MS and Anger

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Coping with MS and Anger

As if the physical symptoms of MS, like mobility, gait and balance problems aren't enough, we MSers also have to worry about cognitive or emotional symptoms lurking in our brains as well.

MSers may have strange mood swings that seem unrelated or disproportionate to what's triggered them. We may react inappropriately to situations, laughing hysterically at bad news for example or crying at the drop of a hat. We may also swing widely and randomly between the two.

With all these strong emotions bubbling away inside our heads it's not surprising that MSers often feel anger. I have certainly felt anger on my MS journey so far, at the diagnosis and inevitable feelings of loss that come with it. But there is also a physiological explanation.

Causes of Emotionalism

Nerve Damage

These strong emotions, sometimes called "emotionalism," can often be caused by MS related nerve damage or flare-ups in the parts of the brain that usually control our emotions. Presumably this damage can permanently alter our personalities, which is a worrying, thought but emotionalism can also be worse during a relapse.

Cognitive Fatigue

With something as complex as emotions though there's usually lots of other factors at work, and one of them is cognitive fatigue.

Most MSers will have experienced physical fatigue at some point and for many it will be the worst, most debilitating symptom of all and for some it's the first symptom they seek a diagnosis for.

Fatigue can hit us cognitively, too, and I'm not sure how many of us understand this. It took me a long time to realize the link between cognitive fatigue and my moods.

Primary fatigue occurs as a direct result of having MS, slowing down the body's reaction times due to damage to the central nervous system. It can take the form of "lassitude," an overwhelming sense of tiredness unrelated to the amount of activity carried out or our bodies can "short-circuit" in small muscle groups due to damage following repetitive movements.

If you consider how many repetitive movements our brains carry out throughout the day it's no wonder some of us feel cognitive fatigue as well as the physical kind. I feel this the most when I finish work and come home to my family.

I find it hard to concentrate, hold a thought in my head or even hold a conversation, and I find myself getting increasingly irritated and frustrated. This can lead to snapping and reacting angrily over nothing and growling at my kids over something trivial.

All I need to recover from these episodes of fatigue is a rest, away from any stimulation, but that's not so easy in the middle of a busy family.

Sense of Loss

Another factor that can lead to anger is how well we cope with our lives after diagnosis. In many ways a diagnosis can feel like a bereavement or a sense of loss for the person we were and all the things MS gradually takes away from us.

It's widely accepted that there are five stages of grief that we all have to go through in order to accept it and move on. One of those stages, after denial, is anger and it can be very powerful.

People will often ask, "Why me?" or, "It's not fair, why is this happening to me?" and it's not surprising when feelings of anger and frustration bubble to the surface during this time.

I'm much happier now I've passed through this stage and have reached acceptance of my MS, and I'm much less cross these days. I find myself thinking, "It's going to be ok, I can't change it so let's get on with it," instead, but we are all different and this process takes time.

Pain

Another MS symptom that's capable of causing anger all on its own is pain. Imagine being in pain all the time and think about how that might alter your ability to stay pleasant and happy? I'm lucky that pain doesn't dominate my life as I don't know how well I'd cope.

Ways to Manage

So, what can we do about feelings of anger and frustration at our situation?

To help combat the physiological warfare going on in our heads there are medications we can take. Anti-depressants are widely prescribed and many people benefit from them.

But is there anything we can do to help ourselves? These tips may help:

- Talk to friends and family and explain what's going on. Don't presume they'll understand why you're emotional.
- Find something that will help you relax and de-stress.
- Exercise and good diet will help.
- Take a break during conversations if you need to.
- Avoid too many distractions.
- Don't meet friends in a busy bar or restaurant.
- Find other MSers who understand, either locally or online.
- Avoid too much alcohol.

It's also useful to accept that there will always be bad days, however well adjusted you are to your new "normal."

There will always be days when you want to kick and scream and ask, "Why me?" and on days like these pull the duvet over your head and wait for it to pass.

Your loved ones will love you no matter what and there will always be good days to smile and laugh about.