

# Taming Stress in Multiple Sclerosis



## TAMING STRESS IN MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

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## **COVER ARTWORK**

Marcello DiBarbora

*Mountain Lake / oil on canvas*

*"Painting is a Dream"*

Italian-born Marcello DiBarbora settled in Kingston, Ontario in 1954. Marcello has always been interested in painting. In the late 1990s, Marcello, who was no longer able to paint with his hands, started a Paint-by-Mouth program in his community.

Supported by volunteers in handling the paints, Marcello is a tireless painter. Marcello's wife, Licia, is proud of his strength and passion: "Painting keeps Marcello busy and interested in the world. It keeps the world alive for him."

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## PART I: Causes of Stress

### Brought to you by evolution...

When our ancestors were taking a morning stroll and met a tiger, they could run or fight. Either action demanded that their bodies adjust rapidly to meet the emergency, and they experienced stress as part of the process.

Without stress, we would not be able to act in times of danger. In fact, without some stress to get us to focus on a problem we might do almost nothing. Many people perform best while under stress. But sometimes people are immobilized by the pressure that stress creates. Then stress makes it hard for us to concentrate and stops us from doing what needs to be done.

### Today's tigers

Stress can be caused by both pleasant and unpleasant demands and changes. People can be just as stressed by getting a promotion as by not getting one.

Stress usually begins with alarm, the modern equivalent of noticing a tiger. However, our options are rarely as simple as running away or fighting. For example, most people are very stressed at the prospect of having to use a cane or wheelchair. Many eventually experience relief or accept the benefits of the aid once the **stressor** – the idea of using a cane or wheelchair – has been sufficiently worked through.

### Stress and MS

Having any chronic illness increases stress. MS is no exception. In fact, there are many stressful situations that are common with MS:

- Diagnostic **uncertainties** (before the definite MS diagnosis)
- The **unpredictability** of MS
- The **invisibility** of the symptoms (which can cause people with MS to question the reality of their own experience)
- The **visibility** of the symptoms, particularly newly emerging ones (to which others may react before the person has had time to adjust)
- The need to **adjust and readjust** to changing abilities
- **Financial stress** and concerns about employment
- The presence – or possibility – of **cognitive impairment**
- **Loss of control** (e.g., bladder dysfunction)
- The need to **make decisions** about disease-modifying treatment and adjusting to the treatment if it is chosen.

### Does stress increase the risk of attacks or affect the long-term course of MS?

Many people with MS feel that there is a definite connection between stress and MS. Others believe that controlling stress can have a beneficial impact on MS. And still others believe that neither stress nor controlling stress has any effect on MS. Scientifically speaking, the jury is still out.

A relationship between stress and the onset of MS or MS relapses is considered possible, but hasn't been powerfully demonstrated in studies. Can a stressful event cause nerve damage or lesions? Can nerve damage or lesions increase someone's experience of stress? More research is needed to answer these questions.

### **Can stress make MS symptoms feel worse?**

Many people with MS say yes. They experience more symptoms during stressful times. When the stress abates, their symptoms seem less troubling or less severe. This could be understood by looking at the stress and coping process.

During times of stress, more energy is required to think, problem-solve, and handle daily life. For example, one's ability to be patient with family members often wanes after a tough day. 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.

We all have finite reservoirs of coping ability. At demanding times, our supply may temporarily run dry. Any difficulty, including MS symptoms, is more challenging at these moments.

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.

### PART II: Recognizing Stress

Common signs of stress include changes in breathing, tight muscles, cold sweaty hands, and clenched teeth. But 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 taming it. What daily events or concerns stress you most? You may find it helpful to make a list of the things that have caused you the most stress in the last two weeks.

You may want to ask those nearest to you to help you recognize your stressors. But don't be overly influenced by what others think should stress you – just take note of what they think **has** caused you stress. A situation isn't stressful unless **you** react to it with stress.

