

# Your mental health

When living with a long-term condition such as MS, good mental health can make all the difference to your quality of life. Conversely, poor mental health can make it harder to live with the condition and prevent you from living your life fully. For example, depression can make it harder to stay active, eat well and connect with others.

You might feel confident in spotting and addressing mental health problems, or you might feel there is a stigma attached to this. Views on mental health have changed greatly over the years. Younger generations are more aware of their mental health and open to seeking support.

We would like to support older persons with MS in feeling able to discuss and care for their mental health. We hope this information helps.

**In this booklet, we look at:**

**[How MS and age can affect mental health](#)**

**[How depression and anxiety can be treated](#)**

**[How to recognise mental health changes](#)**

**[The mental health of carers](#)**

**[Tips on caring for your mental health](#)**

**Living well with MS as you grow older**

**[www.msif.org/resource/living-well-with-ms-as-you-grow-older/](http://www.msif.org/resource/living-well-with-ms-as-you-grow-older/)**

## **Common mental health conditions in people with MS**

Living with MS can sometimes make you feel down, emotional or irritable. It can also affect your self-esteem. As we learnt in the last section, MS can also affect your brain health, which can have an emotional impact.

When issues such as feeling down or anxious go on for a long time or start to affect your everyday life, they are classed as a mental health condition.

Mental health conditions are common in people with MS. For example, about half of all people with MS will get depression in their lifetime. This is a higher rate than seen in the general population. Suicidal feelings are also higher in people with MS than in the general population.

It's possible to have more than one mental health condition. For example, depression and anxiety often occur together in people with MS. In one study of older people with MS, men were more likely to feel depressed, while women were more likely to be anxious.

We show some more facts in the graphic shown on the next page.



## Common mental health conditions in people with MS of all ages

### Depression

About 5 in every 10 people with MS have depression in their lifetime.

#### *What is it?*

*Depression is a low mood that lasts for a long time. It affects your everyday life.*



### Anxiety

About 3 in every 10 people with MS have anxiety in their lifetime.

#### *What is it?*

*Anxiety is a feeling of worry, tension of fear. Most people feel anxious at times. It becomes a mental health condition if it affects your ability to live your life fully.*



### Bipolar disorder

About 1 in every 20 people with MS have bipolar in their lifetime.

#### *What is it?*

*Bipolar disorder makes you likely to have extremely high (manic) and low (depressed) periods, and possibly times when you are less in touch with reality (psychosis). This impacts your life.*



## **Why does MS affect mental health?**

MS can affect your mental health in two main ways:

- MS can affect your brain health. Structural or functional changes to your brain can make mental health problems more likely.
- The symptoms of MS and their impact on your everyday life can affect your emotions, self-esteem and mental health.

Many people find they're better able to cope with MS as they age. However, getting older with MS can sometimes affect mental health negatively.

It may be harder for you to get about, keep social connections with family and friends, and meet new people. Feeling lonely and isolated can sometimes lead to depression and anxiety.

## **Does the risk of depression change with age?**

It's not clear whether the chance of being depressed increases or decreases as people with MS get older. Some studies found that older people with MS were less likely to be depressed than younger people with the condition. Other studies found the opposite.

The chance of getting depressed is likely to differ from person to person and change throughout life. It may be affected by:

- the level of MS disability you have
- how well you cope with challenges.

Your risk of depression can be affected by factors unrelated to your MS too.

## **Treatments for depression and anxiety**

You may feel there is a logical explanation for feeling down or worried. After all, MS can impact your daily life in many ways and bring uncertainties about the future.

This does not mean that depression and anxiety are things you should 'learn to live with'. You can treat them, and this can improve your life. In one study of older people with MS, those whose depression was well-controlled with treatment had a better quality of life, took part in activities more, and led healthier lives than those with symptoms of depression.

Depression and anxiety can worsen other symptoms of MS, such as fatigue, pain, sleep problems and cognitive function. This is another reason to take action.

Depression and anxiety can be helped through:

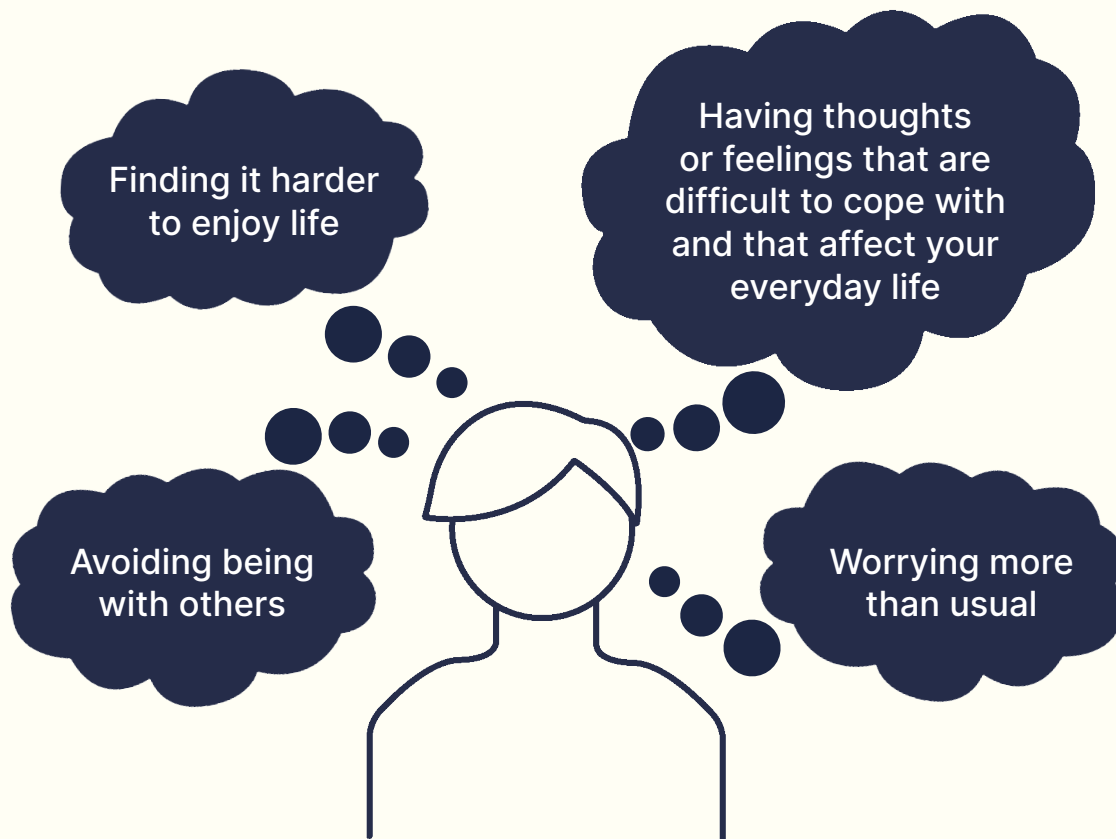
- talking therapies, which involve talking to a trained professional about your thoughts, feelings or behaviours
- self-help programmes to learn to adapt your thinking patterns
- medicines.

Being physically active can also boost your mood and help with depression.

## **Recognising the signs and asking for help**

Depression is not always spotted in older people with MS, especially men. Be alert for the signs. Some of these are shown on the next page.

## Some signs of poorer mental health



Some people with depression get physical symptoms too, such as pain, fatigue, or stomach ache. Anxiety can also bring on panic attacks that make you feel that you can't breathe.

If you think you might have a mental health condition, speak to your doctor or nurse. They can refer you to someone who can help.

If talking to a professional is daunting, you might find it easier to talk to a friend, family member, neighbour, carer or a charity advisor in the first instance. Depending on the services available to you, you might be able to see a trained counsellor or get community support or workplace support.

At its most severe, depression can be life-threatening. If you feel you might attempt suicide, contact the emergency services or a mental health crisis team now. If you don't feel able to do this yourself, ask someone to help you.

## **Connecting with others**

If you feel down or anxious, it can be tempting to withdraw from others. It can also be harder to find the courage to make new connections. However, socialising is important for your mental wellbeing.

Older people affected by MS say that socialising is important to their quality of life.

Friendships and family relationships can bring you joy and prevent loneliness. Social connections can also be a source of empathy and support when you need it.

Aim to have regular good-quality time with your loved ones. Be proactive about keeping in touch – even a brief phone call can make all the difference. Seek opportunities to meet new people and connect with others in positive ways.

Connecting with your local, national and international MS communities can be extremely valuable. Through these, you can learn from others and share your own experiences.

## **Mental health of carers**

Being a carer can be very rewarding. It can also be challenging, isolating and emotionally draining at times.

If you're a caregiver, be mindful of signs of depression, anxiety or other mental health conditions. Be active in getting the support and time out you need to care for your mental wellbeing.

If you have people caring for you, ask how they are. Have open conversations together about how each of you is feeling. Support one another.

# TIPS

## how to care for your mental health

- **Get professional advice and support.** If you think you might have a mental health condition, or want more support dealing with a current one, speak to your doctor or nurse. They can assess your needs and refer you for support.
- **Talk to others.** Speaking to others can help you realise how you're feeling and the effect this is having on you. Support from others can also give you the courage to seek professional help.
- **Have regular mental health checks.** You might not realise how much your mental health is affecting your daily life until you do a questionnaire. You can ask your doctor or MS specialist for a mental health check. Simple ones are also available online: be sure you use a reliable source.
- **Practice relaxation.** Getting sufficient relaxation and sleep is important for your mental and physical health. Relaxing properly takes practice. You can find a variety of ideas and techniques in self-help books, on websites and through apps.
- **Boost your self-management skills.** Mental health problems should not be managed alone. However, good self-management can support your mental wellbeing and improve your sense of control. See the earlier section 'Taking control of your health' to learn how.



# Resources

## Online information and tools

Finding MS support near you

<https://www.msif.org/living-with-ms/find-ms-support-near-you/>

Depression & anxiety (Webinar)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/ask-an-ms-expert-managing-depression-and-anxiety/>

MS and your emotions (Booklet)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/multiple-sclerosis-and-your-emotions/>

Yoga for self-care (Video)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/meditation-for-self-care-by-mssi/>

Breathing and relaxation yoga exercises for MS (Video)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/breathing-and-relaxation-yoga-exercises-for-ms/>

Taming stress in MS (Booklet)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/taming-stress-in-multiple-sclerosis/>

Tips and tricks for sounder sleep (Video)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/wellness-break-tips-and-tricks-for-sounder-sleep/>

Rest and self-care for fatigue management (Webinar)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/rest-and-self-care-for-fatigue-management-webinar/>

Self-care and wellness for carers (Webinar)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/self-care-and-wellness-for-caregivers-webinar/>

Self-care for carers (Webinar)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/self-care-for-carers/>

**This is a section from the guide 'Living well with MS as you grow older'. Download the full guide here:**

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