

Taming Stress in Multiple Sclerosis



MS[®]

National
Multiple Sclerosis
Society

**SCOTT
DIAGNOSED IN 2003**

Taming Stress in Multiple Sclerosis

BY FREDERICK FOLEY, PHD
WITH JANE SARNOFF

Frederick Foley, PhD, is director of psychological services at the Multiple Sclerosis Comprehensive Care Center at Holy Name Hospital in Teaneck, New Jersey. Jane Sarnoff is a professional health writer.

This publication is supported by contributions to the National MS Society from its members and friends.

Reviewed by: James Bowen, MD; Pat Bednarik, MS, CCC-SLP, MSCS; and Sue Kushner, MS, PT.

© 2016 National MS Society. All rights reserved.

Causes of stress

Brought to you by evolution...

When our ancestors were taking a morning stroll and met a tiger, they could run or fight. Either action demanded that their bodies adjust rapidly to meet the emergency, and they experienced stress as part of the process.

Without stress, we would not be able to act in times of danger. In fact, without some stress to get us to focus on a problem we might do almost nothing. Many people perform best while under stress. Other times, however, people are immobilized by the pressure that stress creates and prevents people from doing what needs to be done.

Today's tigers

Stress can be caused by both pleasant and unpleasant demands and changes. In other words, people can be just as stressed by getting a promotion as by not getting one.

Stress usually begins with alarm, the modern equivalent of noticing a tiger. However, our options are rarely as simple as running away or fighting. For example, most people are very stressed at the prospect of having to use a cane or wheelchair. Many eventually experience relief or accept the benefits of the aid once the stressor — the idea of using a cane or other assistive device — has been sufficiently worked through.

Stress and MS

Having any chronic illness increases stress. MS is no exception. In fact, stressful situations that are common with MS include:

- **diagnostic uncertainties** (before the definite MS diagnosis)
- **the unpredictability** of MS
- **the invisibility** of some symptoms (which can cause people with MS to feel misunderstood by others)
- **the visibility** of some symptoms, particularly newly emerging ones (to which others may react before the person has had time to adjust). The biggest changes here are the physical challenges presented by MS.
- **the need to adjust and readjust** to changing abilities
- **financial stress** and concerns about employment
- **the presence — or possibility — of cognitive impairment**
- **loss of control** (e.g., coming and going of unpredictable symptoms)
- **the need to make decisions** about disease-modifying treatment and adjusting to the treatment if it is chosen.

Does stress increase the risk of attacks or affect the long-term course of MS?

Many people with MS feel that there is a definite connection between stress and MS. Some believe that controlling stress can have a beneficial impact on MS, and still others believe that neither stress nor controlling stress has any effect on MS. Scientifically speaking, the jury is still out.

A relationship between stress and the onset of MS or MS relapses is considered possible, but hasn't been powerfully demonstrated in studies. Can a stressful event cause nerve damage or lesions? Can effective stress management prevent damage? Can nerve damage or lesions increase someone's experience of stress? More research is needed to answer these questions.

Can stress make MS symptoms feel worse?

Many people with MS say “yes.” They experience more symptoms during stressful times. When the stress abates, their symptoms seem less troubling or less severe. This could be understood by looking at the stress and coping process.

During times of stress, more energy is required to think, problem-solve, and handle daily life. For example, one's ability to be patient with family members often wanes after a tough day. At stressful or demanding times, symptoms may be experienced more strongly because the energy to deal with them and get on with life has been drained.

Stress may add to the feeling of overwhelming fatigue, which is already one of the most burdensome symptoms of MS.

We all have finite limits on our ability to cope. At demanding times, our supply may temporarily run dry. Any difficulty, including MS symptoms, is more challenging at these moments.

Stress can't be — and shouldn't be — totally avoided. The challenge is to learn to reduce its intensity and use it to work for, not against, us.

Recognizing stress

Common signs of stress include changes in breathing, tight muscles, cold sweaty hands and clenched teeth. But different people show their stress in different ways. In people with MS, 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 your MS symptoms may help you recognize when you are stressed.

Knowing what causes or increases your stress can be the first step in taming it. What daily events or concerns stress you most? You may find it helpful to make a list of the things that have caused you the most stress in the last two weeks.