## COMMON SIGNS OF STRESS

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### Emotional signs

- Chronic irritability or resentment
- Feeling down in the dumps, demoralized
- Continual boredom
- Excessive nervousness or anxiety
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Nightmares

### Thought-related signs

- Worrying every day
- Distractibility
- Expecting the worst to happen much of the time
- Difficulty making everyday decisions

### Physical signs

- Clammy hands or sweating
- Constipation/diarrhea
- Dry mouth
- Headache
- Heart palpitations
- Stomach aches, knots, cramps, or nausea
- Muscle spasms or tightness
- Lump in throat
- Faintness
- Fatigue/weariness
- Sleeping too much/too little
- Short and shallow breathing

### Taming stress in your mind

Stress often evolves from the way we interpret situations – and the way we relate to the world around us. So much in life **could** lead to stress: lost buttons, long lines, irritating people, unreasonable requests, insurance forms, voice mail.

Take a look at your stress producers. In what ways can you reinterpret situations so that they don't cause you so much stress? How can you relate differently to people to avoid stress?

If personal thinking patterns create or increase stress, new thinking patterns can be learned. Here are some examples of thinking that increases stress:

- ➔ You think “total failure” whenever you're short of absolute perfection.

**Try instead:** “I did a pretty good job – I'll do it better next time.”

- ➔ You think you are responsible for everything: “I wonder what I did to make him feel like that?”

**Try instead:** “I am not the centre of everyone's world.”

- ➔ You think “should” about everything: “I should be treated fairly.”

**Try instead:** “I'd like to be treated fairly, but....”

- You think: “I probably won’t be able to do that...no use trying.”  
**Try instead:** “I think I’ll give it a try and see how far I can go.”
- You think one thing is every thing: “I messed that up, I’ll mess up everything.”  
**Try instead:** “I am not very good at that, but I’m good at many other things.”

### Can you cut stress down to size?

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. Examples include a declining relationship with your partner, declining job performance, an ongoing effort to hide your symptoms, or financial problems such as battles with insurance companies or entitlement programs.

Doing this may help start the process of identifying resources. You may need a marriage counsellor, job coach, financial planner, or patient advocate. But regardless of the stressor, stress is never trivial.

### **Talk your way out of stress**

Sharing your thoughts and feelings can relieve stress. Building a support network of people who know about your illness and the difficulties you face can provide you with a wider range of opinions.

Talking with others can help you see the things that cause you stress in a new light. As well as your own support network (family and/or friends), your local MS Society chapter or division is there for you. In addition, there are many support and self-help groups in Canada that are affiliated with the MS Society of Canada. Call your chapter or division to find out if there is a group that's right for you in your area.

Talking with friends and family often means educating them so that they will better understand your experience. Some people can do this on their own; other people need the help of a social worker or other counsellor to help them communicate with the important people in their lives.

### **Expressing anger**

Letting your anger out can relieve stress – if you learn to do it without blaming others. You might say “I’m so angry” instead of “You make me so angry.” After expressing your anger, you may want to do a few cycles of deep breathing to 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.

### **Reopening the issues**

Every time we meet someone new, or start a new job, we have to find out where we can assert ourselves, and where we need to make changes or compromises. People with MS often negotiate and renegotiate as symptoms come and go, particularly if they alter abilities. In telling others how you feel, always mention that MS is a changeable condition – that you and they need to be flexible. Leave the door open.

### **This is more than just stress!**

Depression is a common disorder that is generally related to a chemical imbalance. Many Canadians experience clinical depression each year. There is evidence that people with MS have an even greater incidence of depression than the general population. However, this is not just because coping with a chronic illness can be difficult. There is evidence that depression may be associated with the biology of the disease.

Although depression is a serious illness, it can be treated effectively. Diagnosis and treatment require a professional therapist who is experienced with MS patients or one who is willing to work with your MS professional.

### **Special problems with stress, depression, and MS**

Some of the symptoms of stress are remarkably similar to symptoms of depression and some mimic or overlap symptoms of multiple sclerosis. By and large, research has failed to show a strong link between depression and the beta-interferon drugs used to treat MS. However, decreases in levels of the chemical serotonin in the brain are linked to depression. The beta interferons decrease the amount of serotonin formed in the brain. If you are taking any of the beta interferons, and experience emotional ups and downs, talk to your doctor.

Depression causes people to lose interest in their usual activities. In addition, they have five or more of the symptoms listed opposite, to some degree. (You will notice that symptoms such as fatigue or inability to concentrate can also be symptoms of MS.)

If you, or those close to you, think that you have become depressed, if you have had five or more of these symptoms, and **if they continue for more than two weeks** without improvement, talk to your physician or to a mental-health professional.

