

The MS Handshake



Out here in Texas there aren't many fans of the D.C./Virginia sports teams so whenever I wear any Redskins, Nationals or Hokies gear, it stands out.

Last week, while I was at the store, an older man started a conversation with me. "Go Nationals!" I heard him exclaim as he was staring at the Washington Nationals hat I had on.

Within moments, we were discussing where in Virginia we grew up, how we found our way to Texas and the chances of the Nationals winning the World Series.

Something as simple as the hat I was wearing forged an instant connection between two strangers.

Later that day, I was out to eat with my family and a young man entered the restaurant with his wife and two children. He was about my age, his wife and their kids were a similar reflection of my own... but he was walking with a cane.

As the hostess sat them at a table near ours, I couldn't help but wonder, "Does he have MS?"

Sounds silly, or perhaps inappropriate, but living with a chronic disease can be a lonely battle. I'm blessed with family and friends that I can count on for love, support and understanding. But it's impossible for anyone to truly **get** this disease unless they actually **have** it.

When I meet another person with multiple sclerosis, there's an instant connection, like we root for the same sport's team.

It doesn't matter if they are male, female, black, white, short or tall - if they are living with this disease, they **get** it.

But, unlike a favorite sports team, people with MS don't typically wear shirts or hats that boldly proclaim our affinity with the disease.

There's no polite way of introducing myself and asking if he had MS so dinner ends, we both go our separate ways and I'm left to just wonder... does he?

Maybe his cane is to help him recuperate from a recent accident. Or perhaps he is afflicted by another disease?

That night got me thinking; wouldn't it be nice if those of us with MS had a secret nod, wink or handshake to alert each other of our medical condition?

If only, right after my diagnosis, the conversation with the neurologist went something like this...

Mr. Wentink, your spinal tap results confirm you have MS. I'll now review with you various treatment options but first - and please pay attention because I can only show this to you once - introducing... the Secret MS Handshake™!

Our new social media world creates countless opportunities to connect with others that have MS and various support groups exist where I can meet and talk to others living with the disease.

But to just give a special "I got MS, too" wink, nod or handshake to the guy or gal sitting next to me at a restaurant? That would be magical.

Instantly, I'd no longer feel alone on an MS island. They, too, would likely understand the fatigue I face as I struggle to find the energy to just read the menu... or the dizziness that comes from all the movement within the restaurant.

It's not the first time I wondered if somebody else has MS and I know it won't be the last.

The neighborhood pool, grocery store, church, ball game - countless times, I've seen another person and couldn't help but wonder, "Do they have MS too, and know what it's like?"

We all want to be happy, loved and understood.

Misery may love company but that is trumped in my world by a different, more positive adage: "Multiple sclerosis loves understanding." <Wink>