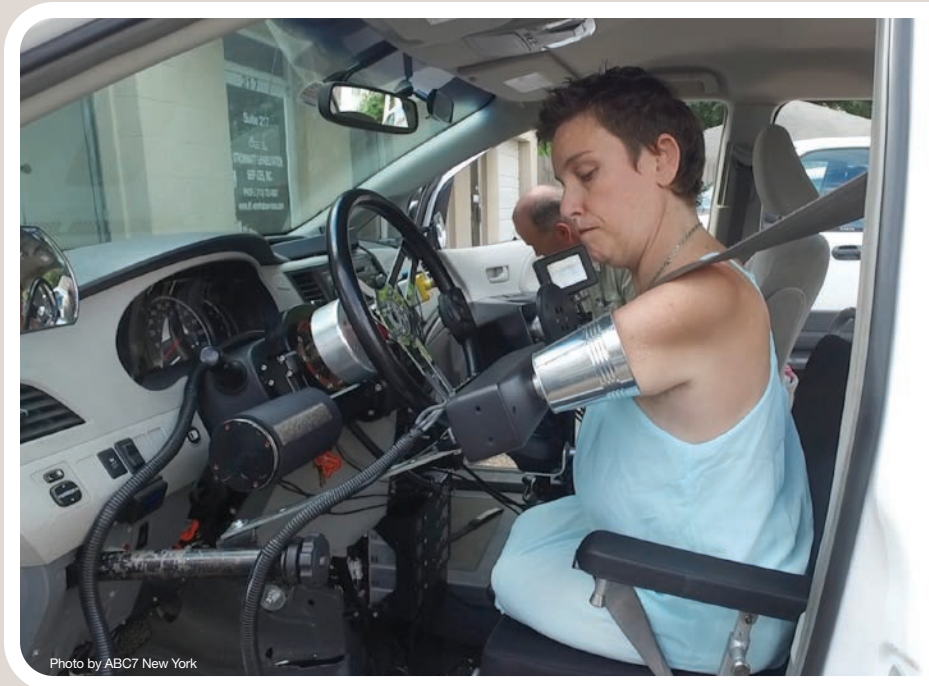
Driving is an area under provincial, rather than federal, control. Therefore, the criteria differ for each province. In many cases there are no specific provincial procedures. Rather, there are guidelines for motor vehicle offices, so experiences may vary from city to city within a province. In some cases, obtaining a driver's license may not necessitate any special requirements. In other cases, a Ministry official may presume that some, or all, amputees must undergo a special assessment.

THE PROCESS

Obtaining a driver's license is a lengthy procedure for anyone, and for an amputee that process can be even more extensive. You may be required to be assessed at a rehabilitation centre or hospital, which sometimes have long waiting lists. Be sure to start early and allow yourself plenty of time to go through each step of the process. Knowing what the process entails in advance and preparing ahead of time can prevent some of the frustration and disappointment that can result if you are not prepared.

Throughout the process you might have to deal with individuals who, understandably, have little or no knowledge of amputation. Individuals might not be aware of your capabilities and thus, question your ability to drive safely. They could suggest or even insist that you undergo an assessment or more testing than you personally feel is necessary.

Driving carries very serious responsibilities – driving is a privilege, not a right. Therefore, although you may feel certain procedures are unnecessary, you have to do what is reasonably requested to prove your ability to operate a vehicle safely. Knowing in advance which devices you need will certainly help and speed up the process.



ADAPTIVE EQUIPMENT

There are several types of adaptive driving devices and modified equipment that can assist amputees with safe operation of a vehicle. In most cases, the adapted equipment involves compensation for the inability to reach and operate primary driving controls like the accelerator, brake and steering wheel, and secondary ones like the wipers, turn signals, and lights.

Right Lower Extremity (above or below knee): Left foot accelerator or hand controls for brake and accelerator, spinner knob.

Bilateral Lower Extremity (above or below knee): Hand controls for brake and accelerator, spinner knob, emergency brake extension, chest strap.

Upper Extremity (right or left): Steering device, modified gear shifter and secondary controls.

Triple or Quadruple Limbs: Additional modifications can be made including reduced-effort steering system, servo brake and accelerator control, and joystick driving systems.

Adaptive driving equipment and vehicle modifications are available for most vehicles. An occupational therapist (OT) and Driving Instructor working in driver rehabilitation can assist in making the correct vehicle choice and will provide a comprehensive Functional Driving

and Adaptive Equipment Assessment to determine your ability to drive. Driver rehabilitation training is required with any adaptive driving equipment recommended.