### SIGNS OF DEPRESSION

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- Sleeping too much or too little
- Marked changes in appetite, or weight gain or loss
- Agitation and anxiety or a slowing down of mental and physical activity
- Decreased energy and increased fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness, guilt, and self-reproach
- Indecisiveness, memory loss, difficulty in concentrating
- Feeling “blue” or “down in the dumps” most of the day, nearly every day
- Loss of interest in doing things that normally would interest you; difficulty feeling pleasure when things happen that would normally be pleasurable
- Thoughts of death or suicide or of harming yourself or others

### Cognitive impairment and stress

Until recently, cognitive changes were thought to be rare in MS. Today, MS-related cognitive changes are known to occur in about half the people with MS. As with all other symptoms of MS, the type and the extent of cognitive problems differ widely from person to person. Many of these changes are minimal. Only about 10% of people with MS have severe cognitive problems.

The most common problems are in the areas of recall or recent memory, in the speed of thinking or information processing, and in the ability to focus and sustain attention. Changes in problem-solving abilities may also be relatively common.

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. Having a cognitive problem can cause stress. The loss of any ability is stressful – and so is the fear of that loss.

A helpful booklet on this subject is *Solving Cognitive Problems* by Dr. Nicholas LaRocca. Available from your local chapter or division office, this booklet explains cognitive problems in detail as well as what can be done about them. People with MS-related cognitive problems may find it helpful to develop or concentrate on strategies to reduce stress due to cognitive problems. For example:

- Keep a daily diary or a notebook for lists to reduce the stress of constantly 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 – designed to improve performance – with your MS professional.
- Practice some form of stress management on a daily basis.
- Ask your local chapter or division of the MS Society of Canada for information and assistance.

## **PART III: Techniques and Strategies for Taming Stress**

### **Everyday strategies**

See if you can get everyday stress under control:

- ➔ Simplify your life. Relax a few standards. Let the grass grow. Ask yourself if you want to do a particular task, if it needs to be done perfectly, or not at all.
- ➔ Plan ahead in situations that could cause stress. Take a book with you if waiting may be necessary. Make plans for where to meet or call if plans go awry.
- ➔ Get extra sleep before family gatherings or important events.
- ➔ Learn to say no. You don't have to do anything if you don't have the time, energy, or desire.
- ➔ Make your requests for help as specific as possible: "Would you please help me by ..."
- ➔ If old interests and activities become more difficult or too time consuming, replace them with new ones that fit your current needs.

### Get very practical:

- Make an extra set of keys.
  - Update your telephone/address directory.
  - Keep the car and other important appliances in good working order.
  - If small things you need don't work, get new ones: shoelaces, alarm clock, can opener.
  - Keep a good supply of small items you use all the time: toilet paper, batteries, stamps, change for the bus.
  - Investigate and use gadgets, aids, and devices that save time or effort.
- 
- ➔ Do the unpleasant things early in the day so that you don't have to worry about them.
  - ➔ Carry a notebook to write yourself – and others – notes for the day, the week, the month.
  - ➔ If you find that you are breathing in a short, shallow pattern, it's time to take a break. That kind of breathing often accompanies stress. To break the pattern, sit down for a minute. Take deep, slow breaths and relax all your muscles. (See "Deep Breathing", page 20)
  - ➔ Don't try to answer the phone on the first ring. Let it ring. Consider having voicemail or an answering machine.
  - ➔ Make a 3/4 rule: fill the gas tank when it is 3/4 empty; order more medication when it is 3/4 gone; replace juice when the container is 3/4 gone.

- ➔ When you find a task difficult or stress producing, try to find a better way of doing it. If you can't think of an easier way, ask a friend to help you look at the problem. Once you have found a solution, you might want to make a note of it to remind yourself of good choices you have made that might be adapted for other problems.

### If the morning rush is stressful:

- Get up 15 minutes earlier.
  - Ask someone else to take on a morning task.
  - Do some of the preparation the night before.
  - Make sure that all your morning tasks are absolutely necessary.
- 
- ➔ Make equal exchanges in your life. Do you find it too stressful to travel to see your family and friends? Give yourself permission to use the same money to make regular phone visits.
  - ➔ Use your imagination to get yourself used to the idea of an event you are not looking forward to. You need to visit a new doctor? Imagine what you are going to wear, what questions you want to ask, what questions will be asked of you. Think about the visit the way you would like it to be. Then imagine the worst thing that could happen and how you would deal with it.
  - ➔ Remind yourself that you are a person – not a “multiple sclerosis patient.”