You may want to ask those nearest to you to help you recognize your stressors. But don't be overly influenced by what others think should stress you — just take note of what they think **has** caused you stress. A situation isn't stressful unless you react to it with stress. Be careful not to blame every stressor, or your reaction to it, on the MS.

Taming stress in your mind

Stress often evolves from the way we interpret situations — and the way we relate to the world around us. So much in life could lead to stress: lost buttons, long lines, irritating people, unreasonable requests, insurance forms, demands at work; responsibilities at home. Some of these patterns may have developed over a lifetime; therefore, it may take a while to make changes.

Take a look at your stress producers. In what ways can you re-interpret situations so that they don't cause you so much stress? How can you relate differently to people to avoid stress?

If personal thinking patterns create or increase stress, new thinking patterns can be learned. Here are some examples of thinking that increases stress:

- **You think:** “total failure” whenever you're short of absolute perfection. (**Alternative:** “I did a pretty good job — I'll do it better next time.”)
- **You think:** you are responsible for everything: “I wonder what I did to make him feel like that?” (**Alternative:** “I am not the center of everyone's world.”)
- **You think:** “should” about everything: “I should be treated fairly.” (**Alternative:** “I'd like to be treated fairly, but...”)
- **You think:** “I probably won't be able to do that...no use trying.” (**Alternative:** “I think I'll give it a try and see how far I can go.”)
- **You think:** one thing is everything: “I messed that up, I'll mess up everything.” (**Alternative:** “I am not very good at that, but I'm good at many other things.”)

Common signs of stress

Emotional signs

- Chronic irritability or resentment
- Feeling down in the dumps, demoralized
- Continual boredom
- Excessive nervousness or anxiety
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Nightmares

Thinking-related signs

- Worrying every day
- Distractibility
- Expecting the worst to happen
- Difficulty making everyday decisions

Physical signs

- Clammy hands or sweating
- Constipation/diarrhea
- Dry mouth
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Stomachaches, knots, cramps or nausea
- Muscle spasms or tightness
- Lump in throat
- Faintness
- Fatigue/weariness
- Sleeping too much/ too little
- Short and shallow breathing

Can you cut stress down to size?

Some very ordinary events — combined with negative thinking habits — can produce major stress. Other events are stressful to even the most optimistic or resilient people. When you examine your stress producers, review the pressures that may have been part of your life for so long you may not immediately identify them as stressors. Examples include a declining relationship with your partner, declining job performance, an ongoing effort to hide your symptoms, or financial problems such as battles with insurance companies or entitlement programs.

Reviewing the pressures may help start the process of identifying resources. You may want to consider a marriage counselor, job coach, financial planner, patient advocate or asking for accommodations at work. Regardless of the stressor, stress is never trivial.

Talk your way out of stress

Sharing your thoughts and feelings can relieve stress. Building a support network of people who know about your illness and the difficulties you face is one way to gain a wider range of opinions.

Talking with others can sometimes help you see the things that cause you stress in a new light. There are more than 1,200 self-help groups affiliated with the National MS Society.

Call 1-800-344-4867 for a list of groups that are near you or visit [nationalMSsociety.org/supportgroup](https://www.nationalMSsociety.org/supportgroup). There may be one that's right for you. Joining the MS online community ([MSconnection.org](https://www.MSconnection.org)) is another way to connect with others to share feelings and opinions.

Talking with friends and family often means educating them so that they will better understand your experience. Some people can do this on their own; other people prefer the help of a counselor or other mental health professional to help them communicate with the important people in their lives. The MS Society can give you referrals.

Expressing anger

Letting your anger out can relieve stress — and it is most effective when done without blaming others. You might say “I’m so angry” instead of “you make me so angry.” After expressing your anger, you may want to do a few cycles of deep breathing to help you regain your calm. When calm, make a plan to face the underlying situation that made you so angry. Expressing anger may relieve stress, but it doesn’t change the situation.

Managing expectation

Every time we meet someone new or start a new job, we have to find out where we can assert ourselves and where we need to make changes or compromises. People with MS

often negotiate and renegotiate as symptoms come and go, particularly if their abilities have been altered. In telling others how you feel, always mention that MS is changeable and that flexibility in expectations (yours and theirs) is key. Leave the door open.

