MS and Mobility: Understanding Balance Issues

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MS and Mobility Issues With Walking and Balance

Five years ago I could walk normally. I had a slight limp in my right foot that would appear if I was tired or had walked too far, but otherwise no one would have suspected anything was wrong.

Now, a combination of poor balance and foot drop make walking with multiple sclerosis (MS) so much harder. I need to use two walking sticks and I get exhausted very easily.

I get around this by using a mobility scooter, which means I'm fine as long as there are no stairs or anything to navigate. I have learned to accept this part of having MS and try not to feel sorry for myself or mourn the loss of what I used to be able to do.

A friend with MS said to me, "It is what it is" and I find that statement helpful as it stops me feeling sorry for myself.

Dragging Feet

Many people with relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis (RRMS) experience relapses where a worsening of symptoms occurs, followed by a full recovery. This certainly happened to me a few times since my diagnosis in 2008.

One particularly nasty relapse resulted in my right leg dragging along the floor. I couldn't lift it at all and it became obvious to those around me that something was wrong. I was forced to tearfully tell my boss who very quickly put things in place to make life easier for me at work.

I recovered fully from this relapse but sometimes we don't fully recover and residual problems are left behind. My right leg is much weaker than my left, for example, and it still drags slightly when I'm exhausted.

The reason I was diagnosed in the first place was due to seeing my doctor about a slight drag in my right foot. I found that after 20 minutes or so on the treadmill I would trip or just find it more difficult to walk.

It was the same when I walked to work or ran for a bus and I remember my friend suggesting I see a doctor. It took about six months to eventually get a diagnosis of MS, but it's no wonder my right foot has become gradually worse over time.

Sometimes when fatigue kicks in it's my right foot I have the most trouble with and am forced to rest while it recovers!

MS and Balance Issues

While my right foot seems to have gotten worse over time, I would say my balance “went” practically overnight. It was around five years ago and I started using a walking stick to help with the fatigue I often felt while walking.

I remember taking my children to a park on the seafront in my home town and having to stop in the middle of the road as I felt my balance going. It was a strange and scary sensation and I remember leaning on my walking stick to stop me falling over but being unable to put one foot in front of the other.

My husband came and rescued me by giving me his arm so I could use my stick and his body for balance.

Over the next few months I found it increasingly hard to walk across open spaces using my stick. I was fine if I could use the wall or furniture with one hand and my stick with the other but it would be impossible to walk across the middle of a room.

This led to growing isolation as I would be too frightened to go out anywhere unless I knew there wasn’t far to walk. Eventually I saw a physiotherapist who suggested two walking sticks and I was amazed at how much difference this made! All of a sudden I could cross a room without hugging the walls!

The trouble with two walking sticks is they were constantly falling over when I leaned them against the wall.

I’d lean them against the car while I got my scooter out, for example, and they’d fall under the car making it virtually impossible to retrieve! Now I tend to lean on the car and use it to get to the trunk and then rely on my scooter.

Improving Your Balance

Luckily, balance can be greatly improved through exercise and anything that improves core strength can help — I would recommend Pilates or seated exercises.

Looking back, my balance started to deteriorate when I started working from home and I think I let myself go physically. I am now making up for that by trying to improve things and am definitely seeing results!

Unfortunately, with MS there is the constant threat of worsening disability. This can either be brought on by bad relapses we don’t recover from fully, or by a gradual worsening of symptoms.

Some of us will be lucky and never experience this, but for those of us who do, “It is what it is” and it needn’t feel like the end of the world! See a physiotherapist and follow their advice till you find what works for you.