

# Finding gratitude



## **Despite the challenges of MS, there are ways to be thankful.**

by **Robert LeRose**

The pandemic, widespread unemployment, racism, political turmoil — the last few years have been a catalog of hard times. But there’s almost always something to be thankful for, no matter how small. How can people with multiple sclerosis find ways to be grateful during dark days?

“Many folks with MS experience unique challenges that can increase stress or cause frustration,” says Derek Anderson, PhD, a clinical psychologist at VA Puget Sound Health Care System. “But research has shown that by focusing on gratitude and appreciation, we can improve our well-being, happiness and life satisfaction,” says Anderson, who provides psychotherapy for individuals with MS. “Gratitude is also associated with greater resilience, which is a key factor that can help individuals overcome adversity and manage health complications.”

To cultivate gratitude, Anderson offers these suggestions:

- Writing or voice-recording “three good things” every day in a journal can lead to greater well-being.
- Sending a letter to someone you’re grateful for can improve happiness and reduce depression.
- Listening to gratitude meditation recordings can guide you toward reflection and help you focus on gratitude across many different areas of life.

Being grateful can take many forms, as these portraits of people with MS illustrate.



**Jerrod Harris says he cherishes everyday moments with family and friends.**

**Jerrod Harris**

**Age: 43**

**Diagnosed in 2008**

Harris served two tours in Iraq in 1999 and 2000 as a corporal with the 35th Signal Brigade. Returning home, he worked as an outside technician for Verizon, raised a family (now totaling five kids) and ran up to five miles a day when he started having double vision and getting dizzy.

After his MS diagnosis, he withdrew from people and had a “pity party and didn’t want to invite anybody.”

He stopped working in 2011, and today, his MS makes his arms and legs feel as if they’re asleep. He got COVID-19 in February 2021 and says feeling each breath made him want to cry. But it’s little things that Harris is thankful for and that keep him motivated and focused, like being able to hug his 4-year-old son and talk with him before daycare or having a warm home on a cold, rainy day.

Harris is grateful for every experience he has. He says he doesn’t have bad days, just some that aren’t as good. “I’ve definitely served with people who had bad days. After that bad day, they had no more days. That’s a bad day,” he says. “To be around my family and friends, whether in a wheelchair or on a cane, is such a blessing. It’s not going to help me to be

negative or feel sorry for myself. Sometimes, we don't understand the power we have in how we think. What you focus on is what you choose to be."

## **Dee DiFatta**

**Age: 49**

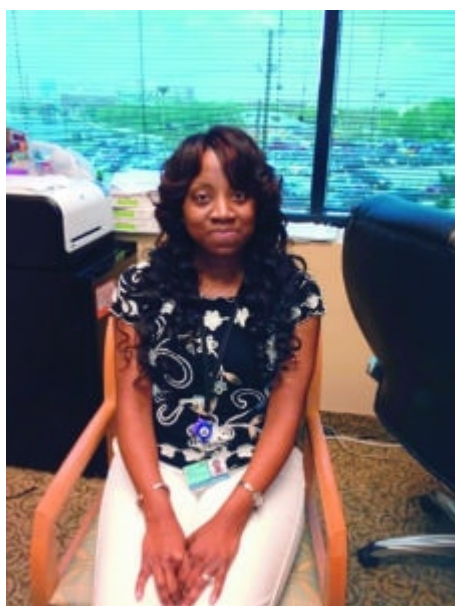
**Diagnosed in 1993**

In a way, DiFatta became her authentic self and found her true calling in life because of her MS diagnosis. She had always put up a positive front to the world but was really angry and frustrated inside. Telling people that she had MS was unconsciously having a negative influence on her. "I gave my power away to the disease and allowed other people and circumstances to define me," she says.

To rethink her condition and reclaim power, she came up with variations for the initials MS. She began defining them as "Modified Swagger" (because she walked differently), "Motivational Spitfire" and "Magnificent Strength." She defiantly named her walker Diva and her wheelchair Proud Mary and felt in charge for the first time. During this self-discovery, she met a master of reiki — a form of spiritual healing using life-force energy — who taught her the power that words, thoughts and actions can exert on the body.

DiFatta found the confidence and courage to quit her insurance job on Feb. 14, 2020. She wrote a book, "Your Daily Dose of PositiviDee," and focused her energies on being a positivity coach, inspirational speaker, author and educator.

"I'm truly grateful when I get up in the morning, and I'm still alive and can take a breath. I love my life for the first time, love what I do, love who I am. I'm so excited to share my wisdom and knowledge and major revelations with others, so they can find their way out of the dark and into the light. Everybody gets labeled and stuffed in a box at some point, but I decided to throw the box away and allow myself to be authentically me."



**Latanya Brooks values mindfulness and shares her MS story in hopes that it will help others.**

**Latanya Brooks**

**Age: 51**

**Diagnosed in 2002**

On the list of things that Brooks is thankful for is the intervention of a persuasive gentleman — a stranger to her — in helping her choose a course of treatment. As a mental health technician in the Air Force for 10 years, Brooks thought that she could tough out MS after her medical discharge from the service. “I had already told myself that I was a soldier, didn’t need any medication and could beat this MS stuff,” she says. But a man in her neurologist’s waiting room, who had put off taking Copaxone for 10 years, pleaded with her to learn from his mistake and begin injections immediately. She consented and has been thriving for the past 19 years.

Brooks felt invincible in the service, but MS showed her that she was just as vulnerable as anyone else, making her a better person. “You need to be mindful about how you treat people, how you interact with people, and you need to be thankful — and I am. I share my story with everybody because you never know who it’s going to help.”

A hospital administrator at Johns Hopkins Community Physicians, Brooks is still beset with fatigue and short-term memory loss today. She has learned to accept it, trust in God, pray a lot and surround herself with positive people, from her understanding husband to her 3-year-old grandson.

“I tell people [with MS] all the time: You didn’t cause this to happen. It’s something that happened to you. You’ve just got to embrace it and learn to live a happy and healthy life — and you can.”



**Jimetris Parnell is proud of her past accomplishments and focuses on her faith and family.**

**Jimetris Parnell**

**Age: 48**

**Diagnosed in 1995**

Parnell was a sergeant in military intelligence, planning to make it her career, when numbness in her feet and chronic fatigue led to her MS diagnosis and discharge from the service. Today, she uses a wheelchair and is legally blind, but her vision and spirit are untrammelled as she reflects on her accomplishments and maintains her optimism.

After her stint in the Army, she became fascinated by computers and got a bachelor's degree in computer science.

She was working with larger-scale computer systems and networking, getting regular promotions, raising two kids, and going for her master's in software engineering at night when she began falling at work. The stress of her commitments on her body forced her to give up working and a six-figure salary in 2014.

"But in my short-lived career, I was able to accomplish things that even people who don't have MS haven't been able to accomplish yet," she says.

Parnell is grateful for friends and family who support her — especially her youngest son, who cares for her — but her strong spiritual faith keeps her positive.

"I believe in God. As long as I don't focus on myself and focus on God and what God has done

and what God is doing, I'm happy about it. That's my hope; that's my strength."

To lift her spirits, she recites a prayer she learned from her mother: If you pray, don't worry. If you worry, don't pray.

"That builds your faith. If you pray, don't worry, because God is going to take care of it."

**Robert LeRose is a Long Island, New York-based writer.**