This is more than just stress!

Depression is one of the most common symptoms of MS. Major depressive disorder affects approximately 14.8 million American adults, or about 6.7 percent of the population age 18 and older, in a given year. More than half of people with MS will experience a major depression at some point in the course of their disease. In MS, depression has been shown to be associated with changes in the brain and in the immune system, as well as to the physical and emotional challenges posed by the illness. Although depression is a serious illness, it can be treated effectively. Diagnosis and treatment require a mental health professional who is experienced with MS and/or willing to work with your MS healthcare team.

Special problems with stress, depression and MS

Some of the symptoms of stress are remarkably similar to symptoms of depression and some mimic or overlap symptoms of MS.

Depression causes people to lose interest in their usual activities. In addition, they often experience five or more of the symptoms listed below to some degree. (Notice that symptoms such as fatigue or inability to concentrate can also be symptoms of MS.)

Signs of depression

- Feeling “blue” or “down in the dumps” most of the day, nearly every day
- Loss of interest in doing things that normally would interest you or difficulty feeling pleasure when things happen that would normally be pleasurable
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Marked changes in appetite, or weight gain or loss
- Agitation and anxiety or a slowing down of mental and physical activity
- Decreased energy and increased fatigue
- Feelings of worthlessness, guilt and self-reproach
- Indecisiveness, memory loss, difficulty concentrating
- Thoughts of death or suicide or of harming yourself or others

If you, or those close to you, think that you have become depressed or if you have had five or more of these symptoms continue for more than two weeks, talk to your physician or to a mental health professional.

Each of the interferon medications used to treat multiple sclerosis carries a warning that the medication should be used with caution by persons who have a history of depression. If you are taking an interferon medication for your MS, have a history of depression or experience significant changes in mood, please talk with your physician.

Cognition and stress

MS-related cognitive changes are known to occur in more than half of people who are living with MS. As with all other symptoms of MS, the type and the extent of cognitive problems differ widely from person to person. While most people will experience mild to moderate changes in their cognitive abilities, about 10 percent of those affected will have much more severe cognitive difficulties. The most common problems are in the areas of speed of thinking or information processing, learning and remembering new information, and the ability to focus and sustain attention. Changes in planning and problem-solving abilities are also relatively common.

These cognitive changes are a consequence of MS lesions in the brain — not caused by stress, depression, medication or fatigue. But all of these factors can also affect thinking and worsen cognitive symptoms. In times of great stress it is common for anyone to forget things,

or have difficulty concentrating or making decisions — changes that can be confusing and worrisome to a person with MS. These sorts of stress-related lapses are temporary and improve when the stressful time passes. If you notice cognitive symptoms, no matter what you think might be the cause, it is important to talk with your physician about what you are experiencing. Having problems with cognition can cause or exacerbate stress. The loss of any ability is stressful — and so is the fear of that loss.

The National MS Society's **Managing Cognitive Problems**, by Dr. Nicholas LaRocca, explains cognitive problems in detail — and what can be done about them. People with MS-related cognitive changes may find it helpful to develop or concentrate on these strategies to reduce stress due to cognitive problems. For example:

- Keep a daily diary or a notebook for lists to reduce the stress of trying to recall a day's activities. This can be done on the fly using a smartphone or tablet.
- Ask for written information and instructions to reduce the need for remembering details.
- Share concerns and responsibilities with others to lighten your load practically and emotionally.
- Discuss cognitive rehabilitation techniques — designed to improve performance — with your MS healthcare team.
- Practice some form of stress management on a daily basis.
- Contact the National MS Society for information and assistance.

Techniques & strategies for taming stress

Everyday strategies

To help get everyday stress under control:

- Simplify your life. Relax a few standards. Let the grass grow. Ask yourself if you want to do a particular task, if it needs to be done perfectly, or not at all.
- Plan ahead in situations that could cause stress. Take a book with you if waiting may be necessary. Make plans for where to meet or call if plans go awry.
- Get extra sleep before family gatherings or important events.
- Learn to say no. You don't have to do anything if you don't have the time, energy or desire.
- Make your requests for help as specific as possible: "Would you please help me by...."
- If old interests and activities become more difficult or too time consuming, replace them with new ones that fit your current needs.
- Get very practical:
 - Make an extra set of keys.
 - Update your telephone/address directory.
 - Keep the car and other important appliances in good working order.
 - If small things you need don't work, get new ones: shoelaces, alarm clock, can opener.

