How to Cope With MS and Anxiety

by ERIC PATTERSON

Managing MS and Anxiety

Counselor Eric Patterson and MSer Libby Selinsky share their thoughts and tips for managing anxiety.

Counselor Eric's Tips for Reducing MS Anxiety

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a disease that attacks you in multidimensional ways. Mentally, physically, cognitively, emotionally and spiritually, MS will test your perseverance and aptitude for managing your symptoms.

As your time with MS lengthens, you may begin to see new and different ways it impacts your life. Of course, there are the direct influences of the disease: your body will be inconsistently weak; your memory and attention will suffer; your emotions and frustrations may boil over more often than you would like.

Then there are the indirect effects of MS. These ones are not attributed to the disease in a cause and effect relationship. Rather than being a symptom of MS, they are a symptom of a symptom — these are second-level problems.

Second-Level Stress

Second-level problems might sound mild or easier to manage, but at times these issues can equal or surpass the damage caused by the direct symptoms. Indirect symptoms of MS can include problems like:

- Poor relationships due to changing roles and expectations.
- Increased work stress from diminished productivity or performance.
- Increased mental health symptoms.

The last item on the list may be the most alarming. Many people in the United States are at risk of developing an anxiety disorder. People with MS are in the unique position of being even more prone to the symptoms of anxiety.

Overall, people with MS have a 43 percent chance of meeting the criteria for an anxiety. The rates for anxiety disorders are even higher in women with MS.

Anxiety will present differently in different people, but many symptoms will be seen across the population no matter which anxiety disorder is experienced. Symptoms of anxiety include:

- Worried thinking marked by expecting the worst to happen no matter what the situation.
- Having thoughts that seem sped up or hard to separate.
- Decreased ability to focus or concentrate.
- Feeling tense and physically fatigued.

- Feeling restless or jittery.
- Decreased appetite and sleep.

As you know, identifying the problem and gaining an understanding of the symptoms is only the beginning of your task. The real work comes from the question: What are you going to do about it?

Some might sit back and wait for the symptoms to progress or grow out of control. Others might think they will be in the group that never experiences anxiety as a second-level symptom. Both plans are poor because neither is interested in action. Being a passive spectator to anxiety will end in disappointment.

Next page: counselor Eric offers his answers for dealing with MS anxiety.
Page three: MS warrior Libby shares her thoughts on coping with anxiety.

Anxiety Answers

Consider the following anxiety-busters specifically built for MS:

Start Therapy

If you were a typical person beginning to experience symptoms of anxiety, therapy might not be the first line of defense, but MS makes you atypical. Since the rates of anxiety are higher in people with MS, therapy is an obvious choice.

Not only can therapy give you the needed skills and techniques to address your anxiety, it can help address the other direct and indirect symptoms of MS. Therapists may offer helpful tips for addressing energy and memory concerns while honing communication skills to improve relationships.

Unfortunately, anxiety is not the only mental health issues effecting people with MS — depression is an additional concern. What to improve both? Try therapy.

Try Medication

After meeting with your therapist, you can receive a recommendation for anxiety medication. Your therapist might feel like you can improve without or that medication is necessary.

Seeking a consultation from a psychiatrist, or another medical professional that specializes in mental health, will give you information about helpful medications, as well as the cost and benefit of each. Be open and clear about all of your symptoms, especially the impact of MS on your life.

It may take several trials to find a good medication for you, but once stabilized, medications can make therapy more helpful and life more enjoyable.

If you are waiting for your first therapy session or your psychiatric evaluation, there are several at-home stress-reducers worth trying. They include:

- **Increasing the involvement of your supports.** Start the process by surrounding yourself with people who love and support you, and listen to their perspective. Express your own thoughts, beliefs and frustrations — allow yourself plenty of time to vent, while setting the goal of ending each conversation with a positive statement. Focusing on hope will aid your mood and anxiety.
- **Move away from stress.** Being around people and situations that breed stress will only heighten your symptoms of anxiety, so put extra effort in reducing your negative experiences.
- **Move towards a relaxed body.** Depending on the impact of MS, exercise can be one your best allies in reducing anxiety and depression while boosting your energy. Exercise may actually be able to improve your attention and memory as well.

- **Retrain your brain.** It is a strikingly simple truth that the way you think about your yourself, your stressors, and your MS has a direct impact on your anxiety. To begin, analyze the ways you think and talk to yourself and rework your self-talk to be more positive, and it can lead to differences in your moods and symptoms of anxiety.

The evidence is clear: people with MS are at a greater risk of increased anxiety as a secondary factor. Luckily, there are many professional and at-home treatments to reduce or resolve the problematic symptoms. With MS-related anxiety, it is never too early to start.

