MS and Cabin Fever

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Keeping Healthy, Positive and Active

If you live through long, cold winters, cabin fever – that feeling of anxiety, restlessness, and irritability that comes with a long stretch indoors – is difficult to avoid.

When you live with multiple sclerosis, reduced mobility can make cabin fever crop up sooner, or at any time of year. It can also be more damaging, working against your best efforts to keep an active lifestyle and wreaking havoc on your MS symptoms along the way.

But there is a way to get through the dark, cold days without losing a grip on your MS management, and it begins with a few easy changes to your daily routine.

Maintaining a Healthy State of Mind

How you perceive your world plays a big role in how you experience symptoms and opportunities, but a healthy state of mind begins with a healthy body. Consider your daily diet, and look to make some additions or replacements that have proven benefits for your emotional wellbeing:

- **Omega 3 fatty acids –** Add more salmon, walnuts or flax seed to your menu. Research shows that their high levels of omega 3 fatty acids can elevate mood, which is particularly useful when you're beginning to feel isolated.
- **Vitamins D and B –** The B vitamins – like B12, folic acid, and niacin – support energy metabolism, and experts suggest that vitamin D deficiency is one factor behind many mood disorders. Try to eat more eggs and vitamin D-fortified milk or juice.

- **Zinc –** When it comes to stress, zinc is an important ally: it moderates your body's stress response, and has both anti-inflammatory and anti-depressant properties. Eat more lean beef, mussels, spinach or cashews when the stress of close quarters gets to you.
- **Tryptophan –** The body converts the amino acid tryptophan into serotonin, the feel-good neurotransmitter that keeps you happy. Try some tryptophan-rich foods like turkey, sunflower seeds, asparagus and tofu.

Attitude and outlook is the other side of the equation. Consider visiting a therapist to learn some cognitive behavioural therapy techniques, and incorporate some simple mediation exercises into each day. And don't underestimate the power that scent can have on your emotions: lavender, peppermint, and jasmine are uplifting aromas that are known to help with depression and anxiety, and can be used in a number of ways in your home.

Next page: finding MS-friendly outdoor activities and staying connected.

Find MS-Friendly Outdoor Activities

When the winter weather dips to new lows, it can be tempting to wait inside until it passes. But on days when the wind isn't so frigid, think about getting out for a bit of sun and fresh air.

It's no secret that natural sunshine allows your body to produce vitamin D, but a big hit of oxygen can also help with your MS symptoms: some patients have used hyperbaric oxygen therapy to decrease inflammation and promote stem cell building, which may help repair tissues that have been damaged by MS. But even smaller doses of fresh, oxygenated air can help you clear your mind and improve your mood.

The key is to find an activity that respects your physical limitations, but let's you really appreciate the world around you:

- **Cheer on your local hockey team**. Public sporting events are great mood-lifters, and the perfect opportunity to get your mind off your own troubles. When they take place outdoors, you can get the added benefit of much-needed sunlight and fresh air.
- **Play in the snow**. Embrace your inner child and build a snowman, make a snow angel, or stroll through a snow-covered forest. A few minutes in the chilly weather can be revitalizing, and you may actually develop a taste for winter.
- **Take up skiing – seriously!** Don't dwell on how your MS interferes with activity, find a way around it. Adaptive skiing and snowboarding is an established sport that's growing in popularity. With the help of an instructor and some clever tweaks to the traditional ski or snowboard design, you could actually enjoy more grace and better mobility on the slopes than walking on a sidewalk.

When all else fails, find ways to keep yourself happy and busy inside. Creating a sculpture, putting together a scrapbook, knitting, and reading an exciting book can keep your mind engaged. Boredom is the enemy. Also, keep your curtains open and your windows clean – it will create an open feeling.

Stay Connected for Better Health

Coping with MS symptoms can make it difficult to keep up an active social life, and the emotional consequences can make it difficult to connect with sympathetic friends and family. The challenge is even greater when long nights and cold weather keep you from leaving your house, but you need to fight against the urge to hide from the world. Consider:

- **There is a biological benefit of keeping good company**. Aside from a lack of sunlight and activity, social interaction is vital if you want to ward off cabin fever. In fact, a recent US study found that the brain reacts negatively when you're isolated from other people: it produces less myelin, and since myelin is necessary for complex emotions and thinking, an insufficient amount may encourage mental illness. This could help explain the well-known connection between level of social connection and risk of depression.
- **Find a comfortable way to interact**. In order to keep your myelin production at a healthy level, reach out to the people around you. Even if you're not feeling like socializing, chances are you'll open up and relax as soon as you surround yourself with happy, caring people. MS support groups or art therapy classes are great ways to connect, and you can devote as much or as little time to them as you like. Even opening up to neighbours or making more calls to friends and relatives can help break the cycle of isolation.

Disability can lead to isolation, and then to depression, especially if you are ashamed or afraid of how your symptoms will manifest when you leave your home. Luckily, a good support network has a remarkable effect on quality of life for most MS patients, and it's one of the best weapons to fight off cabin fever (whether or not you suffer from a chronic illness).

Take some time to build new social links and strengthen your existing relationships for a more positive winter experience.