

Mental health and MS

Mental health is an important part of living with MS. It affects how you cope with symptoms, manage stress, and stay connected with others. Good mental health does not mean feeling positive all the time, but being able to manage challenges and adjust when things are hard. Mental health changes across life, and looking after it is as important as caring for your physical health.

Mental health and MS

Living with multiple sclerosis (MS) can affect more than just the body. Mental health is also an important part of life with MS. Changes in mood, stress, or anxiety are common, and this is not a sign of weakness and it is not something you can prevent.

Depression and MS

Depression affects around half of PwMS, about three times the rate of the general population. It is more than low mood, lasting longer and disrupting daily life. Because symptoms like tiredness or poor sleep are also common in MS, depression can be harder to identify. If low mood continues for several weeks, seek support from your GP, neurologist, or MS nurse.

Other signs may include:

- changes in appetite
- difficulty sleeping, or changes in sleep patterns
- feeling sluggish, agitated, worthless, guilty or having no motivation
- Feeling more tired than usual
- difficulty being able to think clearly, concentrate or make decisions
- negative thoughts, and
- persistent thoughts of self-harm

Anxiety and MS

The unpredictability of MS can lead to worry about the future, and for many PwMS this develops into anxiety. Symptoms may include a racing heart, sweating, shortness of breath, or feeling on edge. Anxiety is one of the most common mental health conditions in Australia, and around half of PwMS experience it, often after diagnosis, during relapses, treatment changes, or as MS progresses.

Stress and MS

Stress is common and can be harder to manage with MS. It may cause low mood, poor sleep, or headaches, and long-term stress can affect physical health. While it can't be avoided, planning ahead, focusing on what you can control, taking breaks, and managing triggers can make it easier to cope.

Why mood changes happen

Mood changes in MS often have multiple causes. They may be linked to nerve damage, the stress of diagnosis, uncertainty, or social pressures like isolation and finances. Some medications, such as steroids or fatigue treatments, can also play a role. Not everyone will experience these changes, but being aware can help with early support.

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Why mood changes happen

The causes of mood changes in MS are complex and usually involve more than one factor. They may result from nerve damage affecting emotion-regulating parts of the brain, the stress of diagnosis and uncertainty, or social pressures like isolation and finances. Some MS medications, including steroids and fatigue treatments, can also impact mood. Not everyone will experience these changes, but it's important to be aware.

Living with mental health challenges and MS

It can be hard to talk about how you're feeling, but reaching out for support matters. Mental health challenges can also make it harder to manage your health, but small steps can still improve your wellbeing.

Some things that may help include:

- Staying active with regular exercise
- Getting enough sleep and keeping a routine
- Eating a balanced, healthy diet
- Spend time outdoors in sunlight and fresh air
- Connecting with family and friends
- Practicing relaxation or mindfulness

Looking after both your mental and physical health can help you feel more in control and improve your quality of life with MS.

Where to get further support

- Plus Connect: call 1800 042 138 or email connect@msplus.org.au
- Lifeline: www.lifeline.org.au or call 13 11 14
- Beyond Blue: www.beyondblue.org.au or call 1300 22 4636
- MindSpot: www.mindspot.org.au or call 1800 61 44 34

Getting support to manage your mental health

You do not need to face depression, anxiety or stress alone. Talking with your GP, neurologist, MS nurse or another health professional is the best first step. They can help with treatments such as counselling, psychology support or medication, and connect you to community services if needed.

Getting a Mental Health Care Plan

If you're finding it hard to cope, a Mental Health Care Plan (MHCP) can help you access support at a lower cost.

It's created by your GP and provides Medicare rebates for up to 10 sessions a year with a psychologist or other mental health professional. You'll only pay the gap fee (if any) after the rebate.

To get one, book a longer GP appointment and ask for a mental health care plan. Your GP will discuss how you're feeling and recommend supports like counselling or therapy.

Asking for a care plan is a common step and can make it easier to get the support you need.

If you're not sure how to start the conversation, you could say something like this:

- I've been feeling stressed and low, and I'd like to talk about a mental health care plan.
- I'm constantly worried about my MS and not sleeping well. I think I need to speak to someone.

