

Reach out and get connected



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It has been many months since you had your ostomy surgery. You probably didn't realize then how much you would learn over several months – and how well you would adjust to this change to your body. Here are a few more things to consider. They may help you as you continue learning and continue feeling more comfortable with your body.

You've come a long way

Sometimes we don't recognize how much we can accomplish in a fairly short period of time. In the first year or so after your surgery you have become skilled at pouch changes. You made decisions regarding whom to tell about your ostomy and what to say. You've learned more about how your body works and how to care for your skin. You've probably figured out which foods work well for you and which ones to avoid. You've probably also resumed intimacy with a partner, become more comfortable with socializing, and possibly traveling too.

Maybe most important of all, you've learned to deal with changes in a very private part of your life. So give yourself credit for all of the ways you've adapted gracefully to these changes.

Consider a support group

You may feel that your anxiety level has gone down over time following your surgery, but you probably still deal with some amount of it today. First, realize that any anxiety you still feel is due to a significant life change. Second, it's very helpful to be thinking about other steps you might take to reduce anxiety and stress. Ignoring stress can potentially lead to other health problems such as headaches, insomnia or depression.

Many people find it helpful to go to support group meetings. Whether you go often or just once in a while, it can be a good chance to learn more and to connect with others who have the same questions you do. The ability to learn more is a big draw for support groups. If there is one certainty in life, it's that we enrich our lives if we keep learning. It's helpful to recognize that you're not the only one who's wondering about certain issues. The answers to questions that never occurred to you can offer insights that might benefit your life.

Helping others

If you are wondering if there is more you can do to help others, a good person to ask is your Wound, Ostomy, Continence (WOC) Nurse. She or he may have good suggestions about how you might direct your energies in ways that help others.

When we go from needing help to offering help it's encouraging to see our growth. A great example is Ramona, who had a colostomy from colon cancer a number of years ago. In the days leading up to the surgery, she was fearful about the surgery and very worried that people would be able to see her ostomy pouch, or notice its odor. Then a fashionably dressed woman visited her at the hospital and invited her to a support group meeting.

Following the woman's visit, Ramona said, "Hey, if she can do it, I can do it." Ramona, who then became active in her ostomy support group, would tell others, "There is life out there, and you can live it."¹

Dealing with doubt

Like it says in an article on ostomies: "Our toughest critics are ourselves. An ostomy does not change who we are ... This is a time to step back and look at the big picture. What are the things I have control over? What is beyond our control?" The author went on to say, "Examining what we can do to brighten our lives a little each day can have a tremendous impact on optimizing the quality of our lives ... It is the little things that add up to make a big difference in our lives and those we care about."^{1,2}

Additional thoughts

There are many resources and organizations available to help you with information, advice and support. Use the contact information below to find out about a support group or to get other types of help.

FOR INFORMATION AND REFERRALS TO LOCAL SUPPORT GROUPS:

United Ostomy Associations of America, Inc. (UOAA)
1-800-826-0826 www.ostomy.org

FOR INFORMATION AND LOCAL REFERRALS FOR OSTOMY NURSE SPECIALISTS:

Wound, Ostomy, Continence Nurses Society WOCN®
1-888-224-9626 www.wocn.org

For other useful information:
American Cancer Society
1-800-ACS-2345 www.cancer.org

Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America, Inc. (CCFA)
1-800-932-2423 www.cdfa.org

Coloplast® Care
1-877-858-2656 ostomy.coloplastcare.us

References:

1. Patty McCormac. "Coping with change." North County Times – Californian. Nov 11, 2007
2. Paula Erwin-Toth, MSN, RN, ET, CWOCN, CNS. "Living with an Ostomy: Quality of Life." Ostomy Wound Management, Vol. 50, September 2004