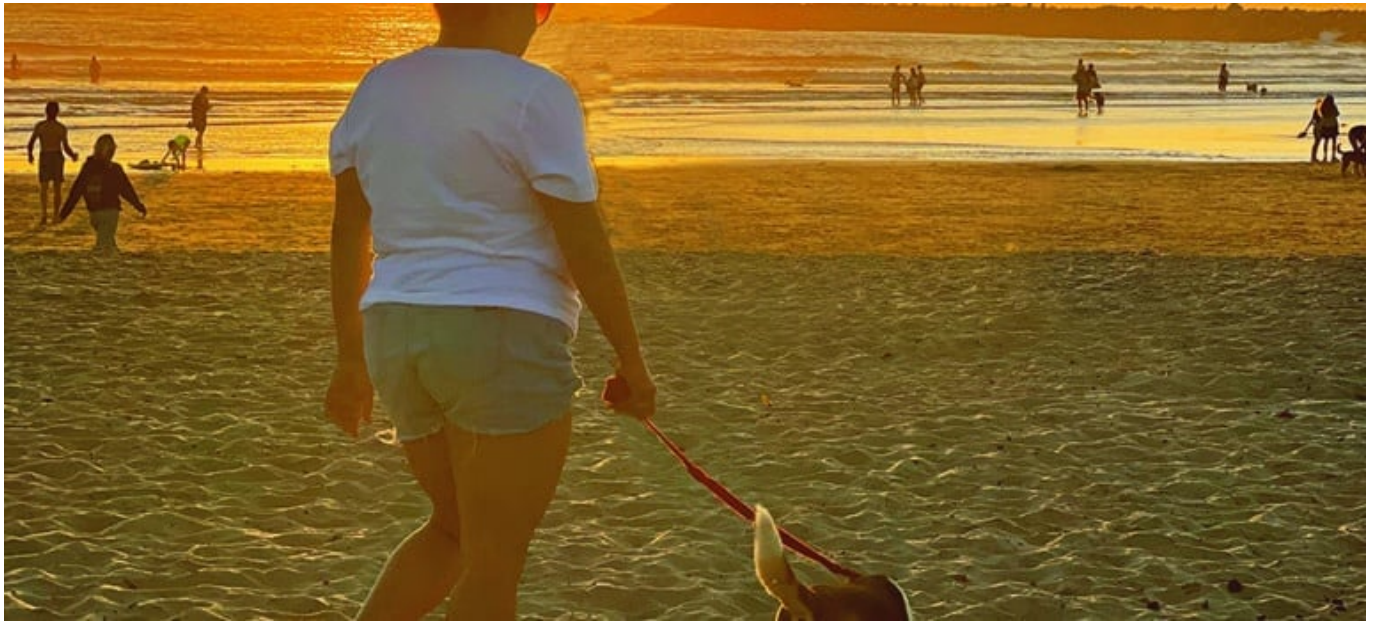


Changing my life for the better



My MS diagnosis gave me the courage to take a new path.

by Alexis Mott



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The doctor looked at me apprehensively as the MRI disc whirled in the hard drive and began to boot up on his computer. After weeks of researching my symptoms and perusing different medical message boards, I knew what he was going to say. I had double vision in my left eye, and the right side of my body from my hips to my toes was completely numb. I imagined myself leaping out of the cold plastic chair, smacking him across the face and screaming, "Just say it!" But I stared back at him while his lips finally shaped the words that would change my life forever, as pictures of my brain illuminated the screen behind him.

"You see these bright white spots?" He pointed at the rat-poop-sized dots on what was otherwise my gorgeous brain. "You have multiple sclerosis."

Seven years have passed since this moment in 2015, but I remember it like it was yesterday, tears clouding my eyes as the reality of my new diagnosis began to wash over me. I can see myself looking at my then-husband, Michael, hoping for some semblance of sympathy from his otherwise stoic personality. But everyone was looking at the scans — no one was looking at me.

I told myself to hold it together so I could get all of my questions answered and be prepared for the suggested course of treatment.

"The first step for you is to quit your job." Hearing these words from my doctor shocked me more than the diagnosis itself. I had shared with him my high-stress occupation as an event planner in Washington, D.C. My symptoms had begun at the start of the very busy wedding season. The truth was despite all of the cool locales I had the privilege of stepping into, I despised my job. I had been searching for a way out, but at the age of 25, I had no idea what I really wanted to do with my life besides making sure I had a roof over my head.

I sat there in wonder as I realized that I now had no choice but to quit this job that I detested. We left the doctor's office, and I began reading everything I could about MS while also thinking about quitting.

The emotions came in waves as I started to learn more about my diagnosis and what my future might look like. I spent a few days curled up with my pup Ringo going back and forth between shock and tears. For the last few years, it felt like my life was on fast forward as I worked 12- to 14-hour days, running around event spaces like a ball of stress with no direction. My health was always on the back burner, and now it was the only thing I could think about going forward if I wanted to manage this disease.

Michael was trying his best to be there for me, but our two-year marriage was already rocky. We met right after I graduated college, and after a rushed courthouse wedding in 2013 and an overly extravagant family affair the following year, we started to realize we were not compatible at all. We had talked about therapy, and after hearing this news, we were forced to decide whether we could work things out.

I told my supervisors about my diagnosis — one of the hardest things I've ever had to do — and I continued to work for another month. Then, my life of unemployment began.

I changed my diet and made exercise a priority. The thought of losing the ability to walk pushed me to stop taking my body for granted. The 40 pounds I'd gained eating leftover food from events started to melt away. A few months later, I decided to share my diagnosis on social media, and this transparency made me feel like I was gaining control of my life again.

My new attitude toward the future gave me the courage to accept that my marriage to Michael was not working. The company he worked for was transferring him to San Diego, and since we were still married, they offered to pay for both of us to relocate. The thought of moving back in with my parents in Maryland crossed my mind, but I decided I had to take advantage of this opportunity. Michael and I agreed to live together for a few months while I acclimated to the city and found a way to support myself.

Moving to California was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I know without my diagnosis I never would have had the courage to uproot from my family and friends and start over in a new place. The culture of this beachside city was so different from the fast-paced life I was used to in D.C. I went to the beach every day and, eventually, found a fitness group to join and continue my healthy lifestyle change. My neurologist referred me to an MS specialist friend of his who had a practice on the West Coast, and he was the perfect fit for me.

Almost seven years have passed since I made that leap and I'm grateful for it in every way. I've found a much less stressful career in property management that I enjoy, created a group of friends to lean on and met a partner who supports me. When we first started dating, I shared my diagnosis with him as I was going through a course of Lemtrada infusions at the time. The next day, he started asking about my symptoms and what he could do when I was experiencing a flare up. I think I fell in love then. He continues to be by my side for every treatment.

As of December 2021, I have had no new disease activity. That could change at any time, but my diagnosis brought out the strong woman inside of me, someone who I didn't even know existed. I now understand that I am capable of overcoming any obstacle.

Alexis Mott is a writer living in San Diego. She loves to take her dog to the beach and watch the sunset in between working full time.