Next page: MS warrior Libby shares her personal experiences with MS and anxiety.

Libby's Tips for Reducing MS Anxiety

MS is unique in its pathology; it comes and goes when it wants to — it haunts people.

If you have been diagnosed with MS, or if you love someone who has been diagnosed, then you know exactly what I mean. This disease enjoys lurking in the shadows, whispering your name in the dark, reminding you never to forget it is there.

Depression and anxiety disorders are common in people who have MS. It may be due to the brain damage we receive from our MS lesions, but I have a strong feeling it is mostly caused by the behavior of MS and our inability to prevent, predict or heal the damages it likes to inflict.

How It Began for Me

When I was diagnosed in 2007, I knew nothing about MS. The symptoms I was experiencing seemed like I had a pinched nerve in my neck or something to that effect. It had been only after months of progression I decided to see a doctor.

My symptoms had been annoying, but suddenly began progressing very quickly. What had been holding steady as some tingling in my hands and feet, and only when I tilted my head downward, turned into a full-time neuropathy overnight.

I was terrified. I had already seen a doctor, but he was not a neurologist and did not give me any indication of what he believed was the cause of my problems. He did give me a worried look I had not seen in a doctor’s eyes since my progressed bout of pneumonia when I was five-years-old.

I knew that look and it did not indicate something as minor as a pinched nerve. That look indicated something more, something unknown to me. Naturally, I went home and googled my symptoms. Turns out, there are a lot of scary diseases that have similar symptoms to MS.

That was the day my anxiety really began. I was beginning to understand something was really wrong. It was settling in that whatever was going on with my body was going to be permanent and that neurological diseases, still being in their beginning stages of medical understanding, meant there were no happy answers coming for me.

Falling Into the Depths

My diagnosis came when I met with a neurologist who had me come into his office a few weeks after our first meeting to get my lumbar puncture, also called a spinal tap. I am sure you are all very familiar with the procedure; it is a terrible experience pretty much across the board.

The doctor botched the whole procedure. He tried administering pain killers into the puncture area but they weren’t taking. Finally, he just went forward with the procedure.

You would think the neuropathy would have prevented my body from feeling the pain, but you would be wrong. He inserted the catheter into my spine and nothing came out, so he needed to place a second catheter into my spine; after all the pain and screaming from the first puncture, he went again. Fortunately, he was successful the second time.

The light inside of me went dark that day — I was wheeled out of that room a different person. My husband was not in the room when it happened, and when he saw me in the waiting room he looked puzzled and scared.

Next page: Libby's advice for reducing anxiety.

Libby's Tips for Reducing MS Anxiety

He started asking me what happened and there was nothing I could say. My soul had been stripped from me and I was certain the beauty of the world was gone. Life was going to take what it wanted, when it wanted — and I had no abilities to fight it.

Life was hard for the first year after it all began for me. I would sit for hours in the bath or take multiple showers a day, so I could cry alone.

I stopped sleeping for the first six months; I was terrified of dying while I slept. I had started sleeping only after my son was in bed and until my husband went to bed. I would get maybe two hours of sleep a night.

I was falling apart. I needed help.

Realizing When Anxiety Has Become a Problem

We need peace; peace of mind, peace of body, and peace of spirit. MS can take away all of these things if we let it. Happiness can feel like gripping water: we dip our hands into the pool, trying to grab a drink, but the water gets squeezed out between our fingers.

How do we stop the anxiety and depression from taking over? How do we keep true to who we are and nurture the pure joy within our souls? It took me years to climb out and live a normal life.

I found respite within the love I received from my husband, son and close friendships. I sought counseling when times were terrible, and used their tools to take my days as they come. I learned to refocus on the things I could enjoy and the goodness happening all around me. I learned to thrive inside the darkness.

I created my own flame for life and fed it every chance that I could. I found a new neurologist — one I could trust. I learned to take in every moment of peace that came my way. Not a second is to be wasted.

Maintaining Peace of Mind

Life is more precious to me now. Life is fleeting; we all know this in the undercurrents of our days. When we are forced to face our mortality by living inside bodies that prevent us from experiencing the world, we get a glimpse of what it is like to have it all taken away.

My anxiety was able to be controlled once I accepted the unpredictability of disease signifies the unforgiving nature of this world, of this life, and of death.

I do not appreciate the threats MS poses to my body and my life. I have just come to realize I am no different than anyone else in this world. I have lived a longer life with this disease than that of some of my friends and family who were always healthy, only to die suddenly from some unseen accident.

We are pioneers journeying into the unknown — just like everyone else. And that makes me happy.