

Stress and Multiple Sclerosis

Having a chronic health condition can increase stress and there are many stressful situations that commonly occur in MS:

- Diagnostic **uncertainties** (before the definite MS diagnosis)
- The **unpredictability** of the disease course
- The **invisibility** of certain symptoms (fatigue, depression, pain)
- The **visibility** of symptoms, particularly newly emerging ones
- The need to **adjust and readjust** to changing symptoms and abilities
- **Financial stress** and concerns about employment
- The presence – or possibility – of **cognitive change**
- **Loss of control** (e.g., bladder dysfunction, mobility)
- The need to **make decisions** about medications and other healthcare requirements

Does stress increase the risk of relapses?

A relationship between stress and the onset of MS or MS relapses is considered possible but has not been powerfully demonstrated in studies. More research is needed to answer these questions.

Can stress make MS symptoms feel worse?

During times of stress, more energy is required to think, problem-solve, and handle daily life. At stressful or demanding times, symptoms may be experienced more strongly, because the energy to deal with them and get on with life has been drained. Stress can't be – and shouldn't be – totally avoided. But we can learn to reduce its intensity and to use it to work for, not against, us.

Recognizing Stress

Common signs of stress include changes in breathing, tight muscles, cold sweaty hands, and clenched teeth. Different people show their stress in different ways. In people with MS, some of the common signs of stress – fatigue and muscle tightness, for example – may also be symptoms of the disease. Understanding your stress responses and learning to separate them from your MS symptoms may help you recognize when you are stressed. Knowing what causes or increases your stress can be the first step in managing it.

Taming stress in your mind

Stress often evolves from how we interpret situations – and the way we relate to the world around us. So much in life could lead to stress. Some very ordinary events – together with unconstructive thinking habits – can produce major stress. Other events are stressful to even the most optimistic or resilient people. When you examine your stress producers, review the pressures that may have been part of your life for so long you may not immediately identify them as stressors. In what ways can you reinterpret situations so that they don't cause you so much stress?

Talk your way out of stress

Sharing your thoughts and feelings can relieve stress. Building a support network of people who know about your MS and the challenges you may face can provide you with a wider range of opinions. You may consider [1:1 MS Peer support](#), joining a local MS peer support group, or online chat group or forum.

Expressing anger

Letting your anger out can relieve stress – if you learn to do it without blaming others. After expressing your anger, you may find a few cycles of deep breathing will help you regain your calm. Once you are calmer, make a plan to face the underlying situation that made you so angry. Expressing anger may relieve stress, but it doesn't change the situation

It could be more than just stress

Depression is a common disorder that is generally related to chemical imbalance. About half of all people with MS will experience a major depressive episode at some point in their lives. The good news is that depression is one of the most effectively treated symptoms of MS. If you, or those close to you, think that you have become depressed, it's important that you seek help—talk to your health care provider.

Cognitive change and stress

MS-related cognitive changes are known to occur in more than half of all people with MS. These changes may include memory, communication skills, attention span or ability to concentrate, among other symptoms. As with all other symptoms of MS, the type and the extent of cognitive problems differ widely from person to person. Cognitive problems are directly related to the presence of MS lesions, or damaged areas, in the brain. They are not caused by stress, depression, medication, or fatigue, but they can be affected by all of these. Cognitive change can cause stress. The loss of any ability is stressful – and so is the fear of that loss. It may be helpful to develop strategies to reduce stress caused by cognitive change. For example:

- Keep a daily diary for lists to reduce the stress of trying to recall a day's activities.
- Ask for written information and instructions to reduce the need for remembering details.
- Share concerns and responsibilities with others to lighten your load practically and emotionally.
- Discuss cognitive rehabilitation techniques with your healthcare team. Practice some form of stress management daily.

Everyday strategies for managing stress

- Simplify your life – learn to say no
- Plan ahead for situations that could cause stress
- Get extra rest before big days ahead
- Make your requests for help as specific as possible
- If old interests and activities become more difficult or too time-consuming, adjust or replace them with new ones that fit your current lifestyle.

Relaxation

Relaxation isn't something you just decide to do; it's something that is learned. You will need to discover what works for you. Some relaxation techniques include:

- Deep breathing: Deep breathing and focusing on your breath can help reduce tension and allow your mind and body to feel more comfortable.
- Meditation: Many people find that meditation greatly decreases the stress in their lives. There are many apps and online tools that can help you get started with meditation.
- Visualization: Visualize an appealing scene and move yourself – in your mind – into the picture.
- Progressive muscle relaxation: Progressive muscle relaxation involves going through your body's entire group of muscles – tensing, relaxing, and focusing on the changes occurring. If you have significant spasticity in some muscles, strongly tensing those muscle groups could trigger a spasm. You may want to speak with a physiotherapist or your healthcare team about ways to work in a more comfortable way.
- Yoga: Yoga involves breathing exercises and a range of stretches that revolve around the spine. Yoga increases the body's flexibility and releases tension.
- Tai chi: Tai chi involves deep breathing, slow gentle movements, and relaxation. As a conditioning regime, it is considered gentler than yoga.
- Traditional exercise programs: Exercise or any physical activity, especially when done on a regular basis, has been found to reduce stress and improve physical and mental health. Walking, swimming, or gardening can all relieve stress. Speak with your healthcare team about developing a program to suit your needs and abilities.

No right way

It is important to remember that there is no one "right way" to cope with stress! Even within the same family, some members may handle situations differently. Everyone should refrain from passing judgment on what is "healthy" or "right" for others. Respect is a stress reducer by itself.

Additional Support:

If you require support, information, or additional resources, please contact the MS Knowledge Network and speak to an MS Navigator at 1-844-859-6789 or by email at msnavigators@mssociety.ca.