- Keep a good supply of small items you use all the time: toilet paper, batteries, stamps, change for the bus.
- Investigate and use gadgets, aids and devices that save time or effort.
- Do the unpleasant things early in the day so that you don't have to worry about them.
- Carry a notebook, smartphone, or tablet to write yourself — and others — notes for the day, the week, the month.
- If you find that you are breathing in a short, shallow pattern, it's time to take a break. That kind of breathing often accompanies stress. To break the pattern, sit down for a minute. Take deep, slow breaths and relax all your muscles (see page 17).
- Don't try to answer the phone on the first ring. Let it ring. Consider buying an answering machine.
- Make a 3/4 rule: fill the gas tank when it is 3/4 empty; order more medication when it is 3/4 gone; replace juice when the quart is 3/4 gone.
- When you find a task difficult or stress producing, try to find a better way of doing it. If you can't think of an easier way, ask a friend to help you look at the problem. Once you have found a solution, you might want to make a note of it to remind yourself of good choices you have made that might be adapted for other problems.
- If the morning rush is stressful:
 - Get up 15 minutes earlier.
 - Ask someone else to take on a morning task.
 - Do some of the preparation the night before.
 - Make sure that all your morning tasks are absolutely necessary.

- Make equal exchanges in your life. Do you find it too stressful to travel to see your family and friends? Give yourself permission to use the same money to make regular phone visits.
- Use your imagination to get yourself used to an event you are not looking forward to. You need to visit a new doctor? Imagine what you are going to wear, what questions you want to ask, what questions will be asked of you. Think about the visit the way you would like it to be. Then imagine the worst thing that could happen and how you would deal with it.
- Remind yourself that you are a person — not a “multiple sclerosis patient.”
- Drive 10 miles an hour slower. And try a new route from time to time. If long car rides cause you stress, listen to audiotapes of books or pleasant music.
- Schedule rest periods. (You may want to set an alarm to tell you that it’s time to rest.) Knowing that you are going to rest on a regular basis can stop you from feeling guilty about doing it.
- Try to do something you enjoy each day.
- Sit quietly for a minute or two before starting your meal. Say grace if you wish, or just notice — really notice — where you are, what you are eating, who you are with.
- Take a shower at the end of the day. Let water carry cares down the drain.
- Spend as much time as possible with people who aren’t worriers.

- Learn to revise time schedules. If you told a friend you would meet at noon, and you are running late, is there any reason the appointment can't be changed to 1:00?
- Do one thing at a time. Don't think about the next task before you have finished the one you are working on. Let yourself feel a sense of accomplishment before moving on.
- Boredom can be stressful: take a course, join a club, learn a new skill.
- Eat regular, balanced meals. Keep prepared foods in the house for times when you don't feel like cooking or shopping.
- Reduce reliance on cigarettes, caffeine, and alcohol. Ask your doctor for help if necessary.
- Work toward the "Best Sense of Humor" award; don't try for "Gets the Most Done."
- Ask for help when you need it.
- Use support and education services. Let the experiences of others help you solve problems — and your experiences to help others.

Relaxation

One of the most unhelpful questions you might be asked is "why don't you just relax?" Relaxation isn't something you just decide to do. People have to learn to relax. You can discover what works for you, and then practice.

There is no one right way to relax. Some people find that reading, listening to music, meditation, or prayer in a quiet room relaxes them. Others garden, paint, cook, or do puzzles.

Many people use one or more of the relaxation techniques described in the next nine sections. Read through the descriptions and consider which might be best for you. Give one a try for a month or so. If it doesn't work, try another. And try again. Different methods of managing stress through relaxation may work better at different times.

To make relaxation easier, give yourself permission to take time for yourself. Don't feel guilty about shutting a door and telling everyone to give you some alone time.

Deep breathing

Deep breathing can help reduce tension and allow your mind and body to feel more comfortable. The exercise takes only a few minutes and can be done almost anywhere at any time. Try deep breathing to start the day and then repeat it several times throughout the day. Deep breathing can also help you relax just before an event that might be stressful.

