



RELATIONSHIPS

10 ways to help your partner if they have MS

Relationships are full of ups and downs – it's a fact of life. But when your partner has a long-term health condition like MS, there may be some extra bumps in the road for you both to navigate. Here are a few ways you can support your loved one along the way

Patience is a virtue

Patience is hugely important in any relationship, but when your loved one is struggling with the symptoms of MS, it is even more vital. This could mean not immediately jumping in like a know-it-all when 'cog fog' clouds their thoughts (cognition issues are a common symptom of MS), understanding that they may not always be able to keep up with your pace when MS fatigue rears its ugly head, or simply giving them enough time and space to make sense of an MS diagnosis in their own way. A little bit of patience can make a very big difference.

It's good to talk (but only when you're ready)

Some people may be happy to talk about their MS, but others might find it more difficult, especially if the diagnosis is still very raw. Never put pressure on your partner; they'll open up when they are ready, and it is your job to be there to listen whenever they need a good old moan.

Stay informed

MS is a complex condition which can sometimes be misunderstood, so it's always important to sort out the facts from the myths. Visit mstrust.org.uk for a wealth of information on MS, from the latest research to the best ways to manage different symptoms, or call the MS Trust's free enquiry service on 0800 032 38 39 with any questions you might have. You could also offer to attend

medical appointments with your partner. The better you understand the condition, the better support you can give.

Keep a sense of normality

It might be tempting to wrap your partner up in cotton wool, smother them in love and affection, and forbid them from lifting a finger. Although they might find this fun for a while (we all love being pampered now and again!), in the long-term this overbearing approach is bound to wear thin. Most people with MS are determined to try and live as normal a life as possible and will resent constantly being asked if they are ok. They will ask for help if and when they need it, so don't force it upon them.

Less is more

Fatigue is one of the most common and debilitating symptoms of MS, so when you want to spend quality time together, embrace the simple pleasures in life rather than suggesting activities that might be too much.

Be willing to adapt

MS is unpredictable. Different people with MS experience different symptoms at different stages. You don't know how they'll feel day to day or even hour to hour, so it's important to be flexible with your plans. You don't have to let MS rule your lives, but you do have to be willing to adapt.

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Let's talk about sex (baby)

It is only natural for couples to be worried about how MS might affect their physical relationship, and it is true that in some cases difficulties can arise. A diagnosis and the symptoms of the condition will undoubtedly affect how your partner feels about sex and intimacy and how they might relate to you, but if you're both open and honest about how you're feeling, you'll be in a much better place to deal with any issues. Be prepared to change routines to accommodate fluctuating energy levels, to adapt sexual positions or find different ways to be intimate with each other that don't involve sexual activity.

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Be their partner first

The partner of someone with MS may find that at certain stages they are taking on some aspect of care. This might be personal care, helping out around the house with day to day tasks or helping your partner get around if they have poor mobility. If this is the case, always remember you're first and foremost their husband or wife; boyfriend or girlfriend; the role of carer should never overtake that.

Look after yourself

It's important to make time for yourself too. When you're feeling a little overwhelmed, don't feel guilty about asking for extra support from friends or family so you can take a break. Looking after yourself, both physically and emotionally, will put you in a better position to support your partner and should have a positive effect on your relationship too.

Be there

An MS diagnosis is the start of a long and unpredictable journey, and there are likely to be many bumps along the way. So just being there, unconditionally, through the ups and downs, is the most important thing.

Read more at
[mstrust.org.uk/
relationships](http://mstrust.org.uk/relationships)

Make sure you continue to care for each other

*Julia Segal works as a counsellor for people affected by neurological and other physical health conditions in North West London. She has recently written **The Trouble with Illness: how illness and disability affect relationships***



What are the most common issues couples face following an MS diagnosis?

The main thing is that your experience of the world changes if you have MS, or if someone you love has it. The potential for misunderstanding increases enormously. Deciding what is reasonable behaviour, what is ok to think or feel or do, what to fight about and what you have to accept, what is somebody's fault and what they can't help, all of these are made more complicated by a physical health condition of any kind – your own or someone else's.

What would be your advice for someone supporting a partner with MS?

Every relationship is different, and everyone wants supporting (if they do) in a different way. I'd also want to challenge the implication that only the person with MS needs support, when I think people with MS are mostly perfectly capable of supporting their partners too – though there may well be times when one or both cannot support anyone else. MS is a lifetime illness, and I think it is a risk for relationships, particularly in the long term, if one person feels they have to do all the supporting. So part of my answer is that it might be important to make sure that both of you take responsibility for continuing to care for the other, in whatever way you can – and a partner might have to accept that they can allow themselves to be cared for too, without feeling too guilty about it.

How can couples access further support?

Counselling can help; so too can psychotherapy. Visit itsgoodtotalk.org.uk for more info. I'd also look for your local Relate counselling service. The Relate website (relate.org.uk) has good links. If you can find someone who has used a counsellor or psychotherapist, a personal recommendation may be the best; if not there are plenty of choices on the web in some parts of the country. An MS nurse or GP may know of a local counsellor or therapist which other people have found helpful.