EQUIPMENT ASSESSMENT

A Functional Driving and Adaptive Equipment Assessment (FDA) consists of two parts – an In-Clinic, with an OT, and an In-Vehicle with a Driving Instructor and an OT. The In-Clinic includes an assessment

of physical, cognitive, attention, visual/spatial/perceptual capability and knowledge of the rules of the road.

The In-Vehicle/Adaptive Equipment Assessment is done in the Driving Instructor's vehicle, equipped with a secondary brake for safety and numerous adapted driving controls to trial. Adapted driving controls are selected that are best suited for each client. After the FDA, an equipment plan is prepared by the OT for the client and the Driving Instructor.



DRIVER TRAINING

In-Vehicle Training Sessions come next, with the Driving Instructor. If primary vehicle controls are modified, it generally takes longer to acquire the skills necessary to safely operate the vehicle. The safe operation of secondary adaptive controls typically takes less training time. Just like no two individuals are the same, nor do two people learn the safe usage of adaptive driving controls in the same timeline.

Some of the more common primary adaptive devices such as hand controls or left foot accelerators take most drivers eight to 15 hours of training time. One of the challenges for experienced drivers is unlearning “automatic” driving movements. A driver learning to use a left foot accelerator will often attempt to press the pedals with their prosthetic leg on their right side.

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ISSUE #28

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- Sports & Recreation

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EQUIPMENT PRESCRIPTION

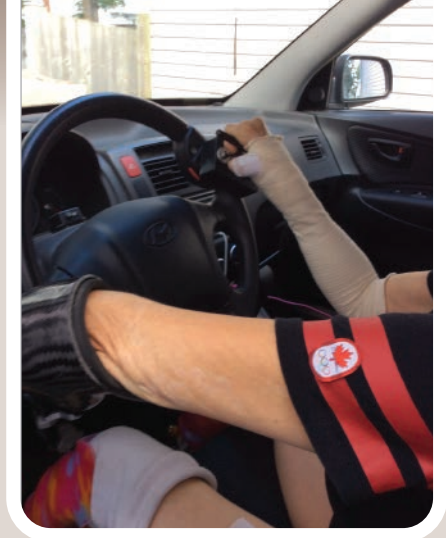
A Re-Assessment after training is done by the OT and the Driving Instructor. Once it's determined that the client is safe to operate a vehicle with the adapted driving equipment, the OT prescribes the appropriate modified equipment. An Adapted Driving Equipment Prescription is required for the vehicle modifier to install the equipment. A list of vehicle modifiers is provided to the client to select the modifier of their choice.

A Post-Vehicle Modification Fitting Checkout is done by the OT and/or the Driving Instructor to ensure that the prescribed equipment has been installed according to the OT's instruction and that the client is satisfied with the adaptive equipment.

The OT is required to inform the provincial government's transportation ministry of the client's driver status for adaptive equipment for primary controls. This will place a restriction on the client's driver's license in that it is valid only with the use of adaptive driving controls. Ministries may also require the driver to complete a provincial on-road driving test at a Drive Test Centre.

For more information, including a complete list of available devices, provincial government contact information, and provincial lists of vehicle modification centres, contact The War Amps for the Licence to Drive booklet at nac@waramps.ca or call 1-877-622-2472.

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Just Roll With It



Alan Dean wins gold at 2024 Canadian Para Bowls Championship in Brampton, Ont.

A sport for all, lawn bowls offers accessible and integrated activities all across Canada. Para Bowls, an adapted version of the game, offers opportunities specifically for Canadians with a disability to play and compete.

In 2021, Bowls Canada piloted the “Just Roll With It” program in two clubs. Met with great success, the association launched the program nationally, encouraging clubs to build more accessible and inclusive programming within their community. The goal of the pilot project was to develop programming that could be implemented by any lawn bowls club wishing to include bowlers with disabilities in a welcoming way, and includes coaching and volunteer training resources.

Bowls, also known as lawn bowls or lawn bowling, is a sport

in which players try to roll their ball (called a bowl) closest to a smaller ball (known as a “jack” or “kitty”). With its origins in the 13th century, the game is played either in teams or one against one, typically on grass and outdoors.

There are aids available for bowlers with ambulatory disabilities, including specialized delivery equipment and carpets or boards for wheelchair users. Bowlers with vision loss are paired with a “director” who helps direct the bowler on aim and distance.

