How to Cope with the Frustration, Anger and Mood Swings That Accompany Living with MS

by ABIGAIL BUDD

Understanding the Connection Between MS and Anger Outbursts

When I was diagnosed with relapsing and remitting multiple sclerosis (MS) in 2008, I do not remember feeling anger, but multiple sclerosis and anger outbursts can be related. The main emotions I felt were shock, disbelief and confusion. I was tearful a lot of the time and had an intense need to keep the diagnosis a secret. This developed into denial for me and I survived for months by pretending it was not happening to me. None of this was particularly healthy for my mental health and in my experience, acceptance took years to achieve.

The Emotional Toll of MS: How MS Can Cause Anger

According to the National MS Society, “MS can cause significant anxiety, distress, anger and frustration from the moment of its very first symptoms. The uncertainty and unpredictability associated with MS is one of its most distressing aspects. In fact, anxiety is at least as common in MS as depression.”

In my experience, anger and frustration have come from living with MS long term. I try not to have outbursts of anger, as I would be in a constant state of rage if I did not keep it in check, but I choose the battles I have.

In the Workplace

For example, I have been passed over for a promotion at work many times in recent years. I cannot prove that I am being discriminated against, but I cannot resist an angry rant at my boss. I am going to take it further but need to be careful that my anger does not cloud the important issue I am trying to address.

In Public

I also get angry at the lack of accessibility for disabled people and last year I made a furious complaint against a hotel who interpreted “accessible” as simply being physically able to get into a bathroom. We’d booked the hotel because of its accessible facilities and I was forced to go home. My anger was justified, and the hotel rebuilt the bathroom and gave me a free stay to apologize, so it felt like a victory.

These examples of anger cannot really be described as outbursts though. They are an understandable reaction to injustice and inequality, so how else does MS cause anger and frustration?

MS and Mood Swings

Mood swings are common when living with MS. According to Healthline, there are common causes of MS related mood swings:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Pent-up frustration
- Inability to cope
- Grief

Feelings of grief and loss are understandable, especially following diagnosis, and usually resolve themselves over time as we start to accept the condition.

As well as grief and other emotional reactions to external factors described above, MS itself may also play a role in mood swings and feelings of anger. As with many symptoms, it is hard to know when MS stops and our reaction to it begins.

MS Brain Damage

Two parts of the brain are involved in emotions: one forms emotional responses and the other controls them.

MS lesions in this part of the brain can lead to difficulties with self-control as well as unbalanced expressions of sadness, happiness, or anger. Emotional responses can even become mixed up, so we laugh or cry at inappropriate times.

Many people with MS also report a worsening of emotional symptoms during a relapse and they may feel like they are coming out of nowhere. If mood swings are caused by nerve damage, it may be that they will increase as the disease progresses.

My Experience with MS Mood Swings

I sometimes experience increased irritability with no apparent cause and wonder if damage is responsible when I feel like this, especially as it can feel worse when I am fatigued.

There was a study in 2009 that seems to support this. Published in Science Daily, the study looked at anger experienced by 195 people with MS. It found that people with MS feel twice as much anger as the general population but the levels they express are similar. This seemed to show that the withheld or unexpressed anger was unrelated to the severity of the disease but may be causally related to nervous system damage. They linked demyelination to the higher levels of withheld anger, stating this interfered with how people received and interpreted messages from the brain.

Managing and Coping with Multiple Sclerosis and Anger Outbursts

What can we do to reduce the impact of mood swings and anger outbursts in MS? Healthline suggests the first thing you need to do is talk to your doctor. They may recommend the following strategies:

- Counselling
- Mood stabilizing drugs
- Anti-anxiety medication
- Antidepressants

You can also get support from local groups or online, as well as practicing mindfulness and other exercises that help. There’s nothing we can do about damage to our nervous systems, but we can get better at how we respond to this damage.

Controlling the Anger

So, it is hard to known if our feelings of anger are to do with coping with how much harder life is when you have

MS. We feel loss and grief at how our lives could and should have turned out, as well as frustration and anger at equality and injustice that we experience in our day to day lives.

We also must not underestimate the impact nerve damage has on our moods, so talking it through with friends, family and colleagues can raise awareness and understanding.