



# MS and Emotions

Understanding your emotions and taking steps towards managing them are helpful skills for anyone to develop. Following your MS diagnosis, you are likely to experience a range of emotions that you may not have had to deal with before.

This booklet gives some guidance on understanding the emotions you might experience when living with MS and suggests techniques that may help you with your emotional wellbeing.

# MS and emotions

Being diagnosed with a life-long condition such as MS can be life changing. It is normal to experience a wide range of emotions during this time.

## **How will my emotions be affected?**

How people react to their diagnosis varies; some people may find relief in finally knowing what condition they have. Others may feel fear, sadness or guilt. It is important to remember that there is no 'correct' way to react or feel.

When navigating life with MS, some people may experience all of these emotions; others may not.

You can experience these emotions in any order, and some of them may overlap and reappear. Your emotions may also change around a relapse. At this time, you may cycle through emotions you have previously experienced, or changes in circumstances may lead to feeling new or heightened emotions.

You may also feel your loved ones are affected emotionally because of MS. Try not to let other peoples' thoughts and reactions influence yours. It's important to pay attention to your own feelings first before helping others to process their emotions.

"I've achieved so much since my diagnosis, met some amazing people who I wouldn't have otherwise met, and have a really positive outlook on life and my future."

- Ellen M



# MS and mental health

Sometimes you may feel that MS is affecting your mental wellbeing, which may include mood swings, anxiety or depression. It is not uncommon for people living with MS to experience feelings of depression or anxiety.<sup>1,2</sup>

Looking after your mental health is just as important as looking after your physical health. If you are feeling low, try to open up to someone, including your doctor. They may be able to point you to an expert, such as a psychologist or counsellor, who can support you.

You may find it difficult to talk about your emotions, and this is completely normal. These opening lines may help you:

- I'm feeling stressed because...
- I'm feeling sad because...
- I'm feeling proud because...

Try to acknowledge and share your positive emotions as well as the more negative feelings.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

Keeping a diary of your wellbeing may help you to see if there are any patterns to how you feel and what may be helping. Remember to track positive as well negative emotions and experiences.



## Are there any tips for helping with emotions?

There are some general activities that you can do to help yourself through different emotions. Sometimes it's something as simple as:



Sitting outside



A change in surroundings



Talking to someone



Spending time doing a hobby or even finding a new one

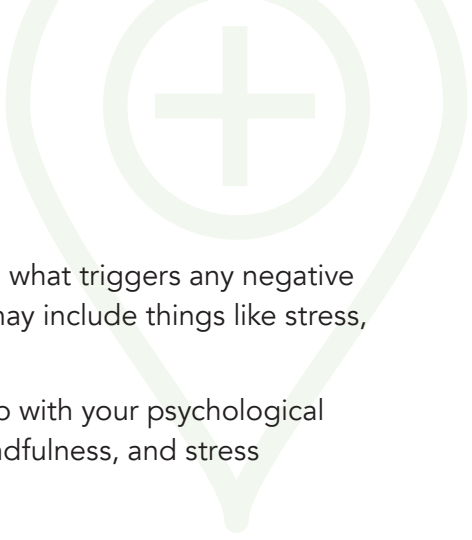


Listening to music or reading/listening to a good book



Getting a better night's sleep





It is also important to try to recognise what triggers any negative feelings and try to avoid these. This may include things like stress, alcohol, caffeine, and overdoing it.

Other, more formal methods may help with your psychological wellbeing, like building resilience, mindfulness, and stress management.

**“I have found that when I reached out and got involved in the MS community, I was overwhelmed with the energy, support, and guidance I experienced amongst this group. We are special people, and together we are stronger.”**

**- Donna N**



# Resilience

## How can resilience help?

Living with a life-long condition like MS means having to adapt to change. Resilience is your ability to deal with this change.<sup>3,4</sup>

Resilience can be improved over time and can help you to overcome adversity, improving your general wellbeing. You can become more resilient by working on how you process and respond to change and stressful events.



Awareness – understanding how you feel and the challenges you face because of MS



Acceptance – accepting that change happens and there are things that you can't control



Being kind to yourself – don't judge yourself negatively on your emotions



Connecting with others – build a support network of friends and family and learn from the experience of others who live with MS



Looking after yourself – work on eating well, sleeping well, and managing stress or fatigue



Adapting – find ways to allow you to continue functioning despite changes in circumstances



# Mindfulness

## How can mindfulness help?

Mindfulness is a form of self-awareness that can be improved with practice over time. It involves being mindful of your thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and the world around you.<sup>5,6</sup>

By paying attention to the present moment in an open and non-judgmental way, people can better understand their emotions and build coping skills.<sup>5,6</sup> This can prevent the cycle of negative emotions.

