

## Self-portrait with cane



### **Attitude makes all the difference when it comes to using a cane.**

by Liz Ripley

Here's how it started. My physical therapist says, "You know you're wall walking, right?"

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"You're using every wall you see to get around," she says. "Let's try something." She hands me a ski pole.

I cruise around the room, ski pole in hand, feeling more stable and moving at a faster clip. Hmm. That **is** better.

"What do you think?" she asks.

"It's great," I reply. "Point me to the slopes!"

"Funny," she says. "But I have something else for you to try. I think you should get a cane."

What? How did my imaginary ski weekend turn into me with a cane? A CANE?!?

So, after 20-plus years with multiple sclerosis, I now need a cane. And it's really messing with my head.



I get home and do all I can to not think about it. But when I go back the following week, the exact same conversation takes place. Clearly my therapist has dealt with my kind before.

“So did you give any more thought to the cane?” she asks coolly. I responded slightly less coolly,

“No.”

A few days later, I’m out to dinner with friends and tell them the crazy thing my therapist said about needing a cane. Awkward silence. My friend Beth says, “You know, I still have my cane from my knee surgery. Do you want to borrow it?”

At the end of the evening, I’m wall walking out of the restaurant, and a woman approaches me. “Do you need a ride somewhere?” she asks. OMG, she thinks I’m drunk! I laugh, tell her I had a Diet Coke and give a very brief explanation. So I borrow Beth’s cane. And I **am** more stable. Physically, anyway.

### **It’s so not me**

I’ve always been something of a fashionista. I admit it. I love clothes. I love shopping, and I love how something fun and new can put a skip in my step. What I’m not loving is me, in front of the mirror, holding a cane. That is not my idea of accessorizing!

So, I think maybe I could use crutches. It could be a ski injury, right? I go to the drugstore and buy a pair. However, they are seriously bulky, awkward and annoying.

Forget it. I return the crutches. Back to my borrowed cane. A friend suggests I “bling it up.” I’m horrified. Why would I want to draw even more attention to this thing?

Fast forward. I’m using the cane more and hating every second of it. I decide which stores and restaurants to go to based on the proximity of parking spaces and availability of shopping carts that I can lean on instead. Heaven forbid a total stranger sees **me** with a cane! (I do know this is ridiculous.)

Then, I get an invitation to have lunch with some friends I haven’t seen in years. First things I think before RSVP-ing: Can I get from my car to the hostess’s house without the cane? I sure

don't want my cane to be a discussion topic! Maybe I won't go.

Now, the reality is that these people are wonderful. I'll have a great time. But I don't want them to think, even for one second,

"Oh, that poor thing. It looks like she's getting worse."

But I know it's crazy to decline the invitation. I have to suck it up, say yes to lunch and deal with the cane if I need to—and also deal with whatever is said about it. And so I did, and I had a great time.



### **Accepting the now**

Well, it isn't happening any too quickly, but truly, I am learning to cope. When someone says something innocent like, "Oh, I didn't know you used a cane," I quickly say, "Oh, it's no big deal," and change the subject immediately. Hopefully my tone has made it crystal clear that this physical BS is **not** going to consume me, define me or get in my way. So there!

I've come up with a few strategies. First, I've decided that I can still wear cute things, be fashionable **and** carry a cane. Second, I've decided that when I get looks from people, I'll meet their eyes with a big happy smile. And it's working! I've found one of two things happens—I either get a big smile in return or I get a sheepish, "caught-in-the-act-of-looking-at-the-person-with-the-cane" glance and my viewer promptly looks away, embarrassed. Whatever!

But I'm also doing some heavy-duty self-inspection about how I feel about myself and my disease. Mostly what I've decided is that this is where I am right now. The cane helps me walk and gives me stability. I need to realize that I am still the same person inside and that's really what matters. And if folks are going to judge me because of my cane, they probably aren't nice (cue the Taylor Swift song about mean people), and who needs them anyway?

**Liz Ripley is a registered nurse based in the Detroit area. She was diagnosed with MS in 1999.**

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