

Steps toward mindfulness



Photo by Kathleen Fekete

Mindfulness helps one woman cope with the stress of living with MS.

by Marilyn McArthur

It seemed like a reasonable idea at the time—that I could juggle work and family like everybody else. I didn't notice I was overwhelmed, even as symptoms crept up on me and each day turned into a new round of agitation and fatigue. The multiple sclerosis diagnosis arrived just as my one-year work contract ended. Then I sat down and took a hard look at my situation.

I was a mother of young children, and was highly motivated to learn about this disease and anxious to discover what I could do on my own behalf. Nerves, I learned, are not just a figure

of speech, as in a “bundle of nerves.” Rather, they are real things, and for a person’s body to function optimally, they should have a protective insulation on them called myelin. My nerves though, were losing their insulation like the jumble of frizzed wires under the dashboard of my first car, the one with lousy radio reception.

I wanted to face my future, whatever it would be, with some degree of composure, and there was none in sight. Often in my life, I had been told to “take a breath and calm down,” but no one had ever taught me how. Being stressed out felt terrible—now that I noticed it—and I wanted relief. I figured if I could learn how to relax tensions in my mind and body, my whole family and I would benefit.

I found relief from stress when I tried practicing mindfulness. Although the word is everywhere these days, I think it evades definition because it is less of a noun and more of a verb. Mindfulness asks us to try to focus attention on our experience of the present moment, beginning with our breath as a foundation for our explorations. It suggests we approach this effort with curiosity, and without the usual judgments that tend to pop into our head. We try, and try again, to be present with the feelings and sensations of the moment, for example, and not just off somewhere in our thoughts.

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Visit [mindful.org](https://www.mindful.org), or check out this [mindfulness exercise blog post](#) from happiness expert Shawn Achor.

As I gave mindful breathing a try, I found I could be more tranquil and alert. It felt like a good start. I thought of it as tinkering with my bundle of nerves, to reduce the static my excitability caused. When being mindful, I am more attentive through my senses to what is actually going on at the time. For example, in mindful walking I purposely try to feel my feet connect to the ground with every step. It steadies me, and it’s good practice for when I have to navigate through a crowd or over rough terrain. Mindful eating is a pleasure in itself. A single morsel of food can be quite sensational.

Actually, any moment of mindfulness can feel like a little vacation from my worries and cares, and just as refreshing. In such moments, I recognize my old self, like a favorite song coming on the car radio.

Marilyn McArthur lives in Deerfield, Massachusetts. She was diagnosed with MS in 1991.

We want to hear your unique viewpoint on MS. Submit your story to editor@nmss.org.

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