

Falling with grace



A ‘born klutz’ won’t let MS trip up her resolve.

by Valerie Benko

I was falling. The black asphalt neared. My work camera smacked the ground. Unfazed, I was back on my feet in seconds, brushing debris from my pant legs.

My friend, who had been a few steps ahead, spun on her heels and rushed to my side.

“I’m OK,” I said waving her off. “These things happen.”

She was concerned about my fall. I wasn’t. I was used to falling. The camera wasn’t, so I crossed my fingers that it still worked.

This wasn’t the first time multiple sclerosis had tripped me, and it sure wasn’t going to be the last.

I am a born klutz. For as long as I can remember, I’ve been able to fall, gracefully or disastrously, on my own, without the help of multiple sclerosis. All it takes is a sidewalk with a few cracks and pits. No sidewalk? A flight of stairs will do. I’m a pro at both tripping up and falling down them. I’ve fallen off a cliff face while rock climbing. And forget about ice. If there is something in my path you can be sure I’m going to trip over it or slip on it and tumble to the ground. No surface is safe! I once fell in a card store and took out a whole display. Hey, go big or go home, right?

My belt has been notched with some great falls. Having done it so often, I’ve learned to fall with minimal impact. Nary a broken bone or stitch in sight. I wouldn’t list this on my life’s

résumé as an essential skill, but ever since I got the worst “job” in history (living with MS), it has become an asset.

Despite growing up falling down, it was still a shock when I had my first MS-related fall. It occurred several years after my diagnosis, right in front of my boss. While I always laughed off my other falls—usually exclaiming something like, “I found it!”—this time I shed tears.

This fall hadn’t involved tripping over an object, or tweaking my ankle or some other aspect of my clumsiness. Unlike with my garden-variety clumsy falls, I had no awareness that “I’m about to fall” or “I tripped over something and now I’m falling.” I just went down. It came without warning as I took a step and nothing was there. No leg, no foot to support me. The pavement came fast. My skirt was a mess, part of my leg was numb and two of my co-workers rushed toward me.

I was embarrassed. More than that, I was afraid this fall would define me and affect my career. My boss knew about my MS when he hired me, so I worked just as hard if not harder than everyone else to prove that I was capable.

Fortunately, the fall was never mentioned, but I walked around in fear for a few weeks thinking it could happen again. I needed to cross a busy street every day to get to work. “What-ifs” haunted me. But then, I learned to pay attention to numbness before it resulted in a fall, and to wear safer, if less cute, shoes, and to walk more carefully and intentionally. I started taking yoga, which seems to have improved my balance. And I learned how to be safe when I DID fall. Eventually, the fear passed because I was never just the girl who fell down. I was always the girl who got back up. And I will always be that girl, gracefully or disastrously.

Valerie Benko lives in Lyndora, Pennsylvania. She was diagnosed with MS in 2010.

The National MS Society offers [Free From Falls](#), a DVD and booklet that can help you minimize your risk of falls, and learn how to fall safely—and get back up—when you do fall. For more information, call 1-800-344-4867.

To learn more about how to reduce your risk of falling—and get back to enjoying your life—read “[Stand or fall.](#)”