

[Finding love when you have MS](#)



Dating can be difficult for anyone—but MS doesn't have to limit your options.

by Vicky Uhland

Kathie Eldredge was 33 and newly married when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1997. Fifteen years after the diagnosis, however, her marriage ended and she began to think about dating. Though her marital problems had been unrelated to her MS, Eldredge feared that her disease would be a turnoff for potential partners—particularly the gait issues that require her to use a cane.

“A piece of me wanted to use my MS as a reason not to date,” Eldredge says. “But then I told myself that while it’s not going to be comfortable to date with MS, it’s not like dating is comfortable in the first place.”

Today, Eldredge feels much more at home in the dating world—thanks to her realization that everyone has issues that may make them feel self-conscious. Maybe it’s their age or finances or children—or MS symptoms. “You just get to a point where you say: ‘This is my truth, and if that doesn’t work for someone, that’s OK,’” she says.

Here’s how Eldredge and others learned to not only survive dating with MS—but thrive.

Fall in love with yourself first

There’s no question that dating can make you feel vulnerable and open you up to rejection. “But that fear of rejection can be felt by people with or without MS,” says Marc A. Norman, PhD, a professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego. That’s why he

recommends that people with MS who want to start dating begin by building confidence in all their relationships—including with themselves.



Brooke, left, diagnosed in 2009.

“If you have an underlying self-confidence issue, even if you were somehow able to take away your MS, it’s probably not going to make that issue go away,” Dr. Norman says. “But talking to a professional, or friends or family, can uncover those issues so you can deal with them.”

For Amy Matheny, a 35-year-old Aurora, Colorado, resident who was diagnosed with MS in 2012 and who is now living with the progressive form of the disease, building her self-confidence meant figuring out who she is and what she wants out of life.

“If you don’t know who you are as a person, you’re just going to be grasping at straws when you’re dating,” Matheny says.

Eldredge, like many people coming out of long marriages, realized she didn’t really have a clear sense of who she was on her own and what she could bring to a new relationship. “First and foremost, I had to realize my value is bigger than my disease,” she says. “And then I made the choice to say: ‘I’m worthy of love; I’m worthy of enjoying my life.’ ”

Dr. Norman says another key is to make sure you’re dealing with the physical aspects of your disease. Managing your symptoms can make you feel more confident about dating, and enable you to relax and enjoy the time you spend with dates.

For instance, untreated depression may make you feel undeserving of a relationship. Certain symptoms, such as bladder or bowel issues or sexual concerns, may make you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable with dating. Your physician or therapist may be able to prescribe treatments that help, or give you work-arounds you hadn’t thought of before. “And

MS support groups can help you feel like you're not the only one dealing with these issues," Dr. Norman says.

While groups or other resources that are geared specifically to dating with MS are rare, Dr. Norman says dating can be a topic for general MS support groups—but it may take some effort to find the right group, where people may feel more comfortable talking about their dating issues.

You can also start or join conversations about dating with MS on [MSconnection.org](https://www.msconnection.org). The National MS Society also offers a program called Relationship Matters, which can help you improve your communication skills in any relationship.

Meeting Mr. or Ms. Right

We've all heard cautionary tales of people who unload personal baggage on a first date and never hear from that person again. Is revealing your MS diagnosis in the same category?

That may depend on how visible your symptoms are. But even then, there are work-arounds if you don't want to disclose your MS right away. For instance, you could say, "I have some leg issues," or "I'm really sensitive to the heat," to explain a visible symptom without delving into details.

"Often, you can tell by your date's reaction [to a symptom you've disclosed]—whether they're annoyed or sympathetic—how they would react to learning you have MS," Dr. Norman says.

Matheny, whose muscle weakness and spasticity makes it difficult for her to walk without a walker, is, by necessity, an early revealer. But not before she physically meets someone. "I used online dating sites like OkCupid and PlentyOfFish, and I tested my profile for two years," she says. "When I put in my profile that I had MS, nobody wrote back. But when I changed my profile to just say I'm an artist, then I'd hear from people."



Joel and Amy Matheny have progressive MS and met on the OkCupid dating site. They married this past June. Photo courtesy of Amy Matheny

One of those people was Joel Matheny—who met Amy on OkCupid three years ago and married her in June 2016. Joel was diagnosed with secondary progressive MS in 2007. Although his major symptom—impaired memory—is not readily visible, he still had trouble finding dates. So he signed up for OkCupid.

Like Amy, he didn't reveal his disease in his profile, "but I would tell a woman on the first date that I have MS—but that it doesn't control my life," he says. "One woman walked out five seconds after I told her. I didn't feel like they wanted to get to know me at all; all they wanted to talk about was my MS. It made me feel depressed, like no one loved me."

Joel was ready to give up dating, but then Amy replied to a message he had sent her via OkCupid. "I saw in his profile that he was retired and I asked why, and he said he has MS," Amy remembers. "I hadn't thought about dating someone with MS, but chatting with Joel made me feel like this person would understand me, that we could talk about ourselves rather than our MS."

Amy had had her own depressing dating experiences. "I met a lot of jerks. A lot of people would say my MS wasn't something they could deal with," she says. "A few men were OK with my MS, but they wouldn't have anything else to offer me. It's incredibly frustrating, but you have to stick it out."

While there aren't any online dating services that are solely for people with MS, there are websites geared toward people with disabilities, including Dating4Disabled, DisabilityDating, Special Bridge, Whispers4U, Soulful Encounters and Meet Disabled Singles.

Eldredge, who uses [match.com](https://www.match.com) and OurTime online to meet potential dates, says she doesn't use disability-focused dating sites because she doesn't consider herself disabled. "And I don't want to limit who I pull into my sphere." But Dr. Norman says these sites can have positive aspects. "For some people, they can feel like a safe place to meet others, and find a healthy, safe relationship with someone who can talk to you about your disability."

The advantages to dating with MS

Eldredge actually uses her MS as a screening tool for potential dates. While she doesn't reveal her MS diagnosis in her profile, she tells an online connection about her disease before she meets him in person. "MS is not going to be something that everyone can handle, so if I tell them up front, it keeps me from wasting my time and theirs getting to know each other," she says.

On the other hand, if someone doesn't have a problem with her disease, that gives Eldredge a clue about how he might deal with other aspects of their relationship. "I figure if he can handle this well, he can handle other things well," she says. "And it can encourage guys to tell me their real stuff, too, and be a little more vulnerable. It takes us to a different level of conversation."

In many ways, Eldredge feels like MS has made her a better potential partner. "The one thing any guy is going to know about me is that I can take the tough stuff in stride," she says. "And I think the disease has helped me be more patient and creative, and have a more positive attitude."

The bottom line, Eldredge says, is "everybody has something. The more authentic you can be about what you're dealing with in life, the more clear you can be about what you bring to a relationship. You're not just bringing your disease—you're bringing you."

Vicky Uhland is a freelance writer and editor in Lafayette, Colorado.

Download the "[Relationship Matters](#)" workbook, or call an MS Navigator at 1-800-344-4867 to find a Relationship Matters program in your area.