



Staying Resilient to MS Transitions

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The term “resilient” has become increasingly more a part of our mainstream and popular culture vernacular. It is a term that conjures up ideas such as determination, strength, and fortitude. But, when it comes to living with a chronic condition such as Multiple Sclerosis (MS), what does resilient really mean? The purpose of this article is to help better understand resilience, how it relates to living with MS, and ultimately how one might improve resiliency.

What is resilience?

There are many different definitions of resilience, however a good working and basic definition of resilience is simply the ability to adapt when faced with significant stressors. It is about “bouncing back” again and again. It does not mean a person won’t experience or be affected by the stressors, nor that it is simply a passive process. In fact, it is likely to include quite a bit of distress and can provide a tremendous opportunity for growth. Considering the unpredictable nature of MS, having the ability to adapt to unforeseen stressors and changes might be well worth the investment of time, energy and effort. It can help you face challenges and difficulties and subsequently, this is likely to lead to increased confidence in one’s ability to deal with stress in the future!

Science and Research

Research findings indicate that higher resilience scores in MS are found in people with better fine and gross motor function. Research has also demonstrated that individuals with higher resilience scores often have lower rates of depression and higher quality of life even though they still experience physical symptoms.

How to develop and improve resilience

Since wellness strategies improve resilience, focusing on exercise to improve physical health is one way to learn to bounce back from difficult circumstances. The challenge, and the real opportunity for resilience to grow in your life, is to take a look at how exercise might look different for you now...and enjoy it anyway!

One of the more effective ways to help understand and build resilience is through setting goals in areas that we know can lead to improvements in areas associated with becoming resilient. For example, improvements in physical and psychological well-being improve and enhance a person’s quality of life as well as his/her ability to bounce back after significant setbacks. Setting goals in these areas can be really helpful to start the process. Let’s use the acronym **SMART** to develop an exercise strategy to improve resilience:

Specific
Measurable
Attainable/action oriented
Realistic
Time Limited

Situational Learning:

You enjoyed running and bicycling, but balance and motor issues related to MS have affected your ability to do those activities. Your health care team has indicated that physical activity/exercise is a great way to improve your overall health and likely to have many long term benefits to help manage MS symptoms. You talk to your family about this and come up with a game plan: you could work with a physical therapist to improve your gait and look into adaptive aids; you could try an elliptical or recumbent bike, which you have enjoyed in the past; you could consider walking for exercise and use walking stick. It takes you a few days, but you start to feel more hopeful about your health and are actually excited about enjoying a new activity and remember the program that you participated in last year with Can Do MS about goal setting and dig out the materials to see if there might be something there to help. You stumble on SMART goal setting work sheet and come up with a goal for your physical activity: <https://cdn.cando-ms.org/images/timeline/SMART-GOALS-NOTES-WORKSHEET.pdf?mtime=20200331153629>

Example of a SMART Goal for Physical Activity:

I will walk for 20 minutes 5 out of 7 days every week for the next 2 weeks. After 2 weeks, if I have met the goal 80% of the time (11/14 days) then I will add 2 minutes of walking. If not, I will maintain the previous goal:

There are many levels to this goal that can viewed through a lens of resilience. In the past, a challenge like this may have led into a spiral of depressive symptoms. However, successfully setting and attaining goals can lead to improvements in mood, or at the very least provide a more stable sense of mood. Also, consulting with the health care team, family and friends demonstrates the use of support system to help develop resilience. Instead of viewing this as an insurmountable task and rather viewing it as a challenge that will have a variety of emotional experiences as a part of the journey, it can lead to the sense that each and every emotion is a part of the process. Ultimately, a process like this often leads people to see that in fact that have many more resources than initially thought, including the ability to be resilient and ride the wave of change!

According to the American Psychological Association, there a number of ways that we can go about building resilience even beyond the basics of goal setting.

- Making health social connections with family and friends
- Viewing crises as problems that can be addressed vs. insurmountable problems
- Accepting change as part of living
- Actively moving toward goals

- Taking decisive action on adverse situations as much as you can
- Looking for opportunities for self-discovery and growth
- Nurturing a positive view of self by developing confidence and trusting your decisions
- Keeping things in perspective, even in the face of painful events to avoid blowing things out of proportion
- Maintaining a hopeful outlook by visualizing what you want rather than what you fear
- Taking care of yourself by attending to your needs and feelings.
- Find time to engage in pleasurable activities
- Actively engage in spiritual or religious practices that are meaningful and restore hope

As you can see, the term resilience is quite complex. It is comprised of a multitude of different concepts and ideas that all seem to reflect one core idea, which is the ability one has to bounce back from difficult stressors or events. In the face of a chronic disease like MS, one that is fraught with stressors, the idea that it might be possible to learn how to more effectively bounce back from set-backs would be even more helpful. And, considering the way that most of us have been effected by the COVID-19 pandemic, learning to be more resilient could be exponentially more powerful.

Resources:

<https://www.nationalmssociety.org/Resources-Support/Library-Education-Programs/Everyday-Matters/Success-Through-Resilience#section-2>

<https://www.cando-ms.org/online-resources/can-do-library/exercise-and-physical-activity-in-ms>

<https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>