

How My MS Diagnosis Inspired My Career



In the midst of getting my Master of Science in health psychology at the National University of Ireland, Galway, I was diagnosed with MS. Ironically, the very moment I was receiving my diagnosis, my classmates were attending a guest lecture from a researcher well known in the field of chronic illness and MS.

I had been working on my dissertation proposal prior to this and was really struggling to come up with an idea that I could inject passion enough into to commit wholeheartedly to for the next 6 months or so. But I had not come across anything that really touched me with this necessary level of interest.

My proposal submission deadline was edging ever closer, and I still had nothing. I had been doing a bit of research into MS following my diagnosis so decided to quickly throw something together on a topic related to MS, mixed in with the half proposal I'd put together on a psychological support intervention for chronic pain, a topic I was less than attracted to at the time.

I moved forward with my research half-heartedly, still quite distracted with adjusting to my own diagnosis, which didn't make things any easier.

At the start, I seriously questioned whether I had made the right choice, especially since my diagnosis was so fresh. Reading about MS from the likes of Dr. Google evoked some serious anxieties for me and had me fear for my future. I had told my supervisor that I had MS, but I hadn't told him that I was only just diagnosed. I feared that as a clinical psychologist, he would have quite rightly dissuaded me from embarking on a topic that would likely cause me

further psychological distress than I was already going through in adjusting to my diagnosis.

As I got into my research, I gradually became more and more attracted to it for several reasons. To begin with, whilst recording the mindfulness-based intervention, a 4 week programme consisting of 12 short audio-visual presentations with supporting mindfulness meditations, I indirectly and unknowingly benefited from the content, especially the parts that got me to really focus on what I was thinking about in relation to my new diagnosis rather than pushing such thoughts away as I had been. I found myself benefiting from the very words I was saying and gently leading me onto the path of acceptance. As much as I had been yearning for some kind of psychological support at this early stage in my diagnosis, I hadn't been offered any, so this experience at least provided me with some knowledge of things that would be helpful to me in adjusting to my new diagnosis. I was pleasantly surprised and had even turned to using the intervention meditation recordings whilst on my bus journey to university each day.

The experience didn't end there. The day I released the intervention, I was blown away by the number of people signing up. I had watched as my classmates struggled to recruit participants for their own research with other conditions, so I anticipated the same struggle. However, the struggle was not meant to be. I launched my research and had just left it aside with the intention of giving it at least 24 hours before I checked as a means to avoid the anticipated disappointment of finding only few had signed up. Much like leaving a present unwrapped, I wasn't strong enough to resist waiting that long and through blurry morning eyes the following morning, I had the urge to check any progress. What I saw took my breath away and woke my sleepy eyes right up! 50 people had already signed up in less than 24 hours, and it just kept increasing as the days passed.

The realisation at this point was that as much as the passion for this research was not there to begin with, I soon realised the value that this research had. Not only was it benefiting me personally, but also many others like myself. Clearly there was a need for more psychological support like this for people with MS. Having benefited from the program myself, I could see why. There is a distinct lack of accessible psychological support for people with MS, and this had opened my eyes to the potential to improve such opportunities for people with MS like me.

Fast forward 8 years to the present day after taking a break from academia to focus on my family and adjusting to life with MS, I was ready to pick up where I left off and embarked on my Ph.D. I expected there to be many advances in the field by this time, but sadly things are much the same. The psychological needs of people with MS are largely being neglected and there is still as much need to improve access to psychological support as there was back then. So, my mission continues where I left off 8 years ago.

Editor's Note: If you would like to know about MS research and getting involved in clinical

trials, visit [the National MS Society website](#).