Navigating MS and Relationships

by ERIC PATTERSON

MS and Relationships

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a formidable foe. The actual damage it causes in your brain is dramatic and the impact can be devastating. But the impact of MS does not stay contained to one specific area of your life. The literal damage to your brain is matched by the figurative damage MS creates in other areas.

Your work may suffer due to missed days and decreased ability to perform. Your mental health may suffer because of the challenging shift in self-perception, self-esteem and the increase of stress. And, illustrating the widespread power of MS, your relationships may suffer.

In a world where you have limited control over contributors to stress, it's enormously valuable to make sure your relationships aren't among them. The negativity of poor relationships can worsen MS symptoms, and the positivity of healthy relationships acts as a support that cushions the impact of changed functioning.

You, as the person with MS, and the people in your life must be willing to make changes. It takes two to create and maintain a beneficial relationship and only one to destroy the progress.

Skills for the Person with MS

Intentional or not, there is a lot of stress put on the person with MS in ac relationship. There is pressure from the outside and pressure from within. When normal problems arise in the relationship, it will be easy for others to point fingers at you. After all, you have changed. Don't set your sights on avoiding blame and mistakes, though. The goal should be to make the relationship as rewarding as possible. Here's how to be a **TEAM**:

- **T**rack MS – Insight, self-awareness and self-monitoring all mean essentially the same thing: knowing yourself, your symptoms and your triggers. Without the ability to accurately monitor your MS symptoms, you cannot react to changes in symptoms. Use tracking sheets, journals and charts to identify and understand the trends and patterns. Also, investigate your emotional and behavioral reactions to these trends. Does feeling worse make you feel like giving up hope? Does feeling better make you believe more strongly in your relationship? Asking these questions increases your awareness. Unless you know yourself, you cannot know MS.

- **E**ducate – Now that you have a good understanding of yourself, your changes and your triggers, work to gain a better grasp of what MS is and what it does. Education will provide you with useful information about where you are and where you are going. Are your symptoms solely from MS, or are other factors involved? Always use the best sources to gather information to avoid confusion and misunderstandings associated with flawed data and opinions.
- **A**ssertive – Honest, open, assertive communication gives you the best chance of maintaining a strong relationship. Check in with your relationships throughout the day, not only when situations become poor. Let them know what you are doing to improve your symptoms and the relationship. Along the way, let

them know what you would like them to do. As long as the requests are well-meaning, it will be hard for them to decline.
- **M**ental health treatment – With MS, the question is not *if* treatment is needed, but *what* treatment and *how much.* This is not a failing on your part, but rather, the acceptance that MS creates issues with grief, depression and anxiety. Individual therapy, group therapy and support groups are available. Be creative and willing to experiment to find a good balance and maintain symptoms. A therapist trained in cognitive behavioral therapy assist in helping relationships as well as finding interventions to manage MS symptoms.

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Skills for the Other Person in the Relationship

Having a good relationship to anyone necessitates love, kindness and sacrifice. Being a friend, family member or spouse of someone with MS takes these qualities to the next level. With practice, patience and persistence, you can find success. Here's how to be a **MATE**:

- **M**onitor – You have twice the tracking and monitoring to do. As important as it is for the person with MS to monitor their feelings and symptoms, it is equally important for you to monitor them, as well as your own. Their insight will change with their symptoms. Typically, when MS symptoms are worse, insight decreases. Tracking the symptoms and triggers from your point of view will offer another perspective that can be used with behavioral interventions or that can be used by their treatment team to make a change to medication or other techniques.
- **A**ssertive – Your communication task is far more difficult that someone in a typical relationship. Chances are high that the way that you communicate with the person with MS is met with different reactions based on their physical and mental health symptoms. When they are more symptomatic, you may need to be more subtle and gentle. When symptoms are lower, you can be more direct and clear. Work to recognize and accept their status before you attempt to communicate to produce the best results.
- **T**reatment – Being involved with someone that has MS impacts you in many, immeasurable ways. Some will be positive while others will be negative. Treatment will provide you with resources, solutions and interventions to improve the relationship. People married to someone with a chronic medical issue are more prone to feelings of depression and anxiety themselves. Online and in-person supports group are available for loved ones of people with MS. Individual therapy can allow an outlet to discuss your frustrations, hopes and fears. This opportunity can recharge your batteries and make you better able to manage your feelings at home. Without release, feelings tend to come out in unforeseen, undesirable ways.
- **E**valuate – How are you doing? How are the plans and interventions working? Evaluating your performance is paramount in reaching the desired goal. If you are doing well, avoid the tendency to slack off by staying the course. If you are struggling, begin to try new strategies in a systematic way. Try to change one aspect for an extended period before reevaluating. This helps to objectively assess the effectiveness of your modification. Relationships are a marathon not a sprint. Do not panic if your progress is slow.

Diversify for Success

Diversification is a tool that economists and financial advisors talk about a lot. Put simply, diversification means not putting all your eggs in one basket. If you put too much emphasis on one or two relationships, you will be impacted by the ups and downs of your symptoms more significantly than if you had many relationships. Additionally, the relationship itself can suffer from the added pressure because you will be critiquing it in harsher ways.

Instead, find ways to have all types of relationships with all types of people. Connecting with people online will give you the freedom to converse with unique people from around the globe. Attending church or religious services allows you bond with people that have similar faiths. If physically able, consider joining an exercise class

or sports team. This will help diversify relationships while adding the benefit of physical activity on mental and physical health.

Many people with MS can begin isolating from supports while others fear being alone. Check in with yourself to note which side you fall. Balance is essential as both are needed to create the well-rounded, diversified person you want to be. If you have been fearful of time alone, look to discover the rationale and find ways to modify.

Conclusion

The best relationships are the ones that work together for the benefit of both. As the person diagnosed with MS, remember the power of the TEAM approach in changing what you can to help the relationship. If you know someone with MS, use the MATE approach to take care of them while assisting yourself.

A TEAMMATE relationship will have a better chance of being long lasting and desirable for everyone involved.