

# **Being the boss**



## **Entrepreneurs have learned that managing their MS symptoms and finding support are keys to success.**

**by Shara Rutberg**

When Tim Clegg was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2013, his neurologist told him to “take it easy, don’t stress yourself — and don’t work too hard,” Clegg recalls.

“Then, I opened a 24-hour doughnut shop,” Clegg says. “I was not a very good patient.” He slept on wooden pallets leftover from furniture he made for the shop in the back of the tiny store.

When he received his diagnosis, Clegg was preparing for deployment to Afghanistan. He and his wife, Kas, had just had twins. The couple ran a shaved-ice business Clegg inherited from his father during summers in Missouri, relying on Clegg’s 13-year military career for steady income and benefits. But the diagnosis left those plans in a puddle like melted shaved ice on an August sidewalk. The following months were an “emotional whirlwind,” Clegg says. Realizing they wanted to run their own business, the couple looked for something to bridge the gaps between shaved-ice seasons. “Why not doughnuts?” he remembers thinking. “Whimsical, crazy, over-the-top doughnuts!”

So, instead of managing the logistics of tanks and military supplies in Afghanistan, Clegg found a used doughnut machine on Craigslist. He and Kas watched YouTube videos on how to make doughnuts. And, with \$7.36 left in their bank account, they opened Hurts Donut in Springfield, Missouri.

Nine years later, with 21 Hurts Donut stores selling over 77 mind-blowing flavors of Whopper-sized fantastical baked creations, the company is a growing, \$20 million-plus brand. Today, however, Clegg, 48, is working from home during a relapse. “Life goes on,” he says. “There are no timeouts in MS.”

That’s something business owners living with the disease have learned — as well as ways to work around the unique challenges that come with MS.

### **Teamwork is key**

Clegg checks in with doughnut HQ over the phone as one of his twins, now 9, vrooms her dirt bike in giant doughnuts around the outside of their house. “Our team is excellent at what they do,” Clegg says.

“It’s critical to have people you can really rely on,” says Maria Boustead, founder of Po Campo bike bag company, based in Harlem, New York. “We’ve also been vigilant about documenting all our processes. We have a shared Google doc, as well as a folder full of videos about how to do things.”



**Maria Boustead, founder of Po Campo bike bag company in New York, learned to delegate in order to manage her health and her business.**

Knowing those things are in place makes her feel confident the business could operate without her. While she’s been “blessed with very mild MS symptoms,” her operations documentation system got a hard test in 2021 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, right after the company received a huge round of capital and was “locked and loaded and ready to grow.” While undergoing chemo, Boustead realized she needed more than spreadsheets and videos. She needed to “truly delegate” responsibilities to her teammates,

something that's a challenge for many entrepreneurs. Boustead underwent chemo. She delegated. She healed. Now cancer-free, she's doing "great" — and so is the business, up over 60% in sales in 2022, after more than doubling online sales in 2018-2019.

### **Reaching out for help**

Deborah Melnick did not have a team when she was diagnosed in 2005. An entrepreneurial dynamo, she had been running her own writing and creativity products company since she developed and patented a musical pen six months after graduating from college. She traveled the world checking in on factories and distributors, growing her company with a continuous stream of innovative products, until she woke up one morning with horizontal diplopia (double vision). "Basically, I couldn't see," she says of the condition that led to her diagnosis.

Within three months, treatment corrected her vision, but fatigue "became a massive issue." She was pregnant, and in her seventh month, her legs gave out. "I had to learn how to be a mother, run a company and survive MS, while not being able to stand up."

During this time, she kept her diagnosis to herself. "I was a single woman in business, afraid to show any weakness; the competition was very stiff," she says (she split with her husband after her diagnosis). But she could no longer hop on a flight to Asia to check product quality. She reached out to a product safety consultant she worked with previously. "He was amazing," she says. She eventually brought him on board at the company — and into her life. After working together for several years, they married.



**Deborah Melnick learns about advertising through online courses to help market her creative products.**

"I wore too many hats," Melnick says. "I needed to figure out a business plan to bring on

more people — and had to grow the company to afford to do that. He became a huge, integral part of the company and helped me grow it, allowing me the flexibility to rest when I needed to. It was not easy — and it was scary. That's the biggest thing I learned, to reach out for help."

