

Staying above water with MS



Editor's note: If you are having suicidal thoughts, call the [Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988](#).

After I was diagnosed with MS four years ago, my brother, who has diabetes, told me to take it as a blessing. "Whatever," I responded. My diagnosis had led me to consider suicide, so his words made no sense to me.

But I get them now. I'm a different man. Before I become a vegetable from fatigue in the evenings, I live every minute of the day to its fullest.

Getting to that mindset took a lot of hard work, though. I had to fend off cultural stereotypes under which those with disabilities are considered inferior. I had to put aside inappropriate comments from those ready to tell me about acquaintances with MS who had a tragic outcome. I had to ignore people like the woman at work who would wash her hands after shaking mine. And I had to defeat my own mind, which refused to admit that I needed to deal with my emotions.

I had to come back from very dark places, ask for help and get therapy. I had to accept hugs, learn from people with MS and do for others.

The symptoms started eight years ago: dizziness, leg pain, blurry vision, pressure around the ears... Do these exercises for vertigo, I was told. Wear different shoes. Use these eye drops. Take these antibiotics.

I felt terrible but tried to be a tough guy. One day I started seeing double while driving on a highway and had to cover one eye to get home. And then one morning, as I tried to get out of bed, I ended up flat on the floor. I drove myself to the hospital, where I had an MRI. The doctors found brain lesions.

It was April 27, 2019, the day my nephew was born and the day I found out I had MS.

I'd never heard of it. When I got home, I googled "multiple sclerosis" and it all sank in: I could end up in a wheelchair. I was an active 37-year-old. I coached soccer and rode a bicycle. I kayaked along the Amalfi coast, in the Everglades and Porcupine Mountains.



I tried to imagine how I could keep doing what I loved without depending on anyone, how I would get myself from a wheelchair into a kayak. If I'd known then what I know now, I would have probably been able to handle the news better.

Soon, the steroids I took for my MS made my acid reflux worse. One night I could barely breathe, I called 911 and ended up at the hospital again.

I lost the will to live. I ended up on suicide watch and in the arms of a nurse in her 50s who, as I cried, hugged me as her own and told me, "It's okay, baby."

After a reevaluation, the doctors decided I wasn't a real threat to myself. But when they sent me home, they told my brother, one of the few people who knew about my diagnosis, to hide my guns. I left with a helpline number, the name of a therapist and no plans to call.

I felt alone in the world, ashamed. If someone found out about my MS, I got upset. All the way in my native Lebanon, my mom started getting suspicious. I wasn't answering the phone. She flew over, saw my limp and the large needles I used for my injections, and broke down. I avoided looking at her. I couldn't take it.

I ignored the doctors' recommendation of having a psychiatric evaluation but went to PT. Two weeks later, I managed to make it to the mailbox and back. Then one day I heard the

physical therapist who was caring for the elderly woman next to me go over her chart with her: hip replacement, stroke, high blood pressure, mobility issues, breast cancer. Plus, she was taking care of her sick husband.

“Dude, there’s nothing wrong with you,” I told myself. But the stress, flareups and medications made it impossible to tough it out.

I was really messed up inside, but cultural and personal prejudices about mental health kept me from seeking help.

I finally figured, if I pretend to have a car accident, people won’t get mad at me for killing myself. I tried to cross the path of an 18-wheeler. At the last moment, I changed my mind and he swerved.

I finally went to therapy. Two weeks later, a car stopped suddenly in front of me. I downshifted and went up on a curb. I was happy to realize that deep inside, I did want to live.

Now, I avoid others’ pity, dismiss the medical horror stories I hear and ignore uninformed people. And I know that men do feel fear, cry and need help.

I started participating in Walk MS, where I have made friends who hug me and tell me it’s going to be okay. I work as a real estate agent and at a bank, where my colleagues are amazing and my manager checks in on me. And as an MS Ambassador, I tell my story and help college students find power within them.

I’m living now.