# Staying Optimistic With MS

by GERARD BLINK

## How to Remain Optimistic With MS

*Counselor Eric Patterson and MSer Gerard Blink share their thoughts on optimism despite illness.*

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is scary. The more you read, and the more you experience, the scarier it can get. But you cannot let your fear control your thoughts, feelings and behaviors; if you do, your life will only become more limited and frustrating. Not only will that negatively affect you, but it will affect the people you care about as well.

### Counselor Eric's Tips for Staying Optimistic With MS

Staying positive in the face of MS does not just happen. You have to make it happen. Here are some simple tips to help:

- **Seek out a good doctor.** Comfort with your doctor is crucial. Consider what you are looking for in a doctor: do you want a matter-of-fact delivery of information or someone that is more nurturing?
- **Seek out reliable information.** Reading and reacting to the wrong information can lead to hopelessness and self-doubt. Set your eyes to the facts — statistics, data and research studies will provide the facts without bias.
- **Manage flares.** Plan for different levels of flares, from mild to moderate to severe. List the symptoms you will likely experience in each level of severity and the appropriate response to those symptoms.
- **Manage expectations.** Expectations filter your perceptions of the world around you. Expectations that are too high lead to frequent letdowns and disappointments. Expectations that are too low can be so discouraging that you may not even try since you believe failure is assured.
- **Get active.** As important as it is to avoid negative influences, it is more important to seek out positive ones. Find a group for people with MS — the people and experiences can illustrate the potential of life with MS. With involvement comes empowerment.

You are a person with MS, but you will not let MS dictate who you are and who you will become. The biggest possible loss is of your optimism; keep working on your goals and managing your expectations and positivity will stay with you.

### MSer Gerard's Tips for Staying Optimistic With MS

Nobody feels positive all the time. In absolute truth, that would be completely unnatural, especially under the cloud of MS. So, take a minute, feel sad, depressed and that life’s not fair — and then get started feeling none of the above.

MS is now a part of your life, but it does not need define you. While ultimately you might feel as though you have no control, you cannot allow it to ever control the person inside you.

We know it is not a death-sentence; we all have many (many many) years to live and we can do so productively, and more importantly, happily.

In my case, I was diagnosed in 2000, but there were symptoms going back to the mid-90s. So I'm pretty much 20 years in on this thing.

**Keep Perspective**

The list of “things MS does not allow me to do anymore” is a significant list (back in the days when I actually kept a list like that, and believe me, I did). I do not keep such a list anymore, because the list I keep now is “things I still do, still have and still love.” It's a much more important list.

The other truth is the fact that there are billions of people on this planet who would change places with any of us in a heartbeat. I do say that a lot, because it's one of those things I do think about often when I think I've been dealt a crappy hand in life.

*Next page: staying optimistic with MS means retaining your sense of humor.*

**MSer Gerard's Tips for Staying Optimistic With MS**

I just think of all those people in the world living below the poverty line (and I'm talking about the global poverty line that stands at $1.90 a day — that's an annual income of $693 dollars). I think of the 1.1 billion without access to adequate water or the 2.6 billion without access to basic sanitation.

Those numbers go on and on (and on, unfortunately). Yes, even with MS, I do consider myself an incredibly lucky human. And you should too!

I also have a loving daughter, two amazing sisters, and a group of incredible friends I have been close with since high school. If I'm ever in a crisis, any of those guys would drop everything to help me.

I have a roof over my head, food on the table, and clean water in the taps. I'm lucky enough to live in a pretty great apartment — and okay, I do have a big TV too!

I have my intellect (okay, so maybe not when I'm in brain fog afternoons, but still). I have my optimism and positivity, and most importantly, I retain my sense of humor about pretty much everything, MS included.

I look at those things, not the bad things.

**Retain a Sense of Humor**

People ask me all the time how I can stay positive and make jokes about things that are seemingly beyond humor.

In my case, I'm certain I get it from my father, who passed away back in 2004. He always was positive that today would be better than yesterday, and he never lost his sense of humor.

I'll give you a specific example: he'd been in the hospital going through chemo and radiation therapy for a particularly brutal form of cancer. At a point in the process, the doctors discovered he had some really significant circulation issues with one of his feet, and the only thing they could do about the issue was to amputate his leg, just above his knee.

So while most, if not everyone, would be crushed by this news, my father referred to it as his “leg reduction surgery!” I honestly thought that was about the funniest thing I'd ever heard, especially with respect to what was being done!

**Find the Light**

When I was on long-term disability, my insurance company (who was anxious to get me off their payroll) paid for me to be retrained as a life coach. So, allow me to put on my life coach hat for a moment.

I used to always tell clients who were dealing with significant life-changing decisions, and also dealing with significant issues in their lives, to look to the light.

What I mean by that is there are always “dark” phases in each of our lives (and yes, MS is a particularly dark phase I fully admit), so what each of us have to do when facing darkness is find the “light.” There is always light, though sometimes it can feel difficult to find.

That light could be anything: it could be an upcoming gathering of friends or family; it could be an upcoming meeting of your support group; it could be as simple as seeing a flower in spring.

Show me a life without some sort of light and I'll show you someone who's simply not trying hard enough.

So, please do not look at what MS has and continues to take. It is counterproductive. Rather, look at all the positive things you do have in your life.

Then you'll be like me, waking up believing and knowing today will be better than yesterday.