Mindfulness training in MS has been shown to reduce stress, help with depression and tiredness, and improve quality of life.<sup>7,8</sup> This training may include a series of classes, such as meditation.



## Being mindful – tips to get started<sup>9</sup>



### THINGS TO CONSIDER

Your MS nurse, local MS society or support group will be able to point you to resources about mindfulness training.

# Managing stress

Having a life-long condition may be stressful. Recognizing when you are feeling stressed and what triggers it are the first steps to managing stress. Mindfulness training or speaking to others can help you recognise when and why you are stressed.

## Signs of stress<sup>10</sup>



Regular irritability



Constant worrying



Low mood



Easily distracted



Feeling anxious



Trouble sleeping

## Ways to manage stress<sup>10</sup>



Take control rather than being a passenger and hoping things change



Make time for the things that make you happy and you find fulfilling



Mindfulness and meditation



Limit unhealthy coping strategies like cigarettes or drinking alcohol



Talk to someone about how you are feeling



Look after your physical health – including exercise and healthy eating



Plan ahead if you know a certain task is likely to be stressful



Set yourself goals; this may help you find a healthy routine



Prioritize the tasks that matter most

# Living your life

## Developing healthy habits and achieving your ambitions

Thinking about what matters to you and making time for these things can help with wellbeing. Being diagnosed with MS shouldn't stop you from living your life and continuing to achieve your goals and ambitions.

Setting goals is one way you can continue to work towards your ambitions and help develop healthy routines. Remember, the process is often more important than achieving the goal itself – some people find it easier to stick to a routine if they have goals in mind. You may need to adapt goals to how you are feeling and your current circumstances.

"My MS hasn't stopped me. I constantly go to gigs and festivals, travel abroad, and work full-time. I've had to make some changes, but I know my limits and how to make the most of opportunities."

- Ellen M

Goals will be different for every person. These may include:



Strengthening your relationships



Everyday activities



Getting creative



Maintaining healthy habits



Thinking about self-care

To help you plan and work towards goals, you can start by making them SMART:

- **S**pecific
- **M**easurable
- **A**chievable
- **R**ealistic
- **T**imely



Start by making your goal **specific**:

I would like to read more often.

And then think how you could **measure** it:

I will try to read one book every month.

You need to make sure it's **achievable**:

I'll join a book club to make it more sociable and fun.

Your goal should be **realistic**, so you should make sure that you have the time and the ability to achieve it:

If I'm unable to read, I will listen to a book instead.

And finally, the goal needs to have a **time**-frame, so that you have a target:

By this time next year, I will have read or listened to 10 books.

Remember, your circumstances may change. Don't worry about adapting your goals to suit your changing needs.

# SMART template

If you find this approach useful, you can use the template below to identify goals and track progress.

<p><b>S</b> Specific</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What gives me a sense of achievement?</li><li>• What do I want to accomplish?</li><li>• Why do I want to accomplish this?</li><li>• What are the requirements?</li><li>• What are the constraints?</li></ul>
<p><b>M</b> Measureable</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How will I measure my progress?</li><li>• How will I know when the goal is accomplished?</li></ul>
<p><b>A</b> Achievable</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How can the goal be accomplished?</li><li>• Note any external factors that may impact my goal and ways to overcome them.</li><li>• What are the logical steps I should take?</li></ul>
<p><b>R</b> Realistic</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have I given myself enough time to accomplish this goal?</li><li>• Is this goal something I can achieve?</li><li>• Do I have the necessary resources to achieve this goal?</li><li>• Remember, your circumstances may change. Don't worry about adapting your goals to suit your changing needs.</li></ul>
<p><b>T</b> Timely</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How long will it take to accomplish this goal?</li><li>• When is the completion of this goal due?</li><li>• When am I going to work on this goal?</li></ul>



# Resources and support

## Where can I find more support?

Discuss with your doctor or MS nurse how you are feeling. They may be able to help you to develop ways for living a better life with MS. Or simply point you towards other sources of support.

Getting psychological support and learning coping strategies isn't just about looking for help when you need it. Contact your local support group for more information and resources.

Also look to build a support network outside of these professionals. Connecting with other people who have MS can help you understand your own emotions. Online MS communities, such as forums and blogs, may help you learn from other people's experiences.

## Who can I talk to?

You can add contact details in the space provided below.

You may not want to contact all of these potential sources of support; it is important to find out what works for you.

My MS nurse

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My doctor

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Local MS society

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Local MS support group

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Local/national MS helpline

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Counsellor

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Psychotherapist

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Occupational health advisor

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My friends or family

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Social media support network

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Online MS blogs or communities

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