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- Don't be in a hurry when driving, slow down from your usual pace. And try a new route from time to time. If long car rides cause you stress, listen to audiotapes of books or pleasant music.
- Schedule rest periods. (You may want to set an alarm to tell you that it's time to rest.) Knowing that you are going to rest on a regular basis can stop you from feeling guilty about doing it.
- Try to do something you enjoy each day.
- Sit quietly for a minute or two before starting your meal. Say grace if you wish, or just notice – really notice – where you are, what you are eating, who you are with.
- Take a cool shower at the end of the day. Let water carry cares down the drain.
- Spend as much time as possible with people who aren't worriers.
- Learn to revise time schedules. If you told a friend you would meet at noon, and you are running late, is there any reason the appointment can't be changed to 1:00?
- Do one thing at a time. Don't think about the next task before you have finished the one you are working on. Let yourself feel a sense of accomplishment before moving on.
- Boredom can be stressful: take a course, join a club, learn a new skill.
- Eat regular, balanced meals. Keep prepared foods in the house for times when you don't feel like cooking or shopping.

- Reduce reliance on cigarettes, caffeine, and alcohol. Ask your doctor for help if necessary.
- Work toward the award for “Has the Best Sense of Humour”; don’t try for “Gets the Most Done.”
- Ask for help when you need it.
- Turn to the MS Society of Canada. Let the experiences of others help you solve problems – and your experiences help others.

### Relaxation

One of the most unhelpful things that you can be asked is “Why don’t you just relax?”

Relaxation isn’t something you just decide to do. People have to learn to relax. You will need to discover what works for you, and you’ll need to practice.

There is no one right way to relax. Some people find that reading, listening to music, or engaging in something spiritual relaxes them. Others garden, paint, cook, or do puzzles.

Many people use one or more of the relaxation techniques described in the next sections. Read through the descriptions and think about which might be best for you. Then give one a try for a month or so. If it doesn’t work, try another. And try again. Different methods of managing stress through relaxation may work better at different times.

To make relaxation easier, give yourself permission to take time for yourself. Don't feel guilty about shutting a door and telling everyone to leave you alone.

### Deep Breathing

Deep breathing can help reduce tension and allow your mind and body to feel more comfortable. The exercise takes only a few minutes and can be done almost anywhere at any time. Try deep breathing to start the day and then repeat it several other times throughout the day. Deep breathing can also help you relax just before an event that might be stressful.

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**Note:** You may want to make a tape of these instructions to play while you are learning the exercises.

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- 1 Sit with your back straight and your shoulders comfortably back.
- 2 Put your hand on your belly, below the waist, so that you can feel your breathing.
- 3 Inhale through your nose slowly and deeply. The air will feel cool. Concentrate on the feeling of the air as it moves into all parts of your body.
- 4 As the air reaches your belly, let your belly expand. Some people tend to tighten their bellies as they breathe in. Your hands on your belly will let you feel the movement.
- 5 Draw in as much air as you can. Then, hold your breath for a few seconds – four or five is fine. You don't need to distract yourself by counting unless it makes you more comfortable.

- 6 Begin to exhale. Shape your lips as if you were going to whistle and slowly breathe out between your lips. Use your lips to control how fast you exhale.
- 7 Concentrate on the feeling of the air leaving all parts of your body. The air coming out should feel warm.
- 8 Your hands will let you feel the breath leave your body. Your belly will deflate and as it does, the large muscle under your ribs – the diaphragm – will get larger.
- 9 When you feel your lungs empty, sit quietly for a moment and then repeat the inhale/exhale cycle. Repeat the cycle four or five times.
- 10 Sit quietly for a minute or two.

### **Clear your mind**

The “Clear Your Mind” exercise is an enjoyable relaxation exercise for many. However, it takes practice to do it well, and may seem deceptively easy. This exercise may be frustrating or require more practice if there are difficulties with attention and concentration.

- 1 Choose a time when you have about 10 minutes available in a place that is relatively free of noise and distraction and where you will not be interrupted.
- 2 Loosen tight clothing, remove your shoes, and sit in a position that is comfortable.
- 3 Close your eyes and do two inhale/exhale cycles of deep breathing.