You may want to make a tape of the following instructions to play while you are learning the exercise:

1. Sit with your back straight and your shoulders comfortably back.
2. Put your hand on your belly, below the waist, so that you can feel your breathing.

3. Inhale through your nose slowly and deeply. The air will feel cool. Concentrate on the feeling of the air as it moves into all parts of your body.
4. As the air reaches your belly, let your belly expand. Some people tend to tighten their bellies as they breathe in. Your hands on your belly will let you feel the movement.
5. Draw in as much air as you can. Then, hold your breath for a few seconds — four or five is fine. You don't need to distract yourself by counting unless it makes you more comfortable.
6. Begin to exhale. Shape your lips as if you were going to whistle and slowly breathe out between your lips. Use your lips to control how fast you exhale.
7. Concentrate on the feeling of the air leaving all parts of your body. The air coming out should feel warm.
8. Your hands will let you feel the breath leave your body. Your belly will deflate and as it does, the large muscle under your ribs — the diaphragm — will get larger.
9. When you feel your lungs empty, sit quietly for a moment and then repeat the inhale/exhale cycle. Repeat the cycle four or five times.
10. Sit quietly for a minute or two.

Clear your mind

The “clear your mind” exercise is an enjoyable relaxation exercise for many. However, it takes practice to do it well, and may seem deceptively easy. This exercise may be frustrating or require more practice if there are difficulties with attention and concentration.

1. Choose a time when you have about 10 minutes available in a place that is relatively free of noise and distraction and where you will not be interrupted.
2. Loosen tight clothing, remove your shoes, and sit in a position that is comfortable.
3. Close your eyes and do two inhale/exhale cycles of deep breathing.
4. With your eyes still closed, picture in your mind a pleasant, restful place. Try to visualize as many details as possible: what objects are present, the color of the sky, who is present, etc. Concentrate on that place. Watch the wind blow on the trees or the water. Notice how the leaves turn slowly. Imagine your other senses experiencing the scene. Feel the gentle cool breeze on your skin. Breathe deeply and slowly, and imagine the smells associated with your scene, perhaps the fresh salty air of the ocean, or the clean woody smell of the country. Imagine hearing the sounds associated with your scene, perhaps the sound of the breeze moving softly through the trees or the call of birds.
5. Some people have difficulty visualizing or creating a “picture” in their mind’s eye. If this is the case, you may find this exercise is not for you. An alternative approach is to follow steps 1 through 3 above. Instead of visualizing a relaxing scene in step 4, concentrate on a word — “calm” — or a thought — “I am loved.”
6. Don’t worry if other thoughts or images break in — it isn’t easy to clear your mind. When you notice your mind has drifted, gently return your thoughts to your image or word. If you have trouble, do another cycle of deep breathing and

try again. It may take considerable practice to learn to clear your mind. As you do so, the relaxation will become deeper and you will feel refreshed and more energetic.

7. End the mind clearing by stretching — to reawaken your body to the world around you — and exhaling.

Meditation

You may want to continue on to deeper meditation once you have learned to clear your mind. Many people find that meditation greatly decreases the stress in their lives. It takes about 15 minutes once or twice a day. Try to meditate at the same times each day.

1. Sit as you would for mind clearing in a quiet place, free from distractions. Unplug the phone and close the door. Tell everyone you are going to be busy for 15 minutes.
2. Do two or three cycles of deep breathing.
3. Pick a word or phrase that makes you feel calm. Although any word will do, many people find that words that end in an **m** or **n** sound are most helpful — words like “calm,” “home,” “noon,” or “one.”
4. Close your eyes and repeat the word or phrase over and over either in your mind or out loud. Concentrate on the way the word sounds inside your head. Try not to think about what you are doing or how you are feeling.
5. If you have trouble relaxing or concentrating on the word, stop, do a cycle of deep breathing, and try again.
6. End the exercise by gently stretching and exhaling.

7. Although 15 minutes may be the ultimate goal of the meditation period, the actual time isn't really important. Be realistic. Don't worry if you only are able to concentrate for a few minutes at first. Just sit quietly for the rest of the time period. (Just sitting quietly will do you good.) With practice, the time and the depth of relaxation will increase.

