MS and Faith

by ANGELA FINLAY

Belief, Spirituality and Health

Some people are skeptical about putting a lot of energy and attention into faith-based healing and coping, since it can lead to false hope for those with chronic illnesses like MS.

It's true that favoring a religious approach over scientific evidence and treatment can lead to complications, but that doesn't mean you have to choose science over faith. In fact, MS and faith go well together; those who seek hope and support in both their secular and religious lives can draw on twice as many loving, strengthening, and healing resources.

How Faith Can Help you Heal

Although your faith may not be able to eradicate all your symptoms, it can provide avenues to better emotional health, less stress, and ultimately, a higher quality of life. Several different aspects of your faith can help you rise above your MS challenges, but also teach you to cope with your symptoms and limitations more easily and comfortably:

- **Certainty –** Nobody knows what tomorrow holds, but those who can focus on a certainty amid all the uncertainties of MS will have an easier time staying balanced and motivated. Patients with a strong sense of faith can balance out their concerns with a sense of purpose: the belief that there is a reason behind your suffering, and that you will be given the strength to continue your journey. That sense of purpose is a powerful psychological tool to get through the rough patches.
- **Support –** When you're battling a chronic illness, your surroundings can be just as important as what you hold in your heart. The church community is a strong social circle, with a lot of love and support to share. While MS flares can leave you feeling helpless and isolated, the helping hands around you can bring you back into a happy and healthy social interaction.
- **Comfort –** Some people benefit most from the security and comfort that faith provides. Your faith is something you can turn to when you're emotionally distraught, something that can quickly restore a sense of calm. In this way, faith and prayer becomes a meditative outlet that factors into your wider MS treatment plan.

Overcoming Roadblocks in the Religious Community

Although faith can be a wellspring of support and healing, it can also lead to dilemmas, especially when your peers don't understand your situation. You may be surprised when some of your fellow believers question your discomforts or hold back sympathy. In many cases, these are opportunities for you to educate those around you, and strengthen you own patience and sense of compassion.

Judgments of Your Faith

Sometimes, people unfairly judge your state of health and faith without understanding how you really feel. After all, if you truly had faith, wouldn't God grant you the strength to overcome your disease? Aren't you just seeking attention rather than a cure?

Those who struggle with the unpredictable pain and disability of MS know the issue is not that straightforward, but it's important to realize that other people may be too far removed from your discomfort to share your deeper perspective of faith.

Next page: overcoming roadblocks continued, and using your illness to empower your faith.

Overcoming Roadblocks in the Religious Community

Ignoring Your Reality

Skepticism and separation is a natural reaction to chronic illness, and even good-hearted people can fall into the trap. The problem is that people project their own fear onto others: the fact that you are ill reminds them that they too could become ill, and that's a frightening realization. In turn, many try to ignore that possibility be ignoring your plight.

Instead of recoiling from those around you who don't understand the nature of your struggle, take the opportunity to describe your life and routine to them. The better your communication, the better everyone can comprehend how you feel.

Seeking sympathy is understandable, but it can also upset the social balance. For instance, if you dwell too much on your own discomforts and limitations in conversation, people will eventually begin to resist your emotional demands. Learning to focus on other topics and other people can actually help to get your mind off your MS, and will foster healthier and more fruitful relationships.

Using Your Illness to Empower Your Faith

Faith can help you better handle your illness, but your MS can also help strengthen your faith and your role in your religious community. Rather than suffer through your limitations, learn to empower yourself with your actions and interactions in your church community and your everyday routine:

- **Make yourself useful –** A quick and easy way to overcome feelings of vulnerability is to help others. A small, generous gesture can go far to making someone's day, and you'll get a real feeling of happiness from the deed. Contribute your time and talents to charitable events, and offer small tokens of gratitude often. Even a simple thank you card can make a big impact.
- **Take control of your healing –** Creativity is closely tied to healing, and many patients make huge emotional gains through art therapy for MS. Use your church as a base for your creativity, and start up an art drop-in class, a writing circle, or a Sunday school play that can get you moving – physically and psychologically. It's important to remember what you are capable of accomplishing, and that you have a lot to offer your community.

- **Honor your unique faith experience –** The way *you* experience your faith is what's important. Comparing yourself to others, or allowing thoughts and judgements to cloud your spiritual resolve will only add worry to your life. Remember that your spiritual path is yours and yours alone, even though you surround yourself with other loving people to help you through.

MS is challenging, but it can also bring a sense of individuality and a unique perspective to strengthen your community. Not everyone will understand your daily path, but when you meet someone who does, there's an even greater chance to forge a strong, comforting bond.

See your faith for all it can bring – the personal strength, social support, and potential for expression and

exploration – and you may find a way not to only survive, but thrive in your life with MS.