



**MS Learn Online  
Feature Presentation  
Stress and MS: Relaxation Techniques  
Featuring Fred Foley, Ph.D.**

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>>**Kate Milliken:** Hi. I'm Kate Milliken and this is MS Learn Online. No matter what the situation is, stress can make any of us feel worse, whether by upsetting our stomachs or knotting our neck muscles. Many people with MS say they experience more symptoms during stressful times. When the stress abates, their symptoms seem less troubling or less severe.

Therefore, learning to relax is essential. That, however, is easier said than done.

In our second program on Stress and MS, we'll learn some techniques for relaxation and managing stress. We have Dr. Fred Foley back with us. Dr. Foley is Director of Psychosocial Research at the MS Center at Holy Name Hospital in Teaneck, New Jersey. Hi, Doctor, and welcome back to MS Learn Online.

>>**Dr. Fred Foley:** Hi. Thank you.

>>**Kate Milliken:** So first question for you is, is there a way of determining the difference of symptoms between stress and something like depression or anxiety?

>>**Dr. Fred Foley:** Yes. Stress is something that everybody experiences, but depression and anxiety are clinical syndromes that interfere in people's ability to function in some critical way.

So the difference between stress and depression and anxiety, although there is some overlap, is that depression and anxiety are worse. So-- and they cause severe distress and usually a reduction in the person's ability to function, in some way.

So, that's how we distinguish between normal stress that we all experience and that people with MS certainly experience, both related to life and related to the MS, from those other clinical syndromes.

>>**Kate Milliken:** Easy question for you. Can stress be eliminated?

>>**Dr. Fred Foley:** I wish it could. It's not possible to eliminate stress, so what we teach people to do is how to cope with it more effectively, how to deal with it in new ways and how to problem solve more effectively.

>>**Kate Milliken:** Stress certainly has the ability to make somebody have a range of emotions, including being angry. You know, I'm angry that I'm late. I'm angry that this isn't going as well as planned and it kind of brings in a chicken-and-egg phenomenon, because that anger can bring in stress. Can you talk about that?

>>**Dr. Fred Foley:** Yes. Chronic anger is not a good thing. You know, we haven't studied that in an MS population, but we know from the general population that anger-- you know, people that have a very short fuse and that express that frequently, particularly on a daily basis, have a chronically elevated stress response in the body. And that is associated with higher cholesterol levels and higher blood pressure and other physiological markers of damage to the body in some way.

So anger is a wonderful emotion, because when you're angry, everything becomes crystal clear. They're wrong and you're right. There's no shades of gray any more in anger. And anger is the feeling that you feel when you want or expect something, you're not getting it, but you still want or expect it.

So if a person, you know, with MS, it's very common, particularly if they undergo an exacerbation or disease worsening, their set of expectations about what they should be able to do and what they currently can do are kind of out of synch with each other. So frustration and anger is very common, you know, in persons with MS or any illness when they lose function in some way or something changes. So that now we have to teach them how to realign their expectations with the current reality so that they're not experiencing that chronic, you know, frustration and anger.

>>**Kate Milliken:** Dr. Foley, for the National MS Society you authored a brochure called "Taming Stress in Multiple Sclerosis." Can you tell me a little bit about what's in here?

>>**Dr. Fred Foley:** Sure. A lot of what we talk about are techniques for managing stress in MS that we've learned over the last 30 years of working with persons with MS in their families. And there are a variety of approaches that are important to learn.

You can approach stress from many different angles. You know, for example, some people love aerobic exercise and aerobic exercise has been found to reduce anxiety, to reduce depression and to help tune up the body's nervous system and balance the stress arm of the nervous system, the sympathetic nervous system, with the relaxation arm of the nervous system, the parasympathetic nervous system.

So aerobic exercise has been found to be a good stress reliever. However, in MS you have to be careful. You know, if you're heat sensitive, you don't want to get overheated when you're exercising, because that can cause problems, as well, and you have to find an exercise, an aerobic exercise, that is safe and appropriate for you, given whatever symptom that you happen to have.

So that's one aspect, is the physiological aspects, tuning the body to have a better stress response and that can be done through exercise. It could be done through relaxation techniques where we teach people to relax the muscles in the body. And that's appropriate for many people with MS. If you happen to have a lot of spasticity or other kinds of problems that would interfere with that, it wouldn't be an appropriate approach, but if you relax the muscles in your body -- and we can teach people to do that in a very active way to gain control over the level of muscle tension in their body -- that's associated with relaxation response. And so that's another physiological approach.

So-- but there are other physiological ways that you can change the body's stress response. So-- and we do this regularly by assessing the person in a variety of ways.

For example, teaching people meditation is a very common approach to stress management and reduction. And if a person has MS, there-- we evaluate, first, what types of problems do they have related to their MS.

For example, if they have impairment in attention and concentration, which can sometimes happen in MS, well, then teaching them concentration meditation approaches will be a frustrating experience for them. So we'll switch to a mindfulness meditation approach or another meditation approach where an impairment in attention and concentration won't interfere with them learning it and being able to relax.

Similarly, if someone has a great deal of spasticity, well, we don't want to teach them relaxation approaches that use muscle tension and relaxation, because that can precipitate an attack of spasticity.

So we want to evaluate the overall symptom profile first and then we teach them relaxation approaches that are going to be in harmony with them and be respectful of the MS symptoms that the person happens to have.

>>**Kate Milliken:** One of the things I feel like, as someone who has MS, you know, there's just such a Catch-22. You start to feel stress and then, you know, you don't feel well and then you start thinking, oh my God, maybe I'm having an exacerbation or an episode and that kind of gets you even more stress and it kinds of feed the fire. So--

>>**Dr. Fred Foley:** But we can also approach it from a cognitive perspective or a thinking perspective. Think about what your thoughts are like when you're feeling stressed out. You're thinking, oh, something's happening and it's bad. So you're anticipating some negative outcome, some bad consequence, to something that's happening.

So-- but we all know what it's like to make a mountain out of a molehill. We all know what it's like to think that things are worse than they really are.

So we train people with MS to systematically identify their daily thinking patterns and change them from those associated with the stress response, which is, you know, focusing on the negative, focusing on anticipated bad consequences, and change them to more neutral thoughts or more positive thought patterns.

Our thinking patterns are just a habit. We learn them when we're growing up and throughout life. And like any habit, if you systematically approach it and-- you can change it.

>>**Kate Milliken:** Disability, cost, lack of availability are three factors for people that are barriers to kind of moving forward with this part-- aspect of kind of their therapy for people with MS. Do you have any suggestions how somebody who's dealing with one of these issues can actually get resources to look into the idea of stress management?

>>**Dr. Fred Foley:** Well, I would start by directing them to the National MS Society, you know, for looking at their-- their library, you know, for resources including the booklet on taming stress and other resources they have.

Also, local chapters of the National MS Society frequently have professionals that they can-- that they work with or that are on their clinical advisory committees that they can refer, you know, persons with MS that are within their area to for professional advice.

>>**Kate Milliken:** Dr. Foley, thank you so much for joining us again to talk about stress, which is obviously a very important subject. I really appreciate it.

If you'd like to get more information on living with MS, go to [www.nationalmssociety.org](http://www.nationalmssociety.org). This is Kate Milliken for MS Learn Online. Thank you for joining us.