

BEATING MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

Empowering Stories of Self-Healing and Thriving

AGOTA NAWROTH
& PAIGE NEWSOME

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To my loved ones,

This book reveals the transformative path of my MS journey and daily dedication required for a healthy life. I'm taking care of myself, so you don't have to.

To the multiple sclerosis community,

May our stories empower and inspire, fostering understanding, compassion, and progress. Together, let's navigate the challenges of this journey, knowing that we are never alone.

With love and deepest admiration,
Agota Nawroth

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Lastly, I extend my gratitude to my followers, readers, and supporters. Your enthusiasm, feedback, and reviews inspire me to continue sharing my story and the knowledge I've acquired along the way with the world, raising awareness about diseases that can be prevented.

To all those mentioned above and the countless others who have contributed in various ways, your presence in my life has made this book a reality. Thank you for being a part of this remarkable journey.

With heartfelt appreciation,
Agota Nawroth

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Many individuals are searching for a diagnosis while struggling with various symptoms. For those of us already diagnosed, having answers can be a relief but also adds a lifelong burden. At times, this weight can feel overwhelming. I wish a book like this had been available when I was first diagnosed four years ago. It would have made a world of difference. Back then, I wouldn't have felt so alone and lost. I wouldn't have had to search through numerous books to connect the dots. My goal with this book is to provide you answers and give you practical guidance to regain control and steer your life back on track.

The stories in this book showcase the remarkable potential within us as human beings. We can heal our minds and bodies, making full recoveries from autoimmune diseases when we cultivate the right mindset and well-being practices. I haven't encountered anyone who thrives with a pessimistic outlook. Our minds are incredibly powerful. It's crucial to remember that the path to healing often begins there. While change can be a challenge, it's a necessary step for those seeking a healthier life.

So, who is this book for? It's not exclusively for people with MS. This book is filled with ideas to improve the lives of anyone, diagnosed or not, who is facing symptoms. Each chapter is a glimpse into someone's life, flourishing despite the diagnosis. My hope is that you'll discover a story or two that resonate with you. Please share this book, help us spread the message, and raise awareness about this complex condition. It doesn't have to lead to life in a wheelchair.

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Final Note

“Wellness is the complete integration
of body, mind, and spirit – the realization
that everything we do, think, feel, and believe
has an effect on our state of well-being.”

– *Greg Anderson*

DISCLAIMER

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Story by

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I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) on May 9, 2011.

I remember calling my close friends to let them know. Some of them were speechless, others burst into tears, and one, whose birthday is on May 9, was worried that I'd always associate the day my life flipped upside down with her.

The prelude to my diagnosis was indistinct. My main symptoms were a little numbness in my left arm, and when I bent my head forward, there was a tightness in my neck like pulling on an old scar. Which, as I later found out, is exactly what it was. Other “episodes” seemed so banal—they weren't even worth considering. For example, I was wobbling a bit

more than usual in advanced balancing yoga postures that were only discernible to me as a yoga teacher. My left leg also felt a little weaker after walking long distances. During the last mile of a ten-mile hike with my husband, my left leg became more tired and a little heavier than my right. I also vaguely remember my left eye going blurry as I was skiing down a mountain the year before, but that easily could have been caused by the cold weather.

I assumed I'd trapped a nerve in my neck. When physiotherapy didn't resolve the numbness, my friend, who is a doctor, advised me to ask for a referral to a neurologist to undergo magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Maybe she knew. I certainly didn't, even when the neurologist advised that I come back to get the results of the scan with my husband.

On the morning of the appointment to review our results, I had this strange feeling that life was about to irreversibly change. Our four-year-old daughter had gone to school, and my mum was on her way to look after our one-year-old, while we went to the hospital. As I sat waiting with my daughter on my knee, I remember fixing my gaze on her big eyes, rocking her back and forth, firmly repeating that everything was going to be okay.