Boustead also reached out for help and found it through different women's business groups online, a mastermind group for entrepreneurs and the Small Business Association's SCORE program. When she met other aspiring entrepreneurs, "I really felt like I met my people," she says.

Though she searched for groups of entrepreneurs living with MS or breast cancer, she couldn't find any. None of the other business owners featured in this story had encountered groups for business owners with MS either.

"It would be amazing to have a cohort of business owners with MS to reach out to," says Marques Jones, who owns a ComForCare Home Care franchise in Richmond, Virginia.

"It's always nice to know there is someone who can relate to what you are dealing with," adds Joe Nammour, who runs his own web development business. "It's also encouraging to see opportunities to use your experiences with MS to help someone who might be struggling."

## **Managing fatigue and stress**

Jones manages 30 employees, "fulfilling a lifelong dream of running my own business," says the 40-year-old, who used to "play business" with his siblings when they were kids.

"I was always president," he says, laughing.

He chose home healthcare after his 2008 diagnosis and his volunteer work with the National Multiple Sclerosis Society showed him a true need for better, reliable service. He recommends owning a franchise, so "you're not starting from scratch."



**Marques Jones, who owns a ComForCare Home Care franchise in Virginia, says working for himself allows him to better manage his fatigue and other MS symptoms.**

"A stubborn guy like me doesn't like to say it, but in reality, I know I fatigue easily," he says. "So, when I go home at 5 or 6 p.m., I'm done."

There's no working until 2 a.m., like he did in college. Knowing his body's schedule helps him plan his day. Also, the freedom and flexibility that come with working for yourself allow you to better take care of yourself, he says. All the entrepreneurs in this story agreed: When you're the boss, you can work around your doctor's appointments and self-care.

Knowing your limits is a challenge that Joseph Nammour still struggles with after running his own web development business for nearly a decade.

"I have an issue with taking on too much work sometimes, and that can lead to a lot of stress," says the 36-year-old father of two who lives in Safety Harbor, Florida. "When you have your own business, especially a service-oriented business, you deal with the fear that the work could dry up, so you pressure yourself to accept most reasonable opportunities, even if you don't have the bandwidth. That can lead to a lot of stress," and, for him, increased MS symptoms. He says his wife is critical to helping keep him healthy, delivering "tough love, when I need it, as well as providing me love and support when I'm feeling down or discouraged."

The main challenge Nammour faced after leaving the agency he worked for and going out on his own was finding insurance.





**Joseph Nammour with his wife, Christy, and their two sons, Daniel (left) and Benji (right). Nammour says Christy is crucial in helping him keep a healthy work-life balance.**

“I was hit with the reality that having a pre-existing condition, like MS, would likely lead to an automatic denial across the board from healthcare companies,” he says. “The only reason I was able to work for myself was because my wife had insurance through her work. Thankfully, the Affordable Care Act changed that law so that individuals with a chronic disease could not be denied insurance. This allowed us to continue to have healthcare when my wife took a year off to be with our son.”

### **Listen to your body**

Melnick, 47, works through the day and is focused on improving her walking. The rollercoaster of MS, and the resiliency it forges, have come in handy running her own business, she says. She’s had to reinvent her company two more times since her diagnosis — once after the tariff war tanked her supply chain and again after Apple changed its iPhone-targeted advertising policy. She noted opportunities on social media, found a promising product — oversized coloring posters — took an online course about Facebook advertising and was quickly “doing as well as when I had a 5,000-square-foot warehouse and five employees. I had known nothing about Facebook before the course.” When the online market shifted to Amazon, she took another online course and switched to that platform. Melnick recommends people living with MS who are considering starting their own business check out all the opportunities online. “Just pull up your sleeves and take courses,” she says.

“I would definitely recommend listening to yourself, understanding your limitations and recognizing when your body’s talking to you,” adds Clegg, who is also finishing up a doctoral program as he grows the Hurts Donut empire. “Don’t push yourself outside your limits, but

don't limit yourself either. I work harder than I've ever worked in my life since my diagnosis, because I recognize the preciousness of life and want to accomplish everything I can while I'm healthy."

**Shara Rutberg is a writer in Evergreen, Colorado.**