Former high-level soccer player and Paralympic track and field athlete Alan Dean, a below-knee amputee, claimed a gold medal at the 2024 Canadian Para Bowls Championship in Brampton, Ont., this summer. “Lawn bowls is a great competitive and recreational sport for people with disabilities,” he enthused.

Dean has served as Board President for the Ontario Lawn Bowls Association, and as a director on

the board of Bowls Canada which has hosted open competitions for bowlers with disabilities in Windsor, Calgary and this year in Brampton.

Says Dean, “Lawn bowls is a great sport for people with disabilities because it combines a social theme with a competitive structure for bowlers of all levels of ability. It’s inexpensive and provides low-impact physical activity for participants of varying disabilities.”

One problem that remains however, is that “many lawn bowls clubs are still not wheelchair accessible,” cautions Dean. “Wheelchair users should visit their local club to assess accessibility and advise on what’s needed for inclusion for all.”

Want to know more about Para Bowls in Canada? Find out how and where you can participate in this exciting sport for all by contacting Bowls Canada at 1-800-567-2695 or email: office@bowlsCanada.com.

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By Rouzalin Hakim

Hello fellow *thrive* magazine readers. We meet again.

This editorial is a special one for me as it marks the three-year anniversary of my accident. As I reflect, a bevy of mixed emotions arise... from celebratory accomplishments to the mourning of loss. I've always wondered if the feeling of loss ever goes away? For me, unfortunately, it only subsides, fading slightly in a background of so many others.

THE REFLECTION IN THE MIRROR

She outgrew the version of herself that she needed to be to survive and is ready to become the version of herself that is going to THRIVE!

Three years sounds like a long time, but it feels like it was just yesterday. In moments like this, I can't help but reminisce about the past, both pre and post incident. I don't know if you've read my previous contributions to *thrive*, but sticking with the past, I'll share a little bit about mine with you.

Three years ago, I had a near-fatal motorcycle accident and when I woke up next to the cold walls of Sunnybrook Hospital, I found myself to be an AK [above-knee] amputee.

As I saw it, nothing would ever be the same again and that feeling is

... my life became a dryer of tumbling emotions set on high speed. Emotions I didn't even know existed."

absolutely mortifying. The overnight change was too much, and I was more lost than I ever thought I'd be in this lifetime. The endless unanswered questions that ran through my mind night after night took a deep dark toll on my mind.

The recovery process was both physically and mentally draining. Learning about prostheses, bouncing back and forth from assistance to mobility devices, and relearning everything was just too much. The wheelchair phase was personally the worst for me. I felt like everyone was looking down at me, literally and figuratively.

As the days, weeks, and months passed, my life became a dryer of tumbling emotions set on high speed. Emotions I didn't even know existed. I wasn't just relearning how to maneuver through my life, I was learning how to maneuver through myself. The identity that I had created for myself was stripped bare and I now had a blank slate staring back at me in the mirror. I was too physically and emotionally exhausted to try and piece my life back together. I didn't

even know where or how to start.

Many have had that time in our life where everything is seemingly falling apart, and we don't know how to handle it. But somehow, somehow, we manage to do it. When it comes to these life-altering changes, most times we do have one thing on our side, and that is time!

Time is our best friend, yet we always tend to rush it. How many times have you said "Wow.

Where has the time gone?" However, in the moment it feels like forever. Now that I sit here and reflect, it does feel like forever ago.

So, what do my three years as an amputee look like?

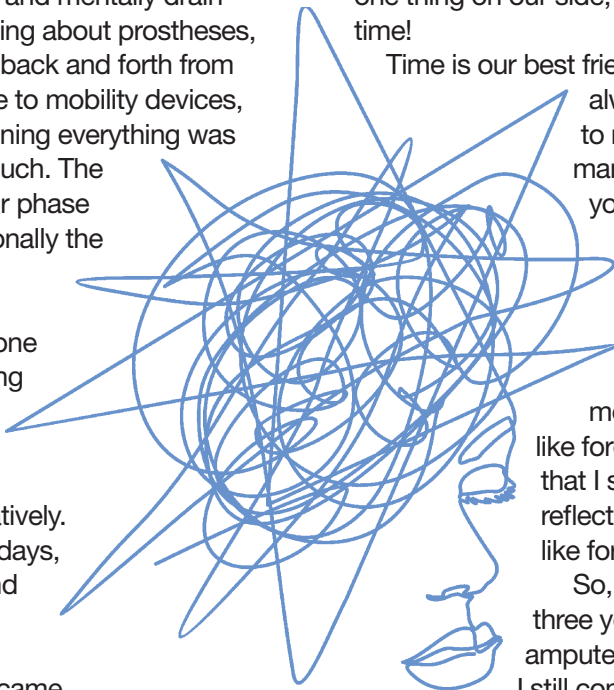
I still consider myself rather young in the recovery process, considering that most of the people I've met were either born with limb difference or have lived with limb loss for most of their lives. But, for being just a "three-year-old," I've done a whole lot of things.

