

Improve your wellbeing with a Gratitude Journal

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Most of us find that we can start the day feeling bright, but some small event can snag our emotions and cause them to unravel. It could be something like an unexpected bill, a worrying letter from the hospital, a growing fatigue that you weren't experiencing yesterday, or someone else's irritability that triggers off our own negative feelings. These events can easily upset our equilibrium for the rest of the day, or even longer, as we brood over the negative event, and compound it with a sense of indignation and righteous anger.

Once these negative emotions have taken hold, they can quickly intertwine with MS symptoms by creating a physical stress which enhances fatigue, weakness, speech, memory or coordination. By allowing this vicious cycle to continue, as we hold on to negative emotions, we colour the whole day, and subsequent events, by minimizing the positive and maximizing the negative.

You may question how gratitude can help you out of this trap, and may be thinking to yourself, 'what do I have to feel grateful about – my MS affects everything'. But an area of science known as Positive Psychology has demonstrated that gratitude lifts our mood in both the short and long-term, and provides many benefits in our relationships and our physical health. In this way, it has a great deal to offer people with MS.

How to experience gratitude

Keep a gratitude journal everyday. At the end of the day, make a list of five things that you feel grateful for. These may be small experiences during the day that momentarily gave you a lift, or they may be bigger aspects of your life in general. This can be anything that gives you pleasure, or provides you with a sense of appreciation. You may find that this simple practice helps you settle down to sleep better.

Notice how gratitude makes you feel. Gratitude has an immediate effect on our emotions, and tends to evoke a sense of soothing

and calming. It is impossible to experience gratitude and anger at the same time. By practicing gratitude regularly, we can stop negative feelings from snowballing, and feelings of resentment and anger tend to subside.

Be alert to moments throughout the day when you experience gratitude. We may notice that someone else is worse off than we are, or that we have been the recipient of an unexpected kindness. If we feel angry towards a relative, we may remind ourselves of what a good person they are generally, even though we get annoyed at them from time to time. By doing so, we are more likely to respond to them empathically rather than angrily.

Reframe your perspective. If you find it too difficult to pinpoint day to day events, try to identify aspects of your life that you tend to take for granted, and look at them in the way someone worse off might view them.

Giving thanks and giving back. Research shows that we are hard wired to experience gratitude, and that it leads us to be more generous to others by activating thought processes involved in altruism. Because of this, practicing gratitude regularly can result in long-term psychological benefits which lead to mental and physical well being.