How to Navigate Dating With MS

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Coping With the Challenges of Dating With MS

Dating is hard. Wading through dating sites, trying to strike up a conversation with someone in the produce aisle, and going on another blind date with the goal of finding your soul mate is a challenging proposition.

As difficult as dating is, the challenge is intensified for those that date with multiple sclerosis (MS). This is due to the added layers of complexity that present for those dating with MS.

If you have MS, you already know about the inconsistency of physical symptoms and the widespread impact on your mental health, but do you realize the added factors you must face when trying to form and maintain a romantic relationship?

As gloomy as the process may seem, the long-term benefits of a healthy, rewarding relationship far outweigh the temporary stresses of dating. By acknowledging and preparing for your unique set of obstacles, you can put yourself in a position to not only survive dating with MS, but to flourish in it. Here's how:

Identify Your Risks

The risks of dating are present continuously, whether the relationship is getting started or has been developing for years. Identifying your risks early in the process will permit you to gain awareness before they become too problematic.

In some cases, the current risks will be too strong for you to devote energy towards dating. To concretely identify your risks, consider making a list including aspects like:

- The person will not understand or accept my MS.
- The person will leave as soon as I reveal my MS.
- My symptoms will flare at the worst time.
- The person will not understand the risks of MS and pregnancy.
- The person will treat me as someone who is "sick" or "broken."

Establish Your Expectations

With your list of risks written, it is time to begin thinking about what you expect from this relationship. At this stage, some people might have expectations that place too much emphasis on the benefits of the relationship, while others may place too much on the risks.

It will not serve you well to expect a knight in shining armor to come along and rescue you from a life of MS symptoms. Additionally, thinking there is no one out there who will accept you as you are will defeat any chances of success.

By arriving at expectations of yourself and your potential partners that are grounded in rationality and logic, you will be left in a better position to begin a healthy relationship. It will be one that benefits you both.

To find balance, reflect on your previous experiences. Have you been too optimistic or too pessimistic in the past? After you identifying your tendencies, try moving towards the middle.

Set Your Goals

With or without MS, people set goals of dating that result in more harm than good. When establishing goals of your dating experience, be sure to set ones that are achievable, desirable and realistic.

How many dates would you like to go on? How would you like to respond to rejection? What are your plans if you garner too much interest or not enough?

You might benefit from setting a goal that views dating as more of journey and less as a destination. If your only goal is finding “the right person” immediately, you might miss many opportunities to grow and learn about yourself and others.

This notion is important because dating is not a science. It is an artful exercise.

Think about dating in fishing terms. If your goal is to land “the big one” on the first cast, you are going to experience overwhelming failure. Pack up your gear and head home.

If you shift your goal to something more realistic like getting a few nibbles during a day on the lake, it will lower your stress and disappointment. Also, this view will leave you more encouraged to repeat the process.

Remember, though, just because you reel one in does not mean it is a “keeper.” Don’t worry about throwing it back.

Clarify Your Communication

There is some danger associated with when and how you disclose your condition to the other person. Some might declare it boldly on their online profile, while others might try to avoid the topic until after the honeymoon. Some might claim, “We will talk about it when the timing is right.”

This strategy is well-intended but can lead to unintentionally negative consequences. For example, if you disclose your condition at a time that seems ideal and your partner reacts negatively, there is a chance you could blame yourself for misreading the signs.

In reality, the person could have reacted similarly regardless of the situation. Any opportunity to reduce shame, guilt and sadness surrounding you or your MS needs to be seized.

To combat this, work to establish a rule to follow regarding your MS diagnosis. It could be based on time or intimacy, but it should be explicitly clear. By being consistent, you can reduce the variables that lead to self-doubt.

During this process, work to develop an explanation of MS that is concise and accurate. You don’t want to startle anyone with overly-specific information just as you don’t want to mislead them by leaving out details. Using a similar description each time will add to the consistency and effectiveness needed in the conversation.

Preserve Your Energy

No matter your relationship status, you need to practice good self-care. MS is draining physically and mentally — so is dating.

The combination can zap your resources. If dating is new to you, ease into it slowly to allow your body and mind

to adapt.

If dating tends to stress you out, look for ways to modify the experience to be more pleasurable by pacing yourself or taking more control of the dates. Certainly all relationships are stressful, but too much stress only leads to negative outcomes for you and the relationship.

Dating and MS are not mutually exclusive. You can do both, and you can do them well if you take the time to thoughtfully prepare.

The formula is simple: target your risks and set expectations and goals before you clarify your communication. Along the way, practice self-care to remain the strong individual you want to be, with or without a relationship.