

MS Has Changed Me



Having multiple sclerosis for the past 25 years has helped me become a better version of myself. Before I was diagnosed, I was an over-achieving, stressed out perfectionist. I wanted straight A's in school, and I wanted to fit in with everyone.

When I look back on the old me, I sometimes get frustrated because I stressed about everything, which I'm sure compromised my nervous system. I just couldn't seem to love my own unique self; I always wanted to fit in and be like everyone else.

After being diagnosed with MS the day before my 22nd birthday in 1993, I wish I could tell you that I had an epiphany, but I didn't change much as a person. I just wanted to take my steroids and get back to normal. Although I stayed positive and aspired to be healthy and strong again, I was incredibly stubborn. I didn't want to learn anything about MS; I just wanted to live my life like nothing ever happened. When my symptoms cleared up, I reverted to the over-achieving, stressed out perfectionist I had been before my diagnosis. Consequently, this led me back in the neurologist's office a year and a half later with another exacerbation.

It wasn't until a few months before I met my husband in March 1997 that I became much more comfortable with myself — quirks and all. I realized that I wasn't meant to fit in; I was meant to stand out. I was taking tae kwon do at the time and when I would get overheated, I couldn't stand up anymore. So I would modify my stance by getting down on my knees and keep throwing punches. My teacher would always say, "Maybe you should take a break," and I would respond with a smile and say, "I am not a quitter." Instead of the old me, who would have been frustrated that I couldn't keep up and fit in, the new me just laughed my way

through it and kept going. I truly believe this shift in perspective helped me to become a more accepting and attractive person.

When I met my husband, I was a planner, and he was the opposite. He lived life a moment at a time. Although I did not embrace this way of living until well after my daughter was born in May 1999, it was definitely one of the best things that ever happened to me. It taught me to slow down and not worry about the future. I realized I had to start making some modifications and adaptations to my life.

Although my overachieving, stressed out perfectionist self still showed up occasionally, I had to accept the fact that I couldn't do it all. I needed to take breaks and rest from time to time and I needed to delegate more. Most importantly, as my legs got progressively weaker, I had to come to terms that I needed to utilize a wheelchair.

I was truly blessed that I worked with a gentleman whose wife also had MS, and she had 2 wheelchairs. He brought one into the office and said to me, "You are an inspiration to others. Please keep an open mind and use this wheelchair when you have to travel long distances. If you keep smiling and stay positive, you will be fine."

To this day, I use that wheelchair to get around. It has gone with us to Maine, Bermuda, Kentucky and New York, and I'm sure we will log several more miles on it. By keeping things in perspective, I have realized that being pushed in the wheelchair doesn't make me weak; it keeps me strong so I can continue to keep up with my family and friends.

Being challenged with MS for 25 years has enabled me to finally accept myself for who I am. I'm a little off and a bit quirky, but those are the things that make me special, authentic and help me inspire others.