

# Solutions for holiday stress



**During the holidays and all year long, sometimes asking the right question is the best way to listen.**

by Sarah Markel

The holiday season can be an especially stressful time for people living with multiple sclerosis—juggling all the usual holiday expectations of gift buying, cooking and entertaining, on top of the reality of living with an unpredictable disease.

One common tip for coping with holiday stress, especially as it affects couples and families, is to communicate. Sometimes letting off steam, or venting, is helpful—up to a point. But research published in 2011 in the journal *Anxiety, Stress & Coping* has shown that unchecked complaining can actually make problems seem larger, increasing stress and creating a vicious cycle.

Solution-focused conversations can help. These types of interactions emphasize the idea that people are capable of solving their own problems, even when stress is mounting, and can help keep things in perspective. The role of the counselor, partner or friend is to listen compassionately, help people recall times when they were successful and use the memories of past successes to solve problems in the present. The technique is so effective that the National MS Society teaches its MS Navigators and Peer Connections volunteers to use it.

## **Asking the right questions**

Solution-focused conversations start by shifting the focus from the problem to the individual's strengths and resources, explains Brian Nauman, a manager at the Society's Information Resource Center (IRC). There are times, Nauman says, when a listener can turn the

conversation around—and perhaps soften the stress of the current situation—by asking what has worked well in the past to solve a similar problem. Nauman likes to ask:

- How did you cope in that situation?
- What actions have you taken in the past in a similar situation?
- What strengths have you relied on in similar situations?
- How can you use these same strengths in this situation?



**Bill O’Hanlon, a licensed marriage and family therapist, recommends seeking a balance between positive and negative thoughts.**

Photo by Steffanie O’Hanlon

Adrian Dargan, senior director of the IRC, says this questioning technique can be particularly useful in helping to identify solutions when people feel that they have limited options, which is exactly what can happen when the “to-do” list starts to grow during the holiday season. “When people feel like they don’t have options, they get stuck,” notes Dargan.

### **Do try this at home**

According to Bill O’Hanlon, a licensed marriage and family therapist and the author of *Do One Thing Different: Ten Simple Ways to Change Your Life* (Quill, 2000), solution-focused conversations can be used at home as a communication tool during times of stress. “When people are under stress, they forget they have these things that have worked before because now they are so focused on having too much to do,” he says.

Jessica, 51, a trainer with the Society’s Peer Connections program who lives with secondary-progressive MS, says this tool is particularly helpful when it comes to dealing with the feelings of anxiety and depression that affect as many as 50 percent of people with MS.

“Most of the time, MS can be so overwhelming that it feels like all my life is impacted,” says Jessica, who lives near Santa Cruz, California.

## Going deeper

To learn more about solution-focused conversations, check out the following publications:

- **8 hours to a Lifetime of Relationship Satisfaction**, a booklet produced by the National MS Society. Download the PDF at [nationalMSSociety.org/8hours](https://nationalMSSociety.org/8hours).
- **Do One Thing Different: Ten Simple Ways to Change Your Life** by Bill O’Hanlon.
- **Changing for Good: A Revolutionary Six-Stage Program for Overcoming Bad Habits and Moving Your Life Positively Forward** by James O. Prochaska, PhD, John C. Norcross and Carlos C. DiClemente.

Last Christmas, one of Jessica’s peers, Ester, emailed to say that she was worried about an upcoming holiday trip home. She was worried she would fall apart in front of her family; that they wouldn’t understand her MS; that she would end up arguing with her mother. Jessica asked a coping question that shifted Ester’s focus from her holiday anxiety to positive memories: “I asked her to think about holiday moments she enjoys and looks forward to,” Jessica recalls. “She was able to tell me who she was with during those happy memories, which helped her identify people she wanted to reach out to and things she actually wanted to do on her trip.”

Jessica also asked Ester which of her siblings is the most supportive of her MS. That helped Ester realize that there were only some aspects of MS that her siblings did not understand. Ester’s solution was to take the Society’s Knowledge Is Power brochures on the trip to educate the family about MS. She also made plans to reach out to her support network during the trip and listen to her favorite songs when stress began to mount.

Jessica has found that by listening carefully when a person is upset, it is often possible to figure out ways of phrasing the coping question so that it naturally triggers a problem-solving conversation.

The way to get there, says Jessica, is to listen with compassion to what the speaker is saying. “That usually gives you a jumping-off point. When they tell you what doesn’t work, the other side of the coin is often what does work.”

The trick, says O’Hanlon, is to find the right balance between being overly positive—which can feel dismissive—and getting drawn into negativity. “The tendency is when something bad happens, [people] tend to get upset or irritable. The goal is to balance that with ‘there’s a possibility here; here’s something you can do.’ ”

## Keeping the balance

Solution-focused conversations also help people with MS remain supportive of loved ones without taking on others' problems as their own. Becky, 55, who lives in San Jose, California, is a former finance professional who has been living with MS since 1987. She learned about solution-focused conversations while volunteering in the Society's MS Friends program, but recently realized she could use the strategy to support her 28-year-old son when he came to her for help during a personal crisis.

"I love him dearly, but I realized that I could not fix his problems," says Becky. By asking him coping questions, Becky was able to acknowledge what her son was experiencing while also gently reminding him that he had already overcome similar problems in his life.

Becky says the conversation "gave him ownership" which, in turn, allowed her to remain detached. "Without this approach, I would be taking on [other people's] problems and trying to solve them," she points out. "That takes a lot of energy versus giving them the tools to solve it themselves."

Research has shown that when people have ownership of their solutions, they are far more likely to stick with them. A study published in 2009 in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* found that during couples' therapy, duos who were prompted to come up with their own solutions were less likely to separate or divorce than couples in control groups who were handed a so-called "magic bullet" by therapists.

Jessica says she uses a solutions-focused approach to manage the holidays. Each year, she writes down what worked well and tries to repeat those things—gift ideas, meals, best time of day to run errands—each holiday season. "If you have the list of what you did [last year], it helps you do it again."

Adopting new communication and problem-solving techniques takes effort, but it's worth it, says O'Hanlon: "To be able to draw on the strengths, resources and abilities you already have can be a powerful tool." That's a gift most people could use this holiday season.

**Sarah Markel is a Washington, D.C., area freelance writer.**

If you feel overwhelmed by stress, call an MS Navigator at 1-800-344-4867.