- 4 With your eyes still closed, picture in your mind a pleasant, restful place. Try to visualize as many details as possible: what objects are present, the colour of the sky, who is present, etc. Concentrate on that place. Watch the wind blow on the trees or the water. Notice how the leaves turn slowly. Imagine your other senses experiencing the scene. Feel the gentle cool breeze on your skin. Breathe deeply and slowly, and imagine the smells associated with your scene, perhaps the fresh salty air of the ocean, or the clean woody smell of the country. Imagine hearing the sounds associated with your scene, perhaps the sound of the breeze moving softly through the trees or the call of birds.
- 5 Some people have difficulty visualizing, or creating a “picture” in their mind’s eye. If this is the case, you may find this exercise is not for you. An alternative approach is to follow steps 1 through 3 above. Instead of visualizing a relaxing scene in step 4, concentrate on a word – “calm” – or a thought – “I am loved.”
- 6 Don’t worry if other thoughts or images break in – it isn’t easy to clear your mind. When you notice your mind has drifted, gently return your thoughts to your image or word. If you have trouble, do another cycle of deep breathing and try again. It may take considerable practice to learn to clear your mind. As you do so, the relaxation will become deeper and you will feel refreshed and more energetic.
- 7 End the mind clearing by stretching – to reawaken your body to the world around you – and exhaling.

## Meditation

You may want to continue on to deeper meditation once you have learned to clear your mind. Many people find that meditation greatly decreases the stress in their lives. It takes about 15 minutes once or twice a day. Try to meditate at the same times each day.

- 1 Sit as you would for mind clearing in a quiet place, free from distractions. Unplug the phone and close the door. Tell everyone you are going to be busy for 15 minutes.
- 2 Do two or three cycles of deep breathing.
- 3 Pick a word or phrase that makes you feel calm. Although any word will do, many people find that words that end in an **m** or **n** sound are most helpful – words like “calm,” “home,” “noon,” or “one.”
- 4 Close your eyes and repeat the word or phrase over and over either in your mind or out loud. Concentrate on the way the word sounds inside your head. Try not to think about what you are doing or how you are feeling.
- 5 If you have trouble relaxing or concentrating on the word, stop, do a cycle of deep breathing, and try again.
- 6 End the exercise by gently stretching and exhaling.
- 7 Although 15 minutes may be the ultimate goal of the meditation period, the actual time isn't really important. Be realistic. Don't worry if you only are able to concentrate for a few minutes at first. Just sit quietly for the rest of the time period. (Just sitting quietly will do you good.) With practice, the time and the depth of relaxation will increase.

### **Visualization**

Visualization is a combination of meditation, clearing your mind, imagination, and deep breathing. With visualization you do more than just see an appealing scene. You move yourself – in your mind – into the picture. Watch yourself reaching your hand out to pick a flower or to trail your fingers through a sunlit stream. Go to the beach and let the sand sift through your hand onto your leg.

Start the exercise by doing three or four cycles of deep breathing, and end the exercise by stretching and exhaling. If you can't enter the picture at first, do a cycle or two of deep breathing and try again. As with the "Clear Your Mind" exercise, try to experience the scene with as many of your senses as possible. Hear the sound the rushing stream makes, and how the sound changes as you change the position of your hand. Smell the cool fresh scent of the stream, and feel the water on your fingers. The entire exercise can take as little as five and as long as 15 minutes.

### **Progressive muscle relaxation**

Progressive muscle relaxation is often used as an aid to stress management. And, done in bed before you go to sleep, it can be an aid to a sound night's sleep.

Going through your body's entire group of muscles – tensing, relaxing, and focusing on the changes – will take about 12 to 15 minutes. If it takes less than that, you are moving at a non-relaxing speed. These exercises will provide the most benefit if you do them twice a day. If there are some muscle groups that you cannot work with comfortably, skip them.

**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 other MS health professional about ways to work in a more comfortable way.**

Many people, especially those with cognitive problems, find that the exercises are easier to do along with a prerecorded tape. You can prepare the tape yourself or ask someone with a relaxing voice to do it for you.

You will work with each of 17 muscle groups in a specific order. **Tense, but don't strain** each muscle group. Hold the tense position for the slow count of five, paying attention to the way those muscles feel. Relax the muscles – letting them go totally limp. Focus for a count of five on how the muscles feel when relaxed.

