

Reserves of resilience



Can people learn to bounce back after a setback?

by Marla Chalnick, PhD, LPC



Marla Chalnick, PhD, LPC. Photo courtesy of Marla Chalnick, PhD, LPC

When you live with multiple sclerosis, it helps to be resilient. The word “resilient,” which has Latin roots, means to rebound or spring back.

I often think of my life with MS as a rubber band: When symptoms flare up, I am stretched out of shape and sometimes I think I might snap. Then, with treatment or time, the symptoms dissipate and the rubber band springs back, but never exactly to its original shape. There’s a new normal. But it took me some time to learn that, and to find my reserves of resilience.

In 1982, when my neurologist told me that I most likely had MS, I began to laugh—probably because up until that point, as I tried to understand my symptoms, I had been convinced I was dying. “This is going to be a cake walk,” I thought, when I finally learned the diagnosis.

Keeping options open

So, I went back to work as if nothing had changed. Soon after, however, I realized that far from being a cake walk, having MS meant that eventually I might not be able to keep up with the demands of my job.

After carefully considering all my options, I realized that leaving my job and going back to school to get my PhD in human development and family relations made the most sense. It had been on my bucket list for some time, and I would only have to be on campus one or two days each week. Plus, I could study in the mornings at home, and then spend more time with my daughter when she got home from school in the afternoons. My ultimate goal was to be a psychotherapist, and I knew that if my MS progressed, I could still work with clients over the phone.

I went into private practice, with a specialty in helping people with MS and other chronic illnesses. Though there were mornings when my fatigue was so bad I wished I could stay in bed, I went to work anyway. Usually, once I was with a client I felt so much better. Because I was focused on them and not on myself, I felt energized.

As time goes on, I have begun to understand how the disease does and does not affect my body. I have learned that if I play, I may have to pay. In other words, if I push myself because I really want to do something, I will most likely need to set aside time afterward to rest. Sometimes it’s just worth it!

Planning for change

I treat my MS with respect and as a puzzle I have to solve. For example, I use a cane when I go to unfamiliar places and I don’t know what kind of terrain or accessibility to expect. I use a walker if I’ve recently had a fall. I use a wheelchair when I travel to particularly challenging places, like New York City, where I have to navigate through crowds and long distances. If a new symptom shows up, I watch it for three days, and if it doesn’t go away, I call my doctor. I wear whatever is safest and most comfortable; for me, sneakers are a fashion statement!

Over time, I realized that I was developing resilience every time I solved a problem created

by my MS. For me, being resilient means being able to take each day as it comes and adapt to the circumstances. It also means planning ahead for those things that are predictable, and being willing to change plans when necessary. Some days, I can accomplish many things; other days, not so much.

Building resilience

According to research, if people have strong internal resources—such as the belief that they can do what they set their mind to—and are surrounded by supportive people, their resilience can be strengthened. As it turns out, helping others also creates resilience because people are focusing on others' problems, rather than their own. I found that many of my own strategies that have proved successful are also recommended by researchers.

For example, I express gratitude, especially for little things.

I leverage my strengths. I know I feel best when I am with other people, so I try to turn everything into a social event, even exercising.

I set good boundaries. Only I know what's best for me. I've practiced—and eventually learned—to say no without feeling guilty. I know that the people who are important to me will understand.

I savor the good in my life, even if I have to look for it.

I try something I thought I couldn't do anymore, even if I have to do it slightly differently.

After years of dancing in my head every time I heard a favorite song, I decided to try dancing lessons. In spite of my terrible balance, dancing came back into my life.

Ultimately, I live by this refrain:

I walk,

I fall down,

I get up.

Meanwhile I keep dancing.

Marla Chalnick, PhD, is a licensed professional counselor in Asheville, North Carolina, who has lived with MS since 1982.

For more on resilience, download the [National MS Society's 2016 educational book and video](#) on this topic, available later this summer. Learn even more by visiting [Everyday Matters](#).