

# Spring cleaning simplified



## **Tips for straightening up and getting organized while keeping your MS in check**

by Robert Lerosé



Stacia Sweigert

While her four cats — Penelope and Mishka, and kittens Salem and Elvira — provide a “fascinating and fun” diversion from her multiple sclerosis, Stacia Sweigert must also factor feeding them and cleaning their litter boxes into her routine.

As a teenager, Sweigert began experiencing numbness in her feet before being diagnosed with MS in 2008 at the age of 23, when she began experiencing double vision as well. Today,

she lives with severe fatigue, spasticity in her legs and vision problems. Nerve damage also causes her limbs to jerk uncontrollably, affecting her ability to move around.

Sweigert maintains a large living space in her parents' Pennsylvania house, including a bedroom, television, refrigerator, microwave and, of course, her cats. Often, she can't get to everything in one day.

"Stuff has to wait sometimes. It's an endless cycle of never really crossing the finish line," she says. "I use my good days or the first two hours after I wake up — where I have a decent amount of energy — or the energy I get at night out of nowhere for some reason to get a little bit done at a time."

Spring cleaning can be an exhausting and stressful time, both the physical labor and unrealistic self-expectations. "Many of us tend to think about spring cleaning as you have to do it all at once on the same day and crank it out. That can lead to overexertion or overdoing it," says Rebecca Cunningham, assistant professor of clinical occupational therapy at the University of Southern California.

## Advice from Rebecca Cunningham:



**Rebecca  
Cunningham**

1. **Spread your work out.** Instead of trying to get everything done at once, break your tasks into small, manageable jobs and tackle them as you can over a longer period of time.
2. **Devise a plan that works for you.** List what you have to do, then decide the best order and timing in which to get them done.
3. **Use activity pacing,** "the ability to slow down the pace at which you're doing something and integrate opportunities for rest so that you are reducing the risk of overexertion." For example, you can do a structured pacing plan where you decide to work steadily for a set amount of time and then rest. Or you may choose just one task to complete, knowing that you'll rest after that one activity is done.

4. **There are likely going to be some things you just won't be able to do on your own or that might be unsafe**, such as climbing a ladder or lifting heavy objects. Ask for help. Let family or friends know what you need help with.
5. **As cleaning can be a stressful project, acknowledge that stress and find a way to work through it.** Talking with friends and family, or even journaling about it, can help alleviate the pressure.
6. **Even though it's called spring cleaning, it could take place in areas that may be hot or uncomfortable.** Remember to adjust for this with air conditioning, fans, cooling vests or towels, working during cooler times of the day (e.g., morning and evening) and working in the shade outside.

Sweigert lays out goals for herself the night before, breaking each one down into micro-steps. To stay organized, she painted one wall in chalkboard paint, just like blackboards in schoolrooms, where she writes her to-do list in chalk to stay motivated. More important than crossing off those tasks, she says, is getting enough rest, not punishing herself for not doing enough and not being embarrassed to ask for help. "Other people have messes, too. There's more strength in asking for help than not," she says.

### **Tips for safe cleaning**

"A little preparation can go a long way when we're talking about managing a condition like MS," says Marie Curtis, an occupational therapist at UNC Health. To prepare for managing MS and your spring cleaning, here are suggestions from the experts.

## **Advice from Marie Curtis:**



**Marie Curtis**

1. **Prioritize your activities** so that you complete the most important cleaning tasks first.
2. **Think about positioning.** "That can be standing to dust pictures or something up high and then sitting to organize items."
3. **Pace yourself.** Be aware of signals your body is sending and schedule breaks before you exhaust yourself.

4. **Consider cleaning tasks that can be done while you're sitting.** You can reduce the amount of energy your body consumes by 25% when you sit. Pick activities that lend themselves to sitting, such as going through and discarding papers or pantry items.
5. **Simplify your tasks, especially the ones that you don't enjoy.** For example, doing the laundry might be your most unpleasant task. Come up with a plan that simplifies the chore and makes it less challenging. Perhaps you could do one load a day or just wash the items you'll need right away.

"The good thing about cleaning is there's a beginning, a middle and an end. A lot of times, that end aspect of it can help clear that mental space and promote positivity," Curtis says.

### **Taking small bites**

From working as an elementary school teacher to being a foster parent to working currently part time as a bookkeeper, Jeanne Phaneuf Champagne has crammed many lives into her 68 years. After being diagnosed with MS in 2013, the Arkansas resident has "learned to embrace" walking with a cane for balance, and arranging her life to deal with cognitive challenges, heat sensitivity — and housecleaning.



### **Jeanne Phaneuf Champagne**

Champagne divides her modest-sized house into five parts —kitchen, bathrooms, east and west sides, sheet changing — and cleans one section per day. "That gives me weekends to catch up should I have an impossible day," she says.

For example, an easy day might involve a light cleaning of her office, guest bedroom and bathroom, which doesn't get used much, or she might skip a week. "I don't have hard and fast rules, but I do have guidelines that make cleaning more manageable."

Along with her "incredible" husband Dennis pitching in, Champagne's guidelines include being flexible, spreading out the work over time and taking small bites out of big projects —

part of her plan for “sorting out unreasonable self-expectations and not overly committing,” she says.

**Robert Leroise is a writer based in Long Island, New York.**