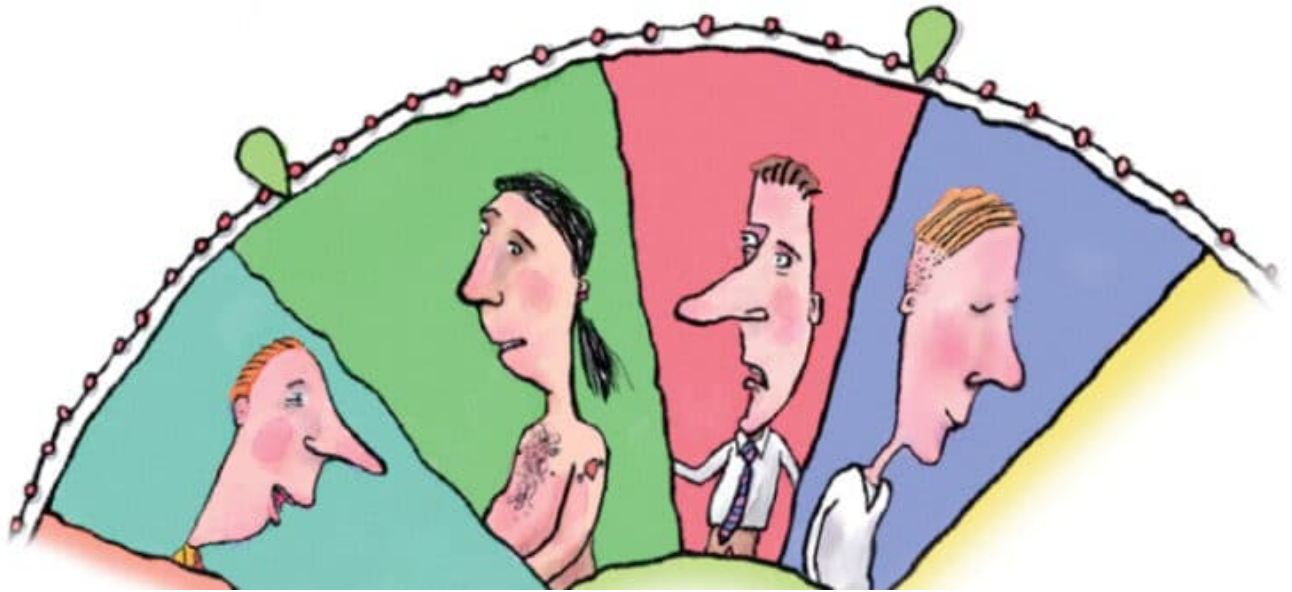


Dating with MS



Re-entering the dating world has given Marissa Benni a whole new take on how, when and whether to disclose her MS.

by Marissa Benni

As I sit here on yet another Saturday night amid my 17 cats watching back episodes of “Wheel of Fortune,” I would like to share some of my dating tips with other people out there with multiple sclerosis.

OK, full disclosure: no cats (yet) and I actually know very little about dating. What I do know is I am a woman in my 30s— diagnosed with MS in 2005 and divorced for almost a year—who has found myself thrown into the dating world.

I was with my now ex-husband for seven years and before that with a high school boyfriend for about the same amount of time. So my dating experience has been quite minimal, to say the least. Plus, I now have the added bonus of getting to tell guys about my MS.

But when do I tell a guy I have MS? First date? Second date? The night before the wedding? Will he immediately flee after I tell him? Would I blame him if he did?

Would I flee if he told me he had a chronic illness? Sometimes I feel like bald George Costanza not wanting to date the bald lady. (“Seinfeld” fans know what I am talking about.)

Along with my MS comes a lot of fatigue, chronic pain and irritability. My ex-husband never fully understood these limitations and why I was not always up for going out and doing

things. Will the next guy understand when I am too tired to function?

I also take weekly shots and, as a result, get flu-like symptoms that night and the whole next day. I really do question whether there is a guy out there for me who will want to deal with all of this. I also question whether I even want to burden someone with all of this.

I have told some of my dates about my MS right away. Some reacted fine—it didn't seem to faze them. Others got that look of concern in their eyes. With other men, I have waited to tell them, for fear of their reaction. And, OK, I will admit that a few times I have even disclosed my MS in hopes that a guy will get scared and back off. This has worked on some occasions, but others have wanted to stand by my side, making me feel even worse when I have to tell them the truth—that I'm just not that into them.

I've been really disappointed when I've had to cancel dates with guys I really did like because I wasn't feeling well, and a couple of men with potential slipped away before we even got the chance to get to know each other. But I'm hopeful that the right guy and right situation will come along, as people reassure me, when the time is right. Right? But then I worry about what will happen if and when that happens. What about having kids? Would I even have the energy for them? Sometimes I feel like I can't even handle taking care of my fat dog, Stella.

My most recent date started off pretty well. I told him over dinner that I had MS, and he seemed OK about it, which was a relief. Then, my sister and her boyfriend met up with us at the end of the night at a local bar so she could check my date out and let me know what she thought. Everything was going smoothly until my sister and I bumped our heads into each other—hard. Her tooth went into my eyelid and the corner of my eye started bleeding. We then realized her front tooth had also been knocked out. Tears and chaos ensued. Funny—I have not heard from the guy since. Maybe the lesson here is to worry less about disclosing my MS and more about not knocking people's teeth out during future dates.

I hear there are many fish in the sea. Where is this damn sea located anyway?! How do people even meet people anymore? My sister recently put me on one of those online dating sites and that's been a whole other can of worms. I feel like those sites should have a required "baggage section" for people to disclose what is really going on in their life. Having people's chronic illnesses up there would help eliminate some surprises prior to going on these dates. They say there is someone out there for everyone, but I have not found him—yet. Fingers crossed! At least I've got some good stories.

Marissa Benni works in research at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has a master's degree in psychology from DePaul University.

Are there dating challenges unique to life with MS? Join the discussion at [MSconnection.org](https://www.msconnection.org).