I got right back into fitness and even competed in a professional fitness contest for the first time in my life, just one year after my

injury. I always mention my return to fitness because I know firsthand how so many people struggle with this after losing a limb. Speaking with many amputees, we all share the same outlook. But we're not alone and there's a way for you too, I promise. It's extremely important to get back to any sort of healthy physical activity whether it's yoga, cardio, strength training, walking, you name it, for benefits for both mental and physical health.

Let's circle back. Another accomplishment for me is writing for *thrive magazine*, which has become my biggest passion and has given me an outlet and a way to help others. I returned to work at a new place of employment which was very intimidating, but I had to push through to overcome my emotional obstacles. I've become involved in our amputee community and many more. Volunteering has brought me a sense of purpose and strength. I started traveling again, a big accomplishment because it challenges me in a new way, and calls on creativity to adapt.

Through the Amputee Coalition of Canada, I became certified to provide peer support for other amputees in their journey because I know how important and impactful it is to have someone with whom to share and listen. I speak publicly and as a guest on podcasts to advocate for our community. I don't think many non-disabled people know what it's like to live with a





Rouzalyn (right) with friend Sydney Robinson (CEO, Vessl Prosthetics Inc.).



"Wherever you are in your journey, I encourage you to take the time to reflect and be proud of who you are and what you've overcome."

disability and I believe bringing awareness is extremely valuable.

I have met some of the kindest and strongest people I can ever imagine. Our community has a bond like no other. I returned to motorcycling with a Can-Am Spyder which has brought me so much joy. It is an excellent reminder that just because life is modified doesn't mean it can't be exciting. I mean, I'm a female AK amputee who rides. How much more exciting can things get for me?

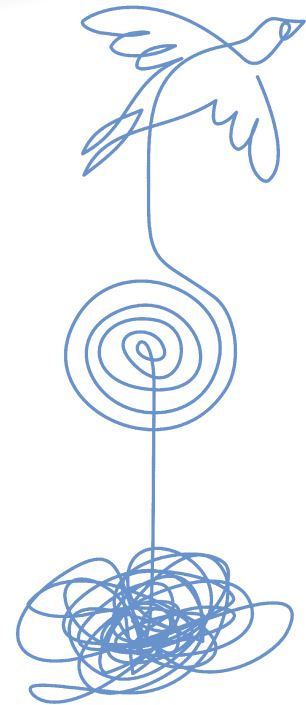
The more time that I live as an amputee, the less I think about my pre-accident life. I have done, seen, and accomplished more things in the past three years than I had in my entire life. I have discovered new layers of myself that I'm truly proud of, and I know more of who I am now than ever before. Yes, of course, I still think about the days before, but the more memories that I make, the more laughter I share, the more people I engage with and

help, the more goals I accomplish, the more I have a sense of self.

I'm learning who I am every day, and I am so much more aware of that. Wherever you are in your journey, I encourage you to take the time to reflect and be proud of who you are and what you've overcome.

Since the gift of time is ours, I feel it's important to return to what you know and love because it brings a sense of stability and calm while discovering new passions that bring a sense of accomplishment and thrill. It's great to stay in a comfort zone while testing new ones from time to time. Do it at your own pace.

Yes, our lives dramatically change after an amputation. Why not make this new one full of new adventures and discoveries. Since this editorial is dedicated to reflecting and time, I leave you with what I find to be an amazing quote... "The bad news is that time flies; the good news is that you're the pilot."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

As a relatively new amputee (3 years), working through new emotional and physical challenges informs Rouzalyn Hakim's work as a peer mentor and freelance writer, regularly contributing to *thrive magazine*. She volunteers at trauma centres, and represents her community as an actor, model and podcast guest.