At the hospital, my husband and I were called into the consulting room, and the nurse who had come to meet us in the corridor, closed the door and sat behind us. I was oblivious, but my husband later said that he knew it was going to be bad news when she stayed. The neurologist opened the scans of my brain on his computer, and I remember seeing lots of white blobs everywhere that I thought were brain tumors. I vaguely remember his lips moving as he pointed to the screen, but the only words I heard were "99% sure" and "MS". I vividly remember my husband putting his head in his hands next to me.

I felt surreally calm and did my best to ask lots of intelligent questions without hearing any of the answers. I remember feeling ever so proud that the doctor praised me for the quality of my questions. Forever the people pleaser in the direst of circumstances. I left with a prescription for some steroids and a heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach when I thought about telling my mum the news when we returned home.

Nothing prepared me for this. It felt like someone had lobbed a hand grenade into my seemingly perfect life. I was married to a man who was the love of my life and best friend; we had two beautiful daughters together. I was a yoga teacher running a busy, successful yoga studio in a pretty village in Cheshire, spending more time with my mum since we

moved from London, and my childhood friends lived a short walk away. Life was good...on the outside.

The truth is I was struggling. The aftermath of a stressful, soul-sucking career; the divorce of my parents; the death of my father; an ugly probate situation with his girlfriend of less than two years; the estrangement of half my family; a traumatic birth story, subsequently followed by post-natal depression. I was nursing an internal cocktail of self-loathing, insecurity, negative self-talk, and anxiety. By creating this illusion of perfectionism on the outside that was at complete odds with how I felt on the inside, I was living in a state of perpetual tension.

Following a lumbar puncture, which confirmed the MS diagnosis, and a second MRI scan to see if it was as active as he suspected (it wasn't), the neurologist was very negative about my prognosis. He said I would undoubtedly be in a wheelchair within a couple of years, and I needed to start potent, high-strength, high-risk disease modifying therapy (DMT) straight away to give myself a little more time before the inevitable happened. Quite uncharacteristically at the time, I said no (politely, of course) and that I wanted a couple of weeks to think before deciding. I don't know why I did this. Perhaps it was because my symptoms were quite mild, or the medication's long list of side effects (including cancer risk and brain infection) scared me more than MS, or because the way the neurologist spoke to me made me feel like a passive recipient rather than an active participant in my healthcare. I was already feeling uneasy in the hospital environment because it was the same place where I had been visiting my dad a few years earlier before he died. I'd also just had two overly medicalized births. The pressure to decide quickly made me feel stressed and out of control. It further compounded my decision when the neurologist called my husband a few days later to have a man-to-man talk with him about how important it was for me to start a high-strength DMT. He urged him to talk sense into me.

Two weeks turned into two months. While my husband was supportive, he was also very scared as I didn't have any firm evidence to show that the "wait-and-see" tactic was a good idea. I had no-one else in a similar situation to discuss it with. At the time, social media was non-existent, the online forums I read seemed overwhelmingly negative, and googling "MS prognosis" was terrifying. There were hardly any positive stories out there. I kept on returning to the question: Why? I was completely dumbfounded—there had to be a reason. I was probably one of the healthiest people in my family and social circle. Nobody knew of anyone in my family who had been diagnosed with MS. Why this? Why now? Why me?

I found some books on Amazon which, although didn't provide specific answers to my "why me" questions, turned out to be transformative and pivotal—providing me with a roadmap going forward. These were *Overcoming Multiple Sclerosis: The Evidence Based 7 Step Recovery Program* by George Jelinek; *The Wahls Protocol* by Dr Terry Wahls; *Minding my Mitochondria* by Dr Terry Wahls; and *Managing Multiple Sclerosis Naturally: A Self-Help Guide to Living with MS* by Judy Graham.

These books, although sometimes contradictory with each other in places, gave me some conviction that there were things I could do to help myself through diet and lifestyle. I thought I knew what healthy eating and living looked like as I had been a yoga teacher for five years at that point, but in truth, I was miles off.

Looking back, I now realize how