



## RELATIONSHIPS

Having a good support system around you makes MPS/ML easier to deal with. Whether you're about to start out on your own or have been an adult for years, creating supportive relationships is beneficial! There are many types of relationships and connections with others, which may include friendships, romantic relationships, and family connections. All require engagement, communication, and work to maintain and flourish.

Being yourself is the best thing you can do. Don't pretend to be someone you're not. It may be easy to connect with someone when you're pretending, but in the long term you're not being genuine and that will cause friction in the relationship.

### **Starting a Relationship**

Don't be afraid to ask questions! The easiest way to start up a friendship is to just make conversation. Most people genuinely enjoy talking about themselves and it takes the pressure off you. Think ahead about a few things you can share about yourself as well. What are your favorite things to do? Where do you like to go? What foods do you like? Have you seen a movie you enjoyed recently? What is your favorite book? What has been in the news?

Search for people with similar interests. Luckily, social media makes this easier. Facebook, Instagram, Meetup.com, SecondLife, and Reddit are all places you can utilize to find people near you that have similar interest. You are also invited to join the "Adults with MPS/ML" Facebook group. This is another great opportunity to meet others who understand your journey, more personally.

If you're in school or attending college soon, find out what clubs are on campus, and join them! If you don't know what clubs are on campus, check your school's website, bulletin boards with events posted, or ask around! Many places have a Campus Life office or something similar, which is a great place to start to find more information.

### **Explaining MPS and ML**

MPS and ML can be difficult for people to understand. Be honest and open to questions. Having your friends research the disease will not give them an accurate description of your life with it. It might be helpful to think of a simple explanation to give others about your diagnosis and know where to direct them if they have questions. It is okay not to know how to answer everything!

Be open and honest with the people in your life about your disease. If you're having a "pain day" and want to stay in but made plans, rearrange them so your friend knows you still want to hang out with them. They should understand.

Let them know your limits and don't push yourself. Let them know if you can't walk that distance or need to bring a wheelchair. A good friend will understand, your friend won't want you to be in pain. Whether you're meeting a friend or going on a date, research the location to ensure that it's accessible.

## **Online Dating**

Meeting people online is not as taboo as it used to be, and it can be a good way to meet people within your comfort zone. Be honest on your profile. You don't have to state in your profile that you have MPS or ML, but don't try to hide it. Using genuine photos of yourself is best.

If you decide to go the online route, make sure you're safe. Always tell someone where you're going and who you are meeting. Make sure they're available to get you out of a situation if you need to. Always meet them at a public place and for the first few dates don't have them pick you up at your house.

## **Long Distance**

Long-distance relationships are just as valid as an in-person relationship. The key to any healthy relationship is communication and trust. But for long-distance relationships to work it is especially important. Today it is easier to make a long-distance relationship work by scheduling time to talk on the phone, Skype/FaceTime, or sending photos throughout your day are good ideas to shorten the distance in a long-distance relationship. Life is busy and can get hectic. Open communication channels will ensure security in a relationship and lower vulnerability.

Having trust in your partner is vital in any relationship, but even more so in long-distance relationships. There will be times when your partner is out with friends and may not be able to talk to you. This doesn't mean they don't want to talk to you, it's important for both of you to engage socially, outside of your relationship. Long-distance relationships can be challenging. There will be positive and negative moments, but it can be successful. Long-distance relationships may not be for everyone. But, if both partners put in the work, the outcomes can be satisfying.

## **Romantic Relationships**

Before you can love someone else, you must love yourself. This doesn't mean you have to be 100% confident and happy, but you can't go into a relationship hoping it will be the fix to all your problems. Meeting people for a romantic relationship always feels nerve-racking and awkward, but it's just the same as making friends. The foundation of a relationship is a good friendship, so don't rush it. Get to know them as a friend.

Learn your partner's love language. Sometimes how we express love is not the same way our partner expresses love. Gary Chapman, the author of "The Five Love Languages," best describes this process of learning how your partner wishes to experience and express love. Finding out how what they need to feel loved and appreciated is vital to a relationship. If you don't know what you or your partner's love language is, it can lead to conflicts and feeling unappreciated. To learn more about your love language you can go to <https://www.5lovelanguages.com>

Trust your instincts. If something about your date or relationship does not feel right, listen to it. You don't want to end up in a situation where someone gets hurt. Our gut instincts tend to be right when it comes to opening yourself up to someone.

## **Body Image**

Social media can make it difficult for anyone to feel comfortable in their own skin. Everywhere you look today are unrealistic standards for both women and men. Having a disability, it can make us feel more insecure about our bodies. Some people embrace their scars while some prefer to cover them, and that's okay. The reality is everyone, whether they have a disability or not, feels insecure in their skin at some point or another. It's important to not only try to embrace your body but thank it for all that it does for you. Your scars are tattoos that life decided you needed. They are a reminder of how strong you are.

Being confident in yourself is one of the most attractive attributes one can possess, but it's not the most important part of a relationship. When you love yourself as you are, it makes life more enjoyable. You will not only have a healthier relationship with your partner, but with yourself.

## **Am I ready for an intimate relationship?**

Society tends to create this image that people with a disability are asexual beings, but that is not true. Just because you have a disability doesn't mean you can't have a healthy sex life.

Sometimes it's difficult to know if you're ready for an intimate relationship, especially when you're in love with your partner. Just because you're in love, does not mean it is time to express that love physically. It's okay to not want to have sex with your partner. Despite how it feels, not everyone is having sex. Having sex is a big decision and should not be taken lightly. There is more to sex than just the expression of love. While abstinence is the best way to protect yourself from pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STIs), condoms and birth control are important if you decide to have sex. Make sure to consult your doctor to develop the best plan for you and your partner beforehand. You and your partner should also think about your answers to questions like the following:

Have I talked with my partner about the possibility of having sex? Does my partner want to have sex? Is it both of our first times or just mine? Does sex mean the same thing to

my partner as it does for me? Does my partner respect me, my point of view, and my feelings? Does having sex fit my values and beliefs? If we have sex, are we ready for the relationship to be more serious? Am I able to make a choice about having sex without pressure from others? Am I willing to talk about condoms and birth control with my partner? Am I prepared to go to the doctor to discuss birth control options? Am I prepared to get tested for STIs if I become sexually active? If I have sex and the relationship ends, will I still be okay with my decision to have sex?

**Note:** If you answered “No” to any of the questions above, it may be a sign that your relationship is not at that point and you may want to wait, and that is perfectly okay.

### **Other Ways to be Intimate**

Intimacy does not have to mean sex. Intimacy is showing your partner you love them. While intimacy does sometimes mean physical affection, this can be done through cuddling, kissing, holding hands and sitting close to one another on the couch or bed watching a movie. Intimacy can also mean an emotional connection you two have. Getting to know your partner on a deeper emotional level is a crucial part of intimacy. Date nights are a great way to be intimate with each other.

Dates do not always have to be extravagant. Something as simple as lighting some candles, making food or ordering in, and watching a movie can be a romantic night to get to know each other. The point of intimacy is to spend time getting to know your partner.