Visualization

Visualization is a combination of meditation, clearing your mind, imagination, and deep breathing. With visualization you do more than just see an appealing scene. You move yourself — in your mind — into the picture. You watch yourself reaching your hand out to pick a flower or to trail your fingers through a sunlit stream. You go to the beach and let the sand sift through your hand onto your leg.

Start the exercise by doing three or four cycles of deep breathing, and end the exercise by stretching and exhaling. If you can't enter the picture at first, do a cycle or two of deep breathing and try again. As with the "Clear Your Mind" exercise, try to experience the scene with as many of your senses as possible. Hear the sound the rushing stream makes, and how the sound changes as you change the position of your hand. Smell the cool fresh scent of the stream, and feel the water on your fingers. The entire exercise can take as few as 5 and as long as 15 minutes.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is often used as an aid to stress management. And, done in bed before you go to sleep, it can be an aid to a sound night's sleep.

Going through your body's entire group of muscles — tensing, relaxing and focusing on the changes — will take about 12 to 15 minutes. If it takes less time than that, you are moving at a non-relaxing speed. These exercises will provide the most benefit if you do them twice a day. If there are some muscle groups that you cannot work with comfortably, skip them.

If you have significant spasticity in some muscles, strongly tensing those muscle groups could trigger a spasm. You may want to speak with a physical therapist or other MS healthcare professional about ways to work in a more comfortable way.

Many people, especially those with cognitive problems, find that the exercises are easier to do along with a prerecorded tape. You can prepare the tape yourself or ask someone with a relaxing voice to do it for you.

You will work with each of 17 muscle groups in a specific order. **Tense, but don't strain** each muscle group. Hold the tense position for the slow count of five, paying attention to the way those muscles feel. Relax the muscles — letting them go totally limp. Focus for a count of five on how the muscles feel when relaxed.

To prepare for the exercise, wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothing, remove glasses or contact lenses, and sit up in a chair without crossing your legs or arms. You may also do this lying down in bed.

1. Clench both hands. Focus on how your hands feel and how the tension moves into the forearms. Relax. Notice what the muscles in your hands and forearms feel like now.
2. Touch your fingers to your shoulders. Raise your arms level with your shoulders. Focus on the tension in your biceps and upper arms. Relax and focus on the change in feeling.
3. Shrug your shoulders, raising them as high as possible. Focus on the tension in your shoulders. Relax and focus on the change.
4. Wrinkle your forehead. Notice where tension occurs — around your eyes and forehead. Relax and focus on the change.
5. Close your eyes tightly. Focus on the tension. Relax and focus on the change.
6. Clench your teeth. Focus on the tension in your jaw and, mouth, and chin. Relax and focus on the change.
7. Press as much of your tongue as possible onto the roof of your mouth. Focus on the tension in your mouth and throat. Relax and focus on the change.
8. Move your head slowly backwards as far as you comfortably can, keeping your shoulders level. Focus on the tension in your neck and upper back. Relax and focus on the change.

9. Pull your head forward, down onto your chest. Focus on the tension in your neck, shoulders, and upper back. Relax and focus on the change. **If you experience Lhermitte's sign (an electrical-like shock in your spine when you tip your neck forward), skip this step.**
10. Move away from the back of your chair, arch your back and push your arms upward. Focus on the tension in your back and shoulders. Relax and focus on the change.
11. Fill your lungs with air and hold the breath. Focus on the tension in your chest and back. Exhale all the way, relax and focus on the change.
12. Pull your stomach as far back toward your spine as you can. Focus on the tension in your stomach muscles and changes in your breathing. Relax and focus on the change.
13. Without pulling your stomach in, tense your stomach muscles. Focus on the tension. Relax and focus on the change.
14. Tense the muscles in your buttocks. Focus on the tension. Relax and focus on the change.
15. Flex your thigh muscles by straightening your legs or tensing the muscles. Focus on the tension. Relax and focus on the change.
16. Lift your feet off of the ground. Point your toes up, your heels down. Focus on the tension in your feet, ankles, and calves. Lower your feet, relax, and focus on the change.
17. Lift your feet slightly and curl your toes all the way down. Focus on the tension on the top of your feet and in your arches. Lower your feet, relax, and focus on the change.

After you have learned to be aware of tension in all 17 muscle groups, you may want to focus only on those groups that give you the most trouble. Tense and relax those groups — often the jaw, neck, and stomach — several times during the day. Check your “high tension” muscle groups from time to time to judge how relaxed you are.

Yoga

Yoga involves breathing exercises and a range of stretches that revolve around the spine. Yoga increases the body’s flexibility and releases tension. Many community centers have courses in yoga. Some of the movements may be easy for you. Other movements may need practice or adaptation. And still others may need to be omitted. Discuss your plans with your physician or physical therapist before you begin.

Tai chi

Tai chi involves deep breathing, slow gentle movements, and relaxation. As a conditioning regime, it is considered more gentle than yoga. Many of the positions can be done while sitting. Discuss your plans with your physician or physical therapist and ask the National MS Society about “adapted” tai chi classes in your area.

Traditional exercise programs

Any physical activity done on a regular basis has been found to reduce stress and improve physical and mental health. Walking, swimming or gardening can all relieve stress. Speak with your physician or physical therapist about developing a program to suit your needs and abilities. You don't need to belong to a gym or health club to engage in beneficial physical activity, and many exercises can be modified if they cannot be done in the 'traditional' way (e.g., using a hand cycle instead of stationary bicycle or performing seated exercises).

There is no "right way"

It is important to remember that there is no "right way" to cope with stress. Even within the same family, some members may handle the MS situation by wanting to talk about it, read about it and participate in support groups; others may ignore it much of the time. If an approach is working for you, you may be tempted to conclude it is the right way for your loved ones.

Dr. Nicholas LaRocca, an expert on coping and MS, advises people to recognize that no one method is inherently better or worse than any other. Family members and professionals should refrain from passing judgment on what is "healthy" or "right" for others. Respect is a stress reducer by itself.

Further reading

- **Multiple Sclerosis: A Self-Care Guide to Wellness, 2nd Edition** by Nancy J. Holland, MSN, EdD, and June Halper, MSN. New York, Demos Health, 2005, 288 pages.
- **Living with Multiple Sclerosis: A Wellness Approach, 2nd Edition** by George H. Kraft, MD, and Marci Catanzaro, RN, PhD. New York, Demos Health, 2000, 144 pages.
- **Living Beyond Multiple Sclerosis** by Judith Lynn Nichols. 2000, 288 pages.
- **Multiple Sclerosis: 300 Tips for Making Life Easier, 2nd Edition** by Shelley Peterman Schwarz. New York: Demos Health, 2006, 128 pages.

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society (“Society”) is proud to be a source of information on multiple sclerosis related topics. The information provided is based on professional advice, published experience, and expert opinion, but does not constitute medical or legal advice. For specific medical advice, consult a qualified physician. For specific legal advice, consult a qualified attorney.

The Society does not endorse products, services or manufacturers. Such names appear here solely because they are considered helpful information. The Society assumes no liability for the recipient’s use of any product or service mentioned. The Society does not independently verify whether the information provided by each service provider is accurate. The Society undertakes no responsibility to verify whether the service provider is appropriately licensed and certified and has applicable insurance coverage.

Early and ongoing treatment with an FDA-approved therapy can make a difference for people with multiple sclerosis. Learn about your options by talking to your healthcare professional and contacting the National MS Society at [nationalMSSociety.org](https://www.nationalMSSociety.org) or 1-800-344-4867.

The Society publishes many other resources about various aspects of MS. Visit [nationalMSSociety.org/brochures](https://www.nationalMSSociety.org/brochures) or call 1-800-344-4867.

Some of our popular pamphlets include:

- Living with MS
- Research Directions in Multiple Sclerosis
- Depression and MS
- MS and Your Emotions
- Managing Cognitive Problems

The National MS Society's mission is for people affected by MS to live their best lives as we stop MS in its tracks, restore what has been lost and end MS forever. To fulfill this mission, the Society funds cutting-edge research, drives change through advocacy, facilitates professional education, collaborates with MS organizations around the world, and provides services designed to help people with MS and their families move their lives forward.



National
Multiple Sclerosis
Society

nationalMSsociety.org

1-800-344-4867