

Carers – How to care for yourself

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If you are caring for a partner with MS, you will have noticed how often others tend to focus on them, rather than on you. Medical professionals, friends, and relatives may preface conversations with, 'how is he/she doing?' While you may be quietly fuming or grieving. While others might briefly acknowledge your needs, this may often simply be a matter of 'don't forget to look after yourself – bye, now!'

Changes may seep into all areas of your own life. Sleep, intimacy, exercise, social life, and household management will all be affected to varying degrees, depending on the severity and fluctuations of your partner's MS. Emotionally, you may feel waves of anger, sadness, guilt, and loneliness as the illness becomes a permanent presence in your lives. You may feel as though you have lost control of your own bearings, and that your own needs have become secondary to those of your partner.

Adjusting to life as a carer is a balancing act. It requires a sense of realism regarding your partner's ongoing and future needs, but it also demands that you remain aware of, and deal with, your own emotional and physical needs. If you ignore or deny these, you may find that you feel less equipped to deal with life, and may feel exhausted and isolated. Paradoxically, you may actually be increasing your partner's stress, as they become concerned about your wellbeing in addition to their own.

It is not selfish to consider what you need, as a carer, in order to maintain physical and psychological resilience. In fact, these needs will be the same as they were before, but may require more effort and ingenuity in meeting them. Getting support from friends, health professionals, and your local MS support group may be key in helping you find ways to improve your own wellbeing.

MS does not define your life, or that of your partner. People with MS and their partners can feel as if the MS has become the centre of their existence, and other aspects of life seem secondary. Have an honest discussion about what is meaningful to you both, what you enjoy, what you've always wanted to do, and identify ways that you can continue to pursue these. MS doesn't have to overshadow the pleasure and fulfilment you get out of life.

Be assertive. Life is too short to wait for someone to ask if they can help. Many of us find it hard to ask directly for support, as we have often been conditioned to provide help rather than to need it. Yet, discovering the benefits of being open about your needs is often liberating and rewarding. Most often, others are happy to help out, and if they don't know how to, they may know someone else who can.

Drop the emotional perfectionism. While you may not want to open your heart to your neighbour while standing in the aisle of a supermarket, do make sure that you find time to confide in a friend or relative about how you are feeling. Remember, everyone struggles with something, and the reciprocal nature of a close relationship means that sharing problems is a way of supporting each other. If you don't have a friend you can turn to, then consider the possibility of seeing a therapist. Stoicism can be bad for your health.

Maintain intimacy with your partner. Long term illness can leave you both feeling isolated and fearful of touching or communicating in an intimate way, yet we know that physical touch triggers the 'bonding' hormone, oxytocin, which leaves us feeling warmer towards each other. Even if sex is not a goal, massage, touching, and physical closeness can maintain and build intimacy. Eye contact, a shared joke or gentle banter are effective ways of showing affection despite the MS. But bear in mind that MS can hit couples particularly hard if the relationship has been rocky in the past. If this is the case, think about seeking help as a couple for help with communication and managing emotions.

Remember the 'five-a -day' (www.Mind.org.uk). This refers to connecting with others, being active, taking notice of what is around you (Mindfulness), learning, and giving. These activities are all vital in helping us flourish, and taking small steps to integrate these into

your day to day life will not only help you feel happy and fulfilled, but will also help your partner deal more effectively with their MS.