

# MAINTAINING BALANCE AND INTIMACY IN AN EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP

EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE  
TIPS AND RESOURCES



# SECTION 1



## CONVERSATION STARTERS

Conversation Starters

# WITH HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS



*"I [read an article, heard a podcast, watched a webinar] and found out it is common for people with MS to have changes in sexual functioning/intimacy - could we spend a few minutes talking about that?" (for the person with MS and/or the support partner)*

*"I know I am here for my follow up, but I have some questions about sex and/or intimacy that I'm hoping you can answer."*

*"I am experiencing some changes in my sexual functioning - I was wondering if this could be related to MS?"*

*"Could you refer my partner and me to someone who could help us with some sexual issues we've been having?"*

Conversation Starters

## WITH YOUR PARTNER



*"I have noticed some changes in our relationship since my/your diagnosis and there are some thoughts/feelings/ideas I would like to share with you. Is it okay if I tell you about them?"*

*"I have been feeling a bit disconnected lately. How are you feeling about our sex life/relationship right now?"*

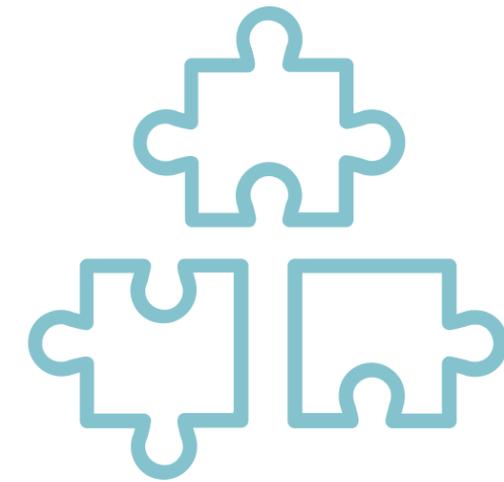
*"I really enjoy when we do [blank]. How would you feel if we made a plan to do more of [blank]? How can I support you when MS has different plans?"*

*"I know it's frustrating for you that I'm so tired all the time. I really hope you understand that my feelings for you haven't changed at all – I'm just too exhausted most of the time to be interested in sex. Could we talk about some things that might help the situation (e.g., sex in the morning rather than at night or changing our positions a bit)?"*

*"I worry so much about hurting you or making you uncomfortable that I don't reach out to you as often as I used to. I still find you incredibly attractive but I feel guilty about thinking about my own needs when you're dealing with so many symptoms."*

*"Some of the things we used to enjoy doing in bed just don't work for me now. My body feels very different. I'd like to show you some things that I think would feel good for me – would that be okay?"*

# SECTION 2



STEPS FOR  
PROACTIVE  
PROBLEM SOLVING

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## Steps for Proactive Problem Solving



*“We used to feel like more of a team but since my symptoms have gotten worse, I don’t feel as though I’m contributing enough to our household.”*

- Start by sharing openly what feels different for each of you, including how your roles have changed.
- Picture yourselves on a seesaw that you’re trying to keep balanced. What is each of you doing to contribute to that balance? What is the same and what has shifted in your roles?
- Check to make sure that you’re focusing your time and energy on the things that really matter to you both. When time or energy are limited, it’s important to prioritize.
- Make a list of responsibilities that the person with MS might be able to take in the place of those that have been taken over by the support partner.
- Consult an occupational therapist about tools and environmental adaptations that would make tasks easier and less fatiguing for the person with MS.

## Steps for Proactive Problem Solving



*“My partner and I seem to be drifting further and further apart. We aren’t as physical with each other and we hardly talk. Everything just feels too tense and complicated now.”*

- Choose a calm and quiet moment to talk about what has changed and when you noticed the changes happening. Sometimes identifying specific events or triggers can help you begin to problem-solve.
- Take turns talking about the things that cause you to feel tense or simply feel too complicated to handle. Making a list may be helpful.
- Try to distinguish between the things over which you have no control and the things that you can change – and then zero in on those.
- Pick a place to start – think about one or two changes or adaptations you could make that would help you each feel better. One success can lead to others.
- If you can’t identify any specific triggers, you may want to engage in the Values Exploration Activity described in the webinar. (See Resources)
- Check in with each other often (when you first wake up or before you go to sleep, for example) – sharing and problem-solving together builds intimacy and connection.

## Steps for Proactive Problem Solving



*“I really don’t understand why my body feels so different or why sex feels so different than it used to. Could that be because of my MS?”*

- The first step is to learn about the ways that MS can affect sexual feelings and responses. This will help you figure out whether MS is all or part of the issue. You can ask your healthcare provider and/or reach some of the materials in the Resources section.
- Talk with your partner about the changes you are noticing and share how these changes are affecting each of you.
- Ask your healthcare provider for help managing any MS symptoms or MS medications that are interfering with sexual activity.
- Be flexible, imaginative, and willing to do things differently than you have in the past, while at the same time respecting each other’s preferences and needs.
- Remember that the best foundation for a comfortable, intimate relationship is trust and communication, so keep talking and problem-solving together.

## Steps for Proactive Problem Solving



*“It’s hard for me to feel like your lover when we spend so much time and attention on care activities like dressing and toileting. Could we talk about how to bring back some of the spark?”*

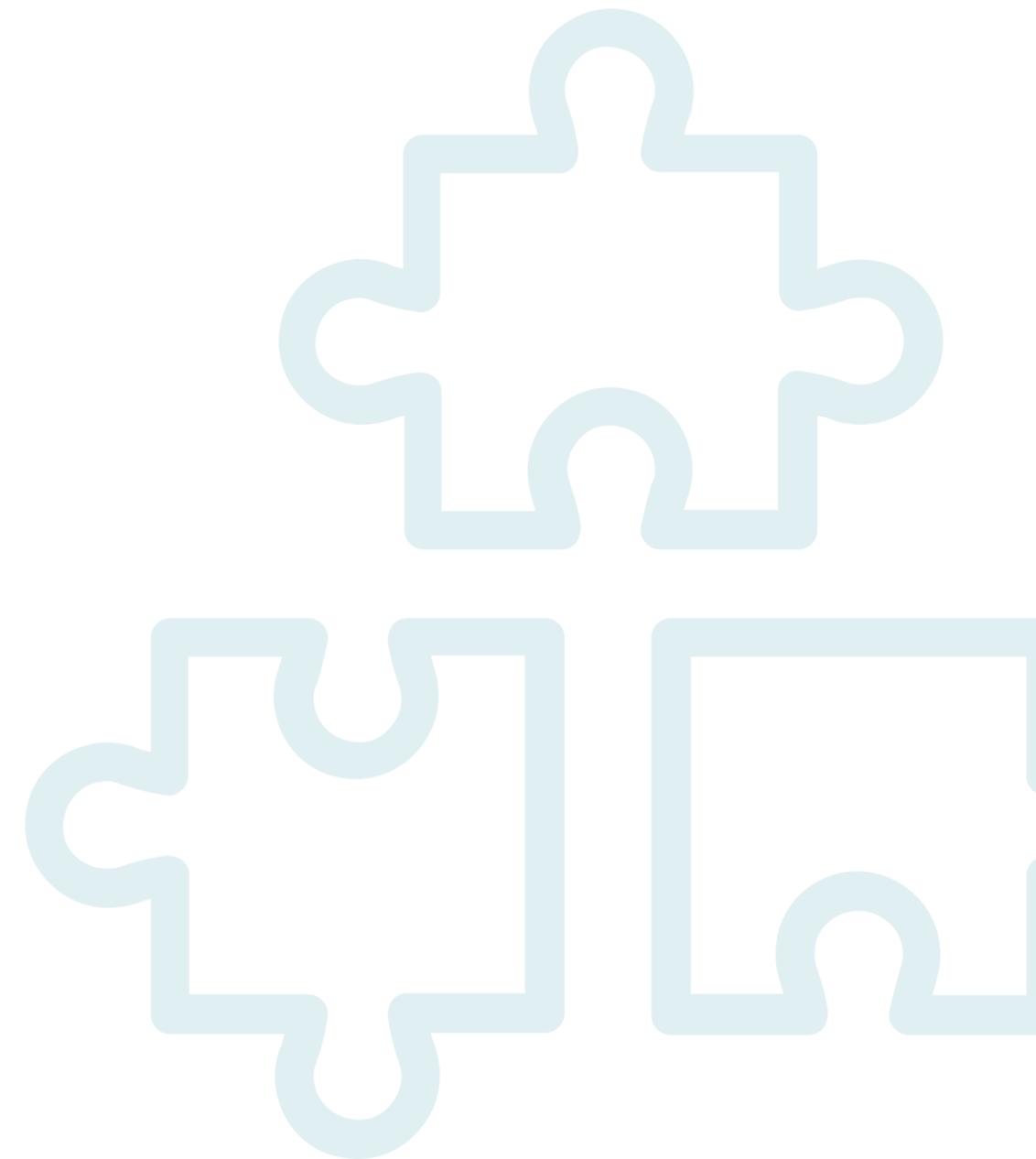
- Start by talking about the ways your roles have shifted. Whether it’s because of MS or normal aging, one partner may begin to feel more like a caregiver than a partner.
- Try as much as possible to separate caregiving activities – which can feel very intimate and loving – from sexual activities.
- Create an environment that enhances sexual intimacy – perhaps with music, low lighting, candles, or anything else that you both find romantic. Planning a date night can help you get started.
- Talk about what would feel best for each of you – even if you have to do things very different than you did them before. Sexual intimacy doesn’t have to mean intercourse or simultaneous orgasms. It can mean whatever feels good for each of you, in whatever ways you chose to share.

## Steps for Proactive Problem Solving



***“Talking about sex and intimacy is very difficult. It was easier when we could just do it without having to think or talk about it so much.”***

- Our culture tells us that sex should be easy, spontaneous, wildly passionate, and mutually satisfying every time. The reality is quite different – so it’s important to share your thoughts and feelings as openly as you can about your values, preferences, and needs.
- Getting educated about the ways that MS can affect sexual feelings and responses is a great way to start. Reading the materials in the Resources section together can provide you with a framework for your conversation and give you the words to help you get started.
- Remind yourselves that it’s okay to do things differently than you have in the past – that creativity with positioning, timing, sex toys is fine as long as you respect each other’s feelings and preferences.
- If you continue to find the conversations challenging, you can request a referral to a counselor, psychologist, or sex therapist who can help you express your feelings to one another in a comfortable environment.





# SECTION 3

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## HELPFUL RESOURCES

National MS Society Brochure: Intimacy and Sexuality (Brochure)

[READ NOW](#)

EvesGarden.com: Mail-Order Catalog and Sexuality Boutique (Website)

[VISIT WEBSITE](#)

Relationships and Intimacy (Webinar)

[WATCH NOW](#)

It Takes a Village: When Cognition Shifts Roles (Webinar)

[WATCH NOW](#)

STEP (Solutions To Empower People) Program™

[VIEW PROGRAM](#)

Understanding Your Healthcare Team (Handout)

[READ NOW](#)

### Books:

- Joannides: *The Guide to Getting it On* (9th ed.)
- Kaufman, Silverberg, Odette: *Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability*
- Nagoski: *Come as You Are*
- Harris: *Happiness Trap*

### Apps:

- Gottman Institute:  
Gottman Card Decks – a relationship app

Values Exploration Activity ([see next page](#))



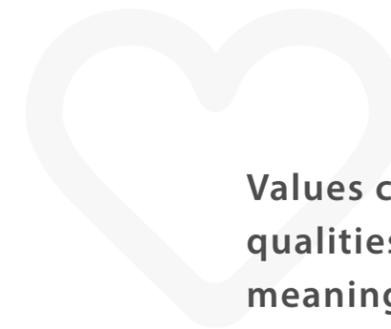
# SECTION 4

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## VALUES EXPLORATION ACTIVITY

*Values Exploration Activity*

## INTRODUCTION



Values can be defined as the priorities, qualities, or activities that give our life meaning. Every person's values are different and there is no such thing as a "correct" set of values. In relationships, values inform us of what is important to cultivate, what gives the relationship meaning.

Values are not the same as goals. Values can serve as a compass of the direction we would like to move in, whereas goals tell us what we want to achieve along the way.

# INSTRUCTIONS



*For this activity, you and your partner will need 3 sheets of paper.*

*One of you can be the “scribe.”*

1. On the first sheet, think about the time when you had first met and started dating: what were some of the things you enjoyed doing together? what sorts of interests helped connect you? what qualities attracted you to your partner?
2. On the second sheet, think about where you are now. How do you spend your time together? What do you enjoy doing?

3. On the last sheet of paper, think about what you would like to continue to cultivate in the future. What activities do you want to keep? What’s important to reconnect with? What do you wish to do more of or less of? What is an inventive or new way you can do something that touches on that specific value?

To help you brainstorm, here are some general areas that values can fall under:

Family  
Marriage  
Parenting  
Friends  
Leisure  
Work  
Spirituality  
Community  
Health

Remember not all of these areas will apply to you –and you may think of others that are a better fit for you.

4. When you are done sorting through your sheets of paper, notice what are some common themes that have come up?
5. Identify next steps you may want to take together. Revisit this exercise as needed - it can be a starting guide for checking in or “recalibrating” your relationship.



## AN EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE GUIDE AND RESOURCE

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