



Stress and Multiple Sclerosis

Living with MS often comes with unique stresses that can affect daily life. This resource is designed to help you understand the connection between stress and MS, offering practical tips and strategies to manage stress effectively. By taking steps to reduce stress, you can improve your overall well-being and enhance your quality of life.

Some of the unique stresses MS may bring:

- Diagnostic uncertainties (before a definite MS diagnosis)
- The unpredictability of the disease
- The invisibility of some symptoms (fatigue, depression, pain)
- The visibility of symptoms, particularly newly emerging ones
- Adjusting and readjusting to changing symptoms and abilities
- Financial stress and concerns about employment
- The presence – or possibility – of cognitive change
- Loss of control (e.g., bladder dysfunction, mobility)
- Making decisions about medications and other healthcare needs

Stress and relapses

A relationship between stress and the onset of MS or MS relapses is considered possible but studies haven't clearly proven this yet. More research is needed to answer these questions.

Stress and MS symptoms

When we're stressed, it takes extra energy to think, solve problems, and manage everyday tasks. This can make symptoms feel worse because our energy is being used up. While we can't completely avoid stress, we can learn to lessen its impact and even turn it into something that helps us rather than holds us back.

Recognizing Stress

Common signs of stress include changes in breathing, tight muscles, cold sweaty hands, and clenched teeth. Different people show their stress in different ways. Some of the common signs of stress – fatigue and muscle tightness, for example – may also be symptoms of the disease. Understanding your stress responses and learning to separate

them from MS symptoms may help you recognize when you are stressed. Knowing what causes or increases your stress can be the first step in managing it.

Taming stress in your mind

Stress often comes from how we see and react to situations. Everyday events and unhelpful thought patterns can create stress, even for the most resilient people. Take time to identify pressures in your life, including those you might not immediately recognize as stressors. How can you view these situations differently to feel less stressed?

Talk through stress

Sharing your thoughts and feelings can relieve stress. Building a support network of people who know about your MS and the challenges you may face can provide you with a wider range of opinions. You may also be interested in a MS Canada support program, or online chat group or forum.

Expressing anger

Letting your anger out can relieve stress when it's done in a productive way, and without placing blame on others. Taking a moment to practice deep breathing afterward can help restore a sense of calm. Once you feel more grounded, make a plan to face the underlying situation that made you angry. Expressing anger may relieve stress, but it doesn't change the situation. It's normal to experience a range of emotions when you receive a diagnosis of MS, including sadness, anxiety, and grief. As you come to terms with having MS, you may also feel irritable, angry, or depressed. If this goes on for more than a few months or starts to interfere with being able to live your life in a healthy way, contact your healthcare provider to discuss things that might help. Mood problems in MS may also be due to damage in areas of the brain that control response to emotion.

Mood might get worse with:

- An MS relapse
- Normal life stresses
- Hormonal changes

Cognitive change and stress

MS-related cognitive changes are known to occur in more than half of all people with MS. These changes may include memory, communication skills, attention span or ability to concentrate, among other symptoms. As with all other symptoms of MS, the type and the extent of cognitive problems differ widely from person to person. Cognitive change is

related to MS lesions, or damaged areas, in the brain. It's not caused by stress, depression, medication, or fatigue, but it can be affected by all of these.

Cognitive change can cause stress. The loss of any ability is stressful – and so is the fear of that loss. It may be helpful to develop strategies to reduce stress caused by cognitive change. For example:

- Use a daily diary to track lists and ease the stress of remembering activities.
- Ask for written instructions to make details easier to remember.
- Share tasks and concerns with others to lighten the load both practically and emotionally.
- Discuss cognitive rehabilitation strategies with your healthcare team.

Everyday strategies for managing stress

- Simplify your life – learn to say no
- Plan ahead for situations that could cause stress
- Get extra rest before big days
- Be as specific as possible when asking for help.

Relaxation

Relaxation isn't something you just decide to do; it's something that is learned. You will need to discover what works for you. **Deep breathing** helps release tension, promoting relaxation for the mind and body. **Meditation** may also reduce stress, with apps and tools available to guide you. **Yoga** combines breathing exercises with stretches that enhance flexibility and relieve tension, while **tai chi** uses gentle movements and deep breathing to encourage relaxation. **Regular physical activities** like walking, swimming, or gardening improve both mental and physical health. Work with your healthcare provider to customize these practices to suit your needs and abilities.

No right way

There's no one "right way" to cope with stress! Even within the same family, some members may handle situations differently. What may work for one person, may not work for someone else. It's important to explore different approaches to find what works best for you.

If you require support, information, or additional resources, please contact the MS Knowledge Network and speak to an MS Navigator at 1-844-859-6789 or by email at msnavigators@mssociety.ca