Fighting MS Without Overdoing It

by LIBBY SELINSKY

Pushing Yourself, But Not Too Far

Those of us who have been diagnosed with MS have only two options, really. We can either get busy and fight things head on, or we can roll over and let this disease do what it wants with us.

Having never understood the latter of those two choices, the first has always really been the only option for me. I am a fighter. But how do we fight without fighting MS too hard and doing more harm than good?

As with any other question involving this disease, the answer really is different for every person. However, I do have some key methods to finding the groove that fits for your individual needs.

Starting Slow

The first step in pushing forward is to start out slow. Exercise is a great example of this. Keeping in shape is incredibly important in slowing down the physical atrophy and fatigue that comes with multiple sclerosis.

The problem is, many of us do not have a physical trainer on hand who is specialized in understanding MS. And we can just forget about finding someone who is knowledgeable about our own unique needs.

So how do we stay in shape without injuring ourselves or adding to our fatigue? The answer is simple: we start out cautiously. We take things slow and light. It is important to do the things that you are confidently capable of doing and then building onto that platform slowly.

‘Enough is enough!’

I love a nice long hike. For a while there I thought that my hiking days were over. When I had my first exacerbation I was barely able to walk 100 feet without wanting to pass out. My doctors kept telling me to rest and I listened.

But I did not improve. My symptoms had improved but my fatigue had worsened over time. My muscles became weaker by the day. I became terrified of going places by myself. What if I couldn’t make it back to the car alone?

My world collapsed around me and my doctors continued to tell me to rest. Three years passed and I gained 50 pounds! My doctors did not discuss my weight gain. They just kept telling me to rest.

One day, my husband came home and said, “Enough is enough! We are not going to sit in this house and rot away! We are going to start hiking again!” I had always loved hiking before I got sick. I had usually been the one wanting to hike further, longer. That love had been truncated by my fear and by blindly taking my doctor’s advice.

My husband got me out of the house and we took things slowly. I was terrified and tired, but I always wanted to go out and try again. Eventually, hiking became a weekly adventure for my husband, my son and I.

Next page: learning your limits and trusting yourself.

Learning My Limits

I learned that I could cope and I became confident in my abilities. The hikes slowly became longer and harder. Sometimes, we would go too far and I would break down in tears. That was hard for all of us, but eventually I would feel better and I would hike back to the car without either of them helping me.

I was learning my breaking point, and what it felt like when I was near it. I was learning my recovery time and how to speed it up. I learned my emotional capacity and how to forge on forward without falling apart. I hike much slower than everyone else, but I hike just as many miles as they do. For that I am grateful.

Getting out in nature in a place that I love, a place full of life, helped me to realize that I had lost a part of who I was for a while. Like I said before, I am a fighter – I just hadn't realized that I had stopped fighting for the three years prior to my husband waking me up and pulling me out of my rut.

Holding on to What You Have

It is easy to lose ourselves and become overrun by MS. I cannot tell you how many articles I have read about people letting go of the things that they love and proclaiming how MS doesn't have them! Every single time I read one of those articles I want to scream at these people! I want to shout at them, 'But how do you keep what you have?!'

That is why we fight. We must always remember to hold on to what we have. MS just might take away my ability to walk someday, but I will be damned if I toss away a single day between now and then.

I have taken stock of the things that I love in life. I take my time to enjoy them as much as possible for as long as possible. Sometimes MS rears up and takes away something that I cherish, like touching my son's hair.

MS took that away for six months when my son was only four years old. I cried, I was robbed, but eventually I learned how to feel with my wrists. I would rock my son to sleep and run my wrists across his forehead to feel the smoothness of his brown locks. I could still feel his beautiful hair. MS did not win that battle, and eventually, the relapse subsided and my hands returned to 'normal'.

Built to Fight

We all have our ways of hanging on. Life wants to live. We are built to fight. We are built to reject the loss of our bodies. We must find ways of hanging onto our happiness and the things that we love.

MS can look like a long downward slope with mile markers that contain all of your favorite things. Looking at things that way will be the fastest route to loss.

We must look at every day as a race to fit in more of the things that we love before MS tries sneaking in and getting there first. We don't know when it will show up again or what it will take, but we will not be less for chasing after more.

Trust Your Body and Yourself

Push yourself towards happiness. Trust in your body's desire to live. Learn the limits of your body. Understand what too far feels like. Be aware of your emotions and treat them with respect. Your emotions are a tangible part of who you are as a whole and treating them as such will lead you towards a happier and fuller self.

You can continue to proudly fight this disease as long as you remain fully aware of who you are and where you stand in this world. Trust yourself. Trust your self-knowledge. Trust your strength. Trust in your ability to rise above and grow.

Multiple sclerosis likes to swoop in during our early years and stunt our personal growth. It likes to truncate our lives before we even know who we are or what life is really about. The trick of the fighter comes when they show up and live a richer and fuller life despite MS’s desire to steal it all.

There is nothing more satisfying in this world than winning the unwinnable battle. It never fails to confuse your onlookers.