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Connections Fuel the Fight for Inclusion and Equity

An excerpt submitted by Amputee Coalition. The full article is published in the Amputee Coalition's Fall 2024 inMotion magazine: <https://blog.amputee-coalition.org/inmotion-magazine>.

In a world that often overlooks or marginalizes people who have disabilities, the importance of community and connection has never been more vital. The Amputee Coalition's National Conference 2024 (ACNC24) was a powerful reminder of this truth, uniting advocates, allies, and the entire community to celebrate a collective strength and shared purpose.

The ACNC24 was more than just an awareness event – it was a celebration of an unwavering commitment to creating a world where everyone with a disability can live their best life. Through the power of connections, we can challenge barriers, demand change, and advance the fight for inclusion, equity, and equal rights for all.

Held in Atlanta, Ga., a city known for its diversity and innovation, ACNC24 brought together a vibrant mix of first-time attendees, seasoned advocates, caregivers, healthcare professionals, technology innovators, and policymakers.



The Power of Connection: Strength in Unity

Despite our different backgrounds and experiences, attendees were united by a common goal: ensuring that every person with a disability receives the respect, access, and opportunities they deserve. Throughout the weekend, we connected, inspired one another, and strengthened our resolve. We emerged not just stronger – but unstoppable.

ACNC24 was about more than sessions and speakers – it was about building a community. Stories were shared, struggles discussed, and successes celebrated. It became clear that individual experiences are pieces of a much larger puzzle.

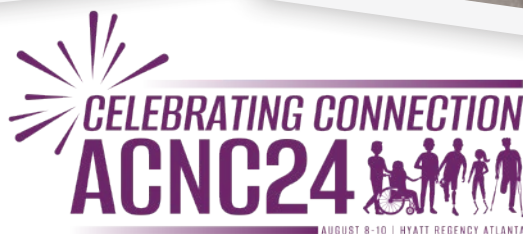
One of the most poignant aspects of these connections was the sense of belonging that so many attendees felt, perhaps for the first time. Emily, a first-time participant, captured this sentiment perfectly: “I wasn’t sure what to expect,” she shared. “But meeting so many amazing people who understand what it’s like, I feel like I’ve found a community that truly gets me.” Emily’s story is just one example of how ACNC24 brought people together, creating a support network that transcends geographical boundaries.

These connections weren’t just heartwarming; they were educational. We learned from one another, shared resources, and developed strategies to tackle the challenges we face as a community.

Building Connections for a Better Future

As the conference drew to a close, the energy in the room was electric. We had connected, learned, and grown together. Now, it was time to take action. The closing remarks delivered a powerful call to action: to take what we had gained at ACNC24 and use it to drive real, lasting change.

The “So Every BODY Can Move” movement was front and center in this call to action. It’s a rallying



cry for equity, access and inclusion. This movement is about ensuring that everyone, regardless of their ability, has the opportunity to move, participate, and thrive.

It’s about breaking down barriers and building a world where every person with a disability can live their best life.

We left the conference with a renewed sense of purpose. The fight for inclusion, equity, and equal rights isn’t just for those who attended ACNC24 – it’s for everyone. But we can’t do it alone. We need more voices, more advocates, and more allies to join us in this movement.

Unstoppable Together

The conference’s closing keynote by Blake Leeper was a fitting finale to the event. An eight-time Paralympic medalist and world record holder, Leeper’s journey is one of breaking barriers and defying expectations. Born without legs, Leeper has risen to the pinnacle of his sport, proving the point as to not put limitations on ourselves.

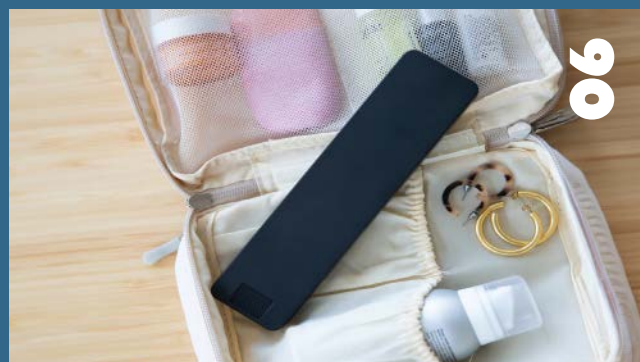
In his speech, Leeper invoked the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “If you can’t fly, then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.” It was a reminder that no matter where we are on our journey, the most important thing is to keep going – and to keep lifting each other up along the way.

PUBLISHER’S NOTE: With similar missions “to support, educate, and advocate for people impacted by limb loss and limb difference”, *thrive magazine* has partnered with the Amputee Coalition of America to bring content from *thrive* to the Amputee Coalition’s network and, expertise and resources from the Coalition’s National Limb Loss Resource Center to *thrive* readers.

To learn more, please visit Amputee Coalition at <https://www.amputee-coalition.org>.

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“Often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one that has been opened for us.”

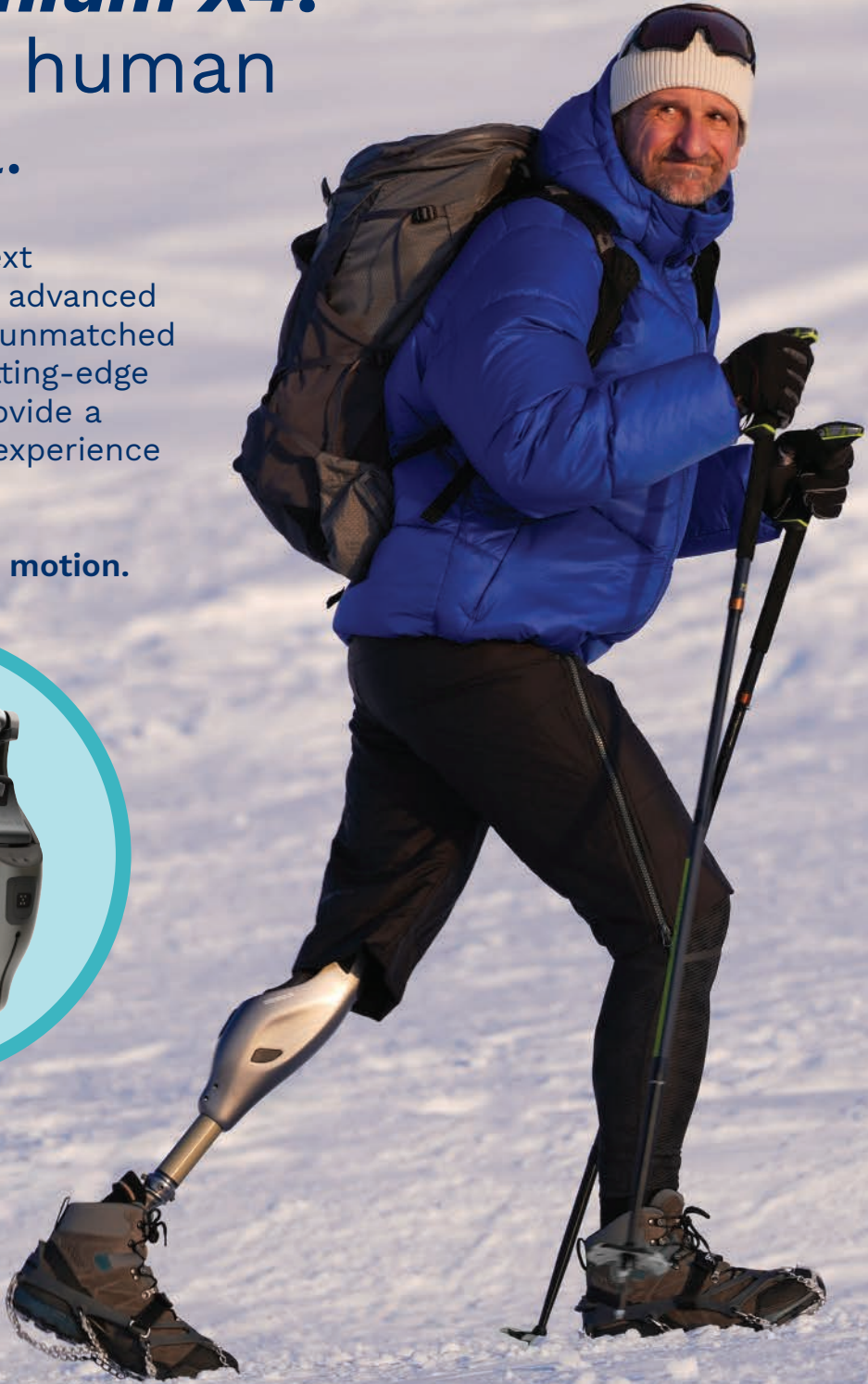
– Helen Keller

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