Expanding Your Knowledge of MS with New Resources

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MS Mindshift Helps Boost Healthy Lifestyles

When I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) in 2008 I imagined the worse possible scenario for me would be to end up physically disabled, needing walking aids, or the dreaded wheelchair.
Now I need to use a scooter or chair most of the time and my outlook has changed. Cognitively, my MS isn't too bad. I can still drive, for example, and can hold down a demanding job where I need to remember aspects of peoples complicated lives in order to support them. I can also read, write, and hold a conversation easily, and I wouldn't trade these skills in to be able to walk again. These things make me who I am and that's more important to me than being able to run or dance.

This is why the MS Mindshift movement appeals to me.

What Is MS Mindshift?

According to the website, it is "an initiative built to help understand the critical role the brain plays in MS, and what you can do to keep the brain as healthy as possible, for as long as possible".

The website states it's for US audiences only, but presumably this relates to the materials and events inked to the site rather than anything specific regarding the brains of American people with MS. As a Brit I still found the concepts useful so don't let this put you off.

The Importance of MS Mindshift

An important point on the site is made about the brain as the "communication center for the entire body", and how MS attacks the brain, causing lesions, when relapse occurs. MS Mindshift links this to worsening disability due to the signals being disrupted.

There is lots of easy to understand information about the brain and its impact on MS, but the website also talks about "neurological reserve" and how the brain can compensate for damage caused by brain lesions. Neurological reserve can protect you from experiencing symptoms early on but doesn't last forever, so healthy lifestyle choices can hep you maintain neurological reserve for as long as possible.

It's important to make these changes as soon as possible before symptoms are even experienced, so this initiative is perfect for the newly diagnosed.

What Is the Goal?

The goal is to take a "brain first" approach to MS by understanding four key areas to focus on.

1. Know all you can about brain lesions in white and grey matter.

White matter lesions: these interfere with the brain's ability to communicate from one side to the other and with the rest of the body, which causes symptoms and relapses.

Grey matter lesions: these have been recently identified as being associated with cognitive changes such as memory (concentration and word recall), as well as physical changes.

2. Learn what research shows about decreasing brain matter.

Everyone loses brain matter as they age, but for people with MS this brain volume loss can occur more quickly. Research now suggests that a decrease in the amount of grey matter caused by MS is a strong predictor for long term physical disability and cognitive issues.

3. Understand your brain's neurological reserve.

When brain lesions affect the brain, the area no longer works properly so other areas can step in and compensate. This neurological reserve can prevent you from experiencing symptoms early on and can be affected by every-day lifestyle choices so it's important to make changes before you even experience symptoms.

4. Make healthy lifestyle choices and manage chronic conditions.

A healthier brain can maximize neurological reserve but it's also important to manage other chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease, high cholesterol, depression, and diabetes. If left unmanaged these conditions can have an impact on relapses and result in a quicker progression.

How to Improve Your Own Life

The main takeaway from visiting the MS Mindshift website for me was information about the healthy lifestyle choices I can make to maximize my own brain health and neurological reserve.

Some changes you can do today include:

- **Sleep:** Getting at least 7 hours of restful sleep is good for your brain.
- **Exercise:** This can speed up information processing and improve grey matter functioning.
- **Being social:** Spending time with others is good for the brain.
- **Diet:** A diet low in fat and cholesterol can reduce inflammation.
- **Vitamin D:** This can improve cognitive function.
- **Smoking:** Smoking can make MS worse so quit now, no excuses.
- **Keep your brain active:** Spend time reading, writing, or playing board games.
- **Mindfulness:** Meditation, yoga, and breathing exercises can also help.

Final Thoughts

Looking after your brain makes perfect sense to me and taking a holistic approach to your own health can make you feel more in control. Speak to your health care team about brain health and keep an eye on it with regular Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans.