

Marching on With MS: Lessons From a Veteran



Let me start with, as an active duty member, living with MS cannot be taken frivolously. You see, I noticed my body changing while stationed at Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. I used to be very active (e.g. running marathons, riding bikes and working out 3 maybe 4 days a week); but my intensity level started to diminish, and I blamed it on getting older and back trouble. Man, I was wrong.

While deployed to Iraq, Kuwait and later Afghanistan, my energy levels would be depleted: working 14+ hours on adrenaline, emotions and prayers. I had to keep marching on for my troops/airmen and the mission. I thought my medical problems - issues with back, shoulder, lumbar spine and neck - originated from my numerous deployments and in garrison activities. Again, I was wrong.

I retired from the Air Force in 2011, and I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in November 2015. I had an appointment with my neurosurgeon about my back (man, I was in a lot of pain). After reviewing my MRI, she sat down and said to me - Mr. Leak, you have multiple sclerosis. There are lesions on your back, neck and spine. It was gut check for me, but I want to share that there is **hope!**

My goal is to provide you with information on living with your MS. As we know, MS affects people differently; but we can teach each other.

For my active duty comrades. Please get yourself checked out. Don't let anyone tell you anything different. Many times, I felt like I was not performing my mission duties to the best of my abilities, but this was not the case. It wasn't just "take 800mg of ibuprofen twice a day and keep moving." No, my medical condition was serious, and I didn't take it seriously. Although I informed senior leadership within my chain of command, it was about the mission and not my body.

For my veterans, please contact your local VA and neurologist about any issues that are multiple sclerosis triggers. I was informed about my MS from my neurosurgeon. She took the time and effort to diagnose me correctly. Yes, it is all about your relationship with your healthcare providers.

Once, you find out it is MS, please find out what type of MS and get involved with your local National Multiple Sclerosis Society. Again, I express the importance of exercise, eating healthy, maintaining good mental and spiritual health, and talking with your neurologist.

Here are some important tidbits for all:

1. **Once you have been diagnosed with MS**, find out what type of MS, and talk with your family members and friends.
2. **Become a MS advocate.** Share your story –everyone has a story to tell, and MS affects everyone differently.
3. **Find a good support group**
4. **Keep learning about your MS diagnosis**
5. **Finally - my quote: "MS doesn't stop me from living my life; because I am the Captain of this ship (my body)."**

Editor's Note: Read [more blogs](#) on the veteran experience and living with MS, as well through this [Momentum Magazine article](#). Watch the latest [Ask an MS Expert](#) for more.