‘Preparation Is Key:’ How to Cope During Emergencies When You Have MS

by DEBRA ROBERT

MS in Emergency Situations

Having lived most of my life on the coastlines of South Florida, I have been through my share of hurricanes.

This past September was the first hurricane I experienced as an MS’er. As the storm approached, I thought of the overwhelming amount of work it would take to both prepare for and recover from a major storm. I wondered how I would deal with it all.

As it turns out, I handled the hurricane situation better than any other one I had been through in my MS-free past. Even at the most intense of moments, I was cool as a cucumber. I know now that learning to live a life with MS is what made all the difference.

Why People With MS Cope Better During Emergencies

Here are ten reasons why living with MS makes us well-equipped to handle hurricanes and other natural disasters:

1. We live every single day not knowing exactly when an event will hit, how bad it will be or how long it may last.
2. We know there is nothing that can be done to stop an event from happening. We just keep going.
3. We're used to our regularly scheduled lives being torn asunder with little or no warning.
4. We know the sense of helplessness that can arise once an event hits. We are used to hunkering down, conserving our energy and riding out the storm.
5. We're all too familiar with wondering what level of damage or loss we may be left within an events aftermath.
6. We know that recovery will involve variables and stumbling blocks we could not anticipate. We know to give ourselves a break, have patience and adapt to whatever comes our way.
7. We're used to asking for help with things we would never have before.
8. We realize that graciously accepting help from those who offer it is its own form of giving. We know the power of a simple ‘thank you.'
9. We know that all the things we worked for and all the things we planned to do in our lifetimes can change in the blink of an eye.
10. We learn from it all that the most important, precious things in life are not things.

The National MS Society (NMSS) states, “People with disabilities are often better at coping with emergencies than others. Living with MS every day teaches us how to handle the unexpected.”

It is true. We are more resilient than we know because, for us, the threat of a major storm hangs over our heads every day. We thrive in spite of utter unpredictability.

Preparation Is Key

For anyone in the path of a significant event, the importance of storm and disaster preparation cannot be underestimated.

There are plenty of resources available both locally and nationally that provide valuable information regarding all types of natural disasters. As MS'ers, however, there are a few additional things we can do to get through whatever nature has in store for us.

Focus On The News

Once the threat of an event is imminent, there will be an information overload. The news channels and social media will go into a 24-hour feeding frenzy. It is easy for anyone to get caught up in the drama of this very real situation.

The biggest hurdle for us is to stay focused.

We need to stay informed, but not to the point of being distracted with repetitive stories of what is going on at every turn. MS'ers have enough brain fog to deal with as it is. Do not allow yourself to be sidetracked by all-consuming noise.

Keep up with the latest emergency updates and stay focused on what needs to be done.

Conserve Your Energy

Stressful situations can deplete MS'ers of energy in very short periods of time. Make rest periods as essential an item on your preparation list as any other.

If the storm situation becomes dire, you'll need every ounce of energy you've got to push through. It is essential from the get-go to rest and recharge whenever possible.

Contact Your Local Emergency Office

Contact your county or local emergency management office so you can get on any special needs or assist lists. Make sure they know your medical condition, location and if you have mobility or impairment issues.

- If you use a wheelchair or scooter, make sure you know its weight and dimensions. Label it with your contact info and basic operating instructions.
- Make a plan for backup power options and store a lightweight, manual wheelchair as a precaution.

Compile Everything You Need

Make sure all of your medications are refilled in advance of the storm. Know what temperature ranges they need to be stored in. If your drugs require refrigeration, find out what their shelf life is at room temperature, in case you lose power.

Contact your physician or MS drug provider as part of storm preparation. Discuss the process for attaining replacement medication in case any of your drugs are lost or destroyed.

Dealing With Heat Exhaustion

It is very easy to lose track of time when in overwhelming situations. If you are out in the sun for storm preparation or recovery, pace yourself. Remember, there may not be a cool place to revert to if you get overheated.

Remain hydrated, protect yourself from direct sunlight, limit your time out in the heat, and always have a friend or partner keep an eye on you as a precaution.

When All Is Said and Done

I would never have thought that having a debilitating disease would have been an asset in a time of a natural disaster, but it was.

With all the blows we are dealt with MS, we persevere. We embrace the resiliency of the human mind and spirit. We are stronger than we know.

When nature decides to show us how unpredictable and powerful it is, we will deal with it. We know somehow, we will find a way to flourish after the storm. We will find joy and a new beginning, somewhere in its wake.