To prepare for the exercise, wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothing, remove glasses or contact lenses, and sit up in a chair without crossing your legs or arms. You may also do this lying down in bed.

- 1 Clench both hands. Focus on how your hands feel and how the tension moves into the forearms. Relax. Notice what the muscles in your hands and forearms feel like now.

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- 2 Touch your fingers to your shoulders. Raise your arms level with your shoulders. Focus on the tension in your biceps and upper arms. Relax and focus on the change in feeling.
- 3 Shrug your shoulders, raising them as high as possible. Focus on the tension in your shoulders. Relax and focus on the change.
- 4 Wrinkle your forehead. Notice where tension occurs – around your eyes and forehead. Relax and focus on the change.
- 5 Close your eyes tightly. Focus on the tension. Relax and focus on the change.
- 6 Clench your teeth. Focus on the tension in your jaw, mouth, and chin. Relax and focus on the change.
- 7 Press as much of your tongue as possible onto the roof of your mouth. Focus on the tension in your mouth and throat. Relax and focus on the change.
- 8 Move your head slowly backwards as far as you comfortably can, keeping your shoulders level. Focus on the tension in your neck and upper back. Relax and focus on the change.

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**Note:** If you experience Lhermitte’s sign – an electrical-like shock in your spine when you tip your neck forward – skip step 9.

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- 9 Pull your head forward, down onto your chest. Focus on the tension in your neck, shoulders, and upper back. Relax and focus on the change.

- 10 Move away from the back of your chair, arch your back and push your arms upward. Focus on the tension in your back and shoulders. Relax and focus on the change.
- 11 Fill your lungs with air and hold the breath. Focus on the tension in your chest and back. Exhale all the way, relax and focus on the change.
- 12 Pull your stomach as far back toward your spine as you can. Focus on the tension in your stomach muscles and changes in your breathing. Relax and focus on the change.
- 13 Without pulling your stomach in, tense your stomach muscles. Focus on the tension. Relax and focus on the change.
- 14 Tense the muscles in your buttocks. Focus on the tension. Relax and focus on the change.
- 15 Flex your thigh muscles by straightening your legs or tensing the muscles. Focus on the tension. Relax and focus on the change.
- 16 Lift your feet off of the ground. Point your toes up, your heels down. Focus on the tension in your feet, ankles, and calves. Lower your feet, relax, and focus on the change.
- 17 Lift your feet slightly and curl your toes all the way down. Focus on the tension on the top of your feet and in your arches. Lower your feet, relax, and focus on the change.

18 After you have learned to be aware of tension in all 17 muscle groups, you may want to focus only on those groups that give you the most trouble. Tense and relax those groups – often the jaw, neck, and stomach – several times during the day. Check your “high tension” muscle groups from time to time to judge how relaxed you are.

### **Yoga**

Yoga involves breathing exercises and a range of stretches that revolve around the spine. Yoga increases the body’s flexibility and releases tension. Many community centres have courses in yoga. Some of the movements may be easy for you. Other movements may need practice or adaptation. And still others may need to be omitted. Discuss your plans with your physician or physiotherapist before you begin.

### **Tai chi**

Tai chi involves deep breathing, slow gentle movements, and relaxation. As a conditioning regime, it is considered more gentle than yoga. Many of the positions can be done while sitting. Discuss your plans with your physician or physiotherapist and ask your Society chapter about “adapted” tai chi classes in your area.

### **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 physician or physiotherapist 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 the MS situation by wanting to talk about it, read about it, and participate in support groups. Other family members may ignore it much of the time. If an approach is working for you, you may be tempted to conclude it is the right way for your loved ones.

Dr. Nicholas LaRocca, an expert on coping and MS, advises people to recognize that no one method is inherently better or worse than any other. Family members and professionals should refrain from passing judgment on what is “healthy” or “right” for others. Respect is a stress reducer by itself.

## **How to reach the MS Society of Canada**

**Current as of February, 2007**

**Call toll-free in Canada: 1-800-268-7582**  
**[www.mssociety.ca](http://www.mssociety.ca)**

### **British Columbia Division**

1501-4330 Kingsway  
Burnaby, British Columbia  
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### Our Mission

To be a leader in finding a cure for multiple sclerosis and enabling people affected by MS to enhance their quality of life.