

Disentangling Thoughts and Moods from MS

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In my role as a Clinical Psychologist, I frequently hear patients with MS describe days when their physical MS symptoms seem to merge with their emotional state. They can struggle in their efforts to disentangle the illness from their emotions, and describe a sense of feeling overwhelmed by both.

Which comes first, the low mood or the MS symptoms?

As a neurological condition, MS can affect our emotional regulation, and increase vulnerability to mood swings. Many people are waylaid by anxiety, anger, sadness, or feelings of guilt and frustration. By looking at the cognitive (thinking) basis of your emotions, you may find you have a clearer idea of what is going on, and how to manage your mood.

The cognitive basis of anxiety, depression, and anger

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is based on identifying our negative automatic thoughts, and finding ways to shift our thinking into more helpful patterns. Negative thoughts are often inaccurate, but can feel very real and can profoundly influence our mood and behavior.

Anxiety: Anxious thoughts tend to be based on fear, and are often a rapid response to stress or threats ('fight or flight'). They tend to focus on 'what ifs' or negative predictions about the future ('I'll never be able to cope with going out/seeing friends/travelling again')

Depression: Depressive thoughts focus on sadness and loss, and may combine with anxious thoughts. They often revolve around the loss of self, physical functioning, or ability ('I used to be so strong and capable, and now look at how useless I am'... 'My husband can't possibly enjoy my company, I've completely lost my spark/looks/sense of humor').

Anger: Angry thoughts stem from a sense of unfairness, and tend to be associated with the ‘tyranny of shoulds’ – rules we set for ourselves and for others, which may not be realistic. In MS, anger may be turned inward (‘I shouldn’t be taking so long to get dressed-how pathetic I am!’) or it might be turned outwards (‘they should know that I can’t manage this by myself-how can they be so insensitive?’)

If you are wondering why I have not included guilt in the list of emotions, you may be surprised to know that guilt is not actually a pure emotion. It is a combination of emotions, which usually include a degree of anger mixed with either anxiety or sadness. Think about the last time you felt guilty, and then think about what emotions lay below the surface. A typical example is that we feel guilty about not being about to do something for someone else. If you pick apart the emotional basis of guilt, you may find that you feel resentful of the person making demands on you when you are not feeling up to it. You may also find that a few ‘shoulds’ enter the picture, for example, ‘I should visit my mother three times a week, but my MS makes me so tired, she shouldn’t expect me to be there so often. My brothers should step in and help more’.

A practical exercise in managing your moods:

Keeping a Thought Diary each day for a week is a simple (but challenging) method of examining your mood and how your thoughts affect it. Note the time, situation, and try to identify what thought or ‘self-talk’ was going on as your mood developed. Once you have gotten accustomed to this, make a further note of a more helpful way of dealing with the thought/emotion. For example, the thought ‘I should be able to go to work even though I feel ill’ is likely to trigger anxiety (fear of losing job) and anger (‘I hate the way this MS makes me feel’). Then, change the thought to a less judgmental and rational one, e.g. ‘My symptoms are so severe that I am unable to get to work. By resting today I am more likely to feel better tomorrow’. This line of thought is realistic, and balances expectation with reality. The result? A reduced sense of guilt and a greater sense of acceptance and hope.

Keeping a note of your moods may be difficult at first, but will provide a lasting benefit of enabling you to have better control of your moods.

It can be an extremely useful tool in dealing with the complex relationship of MS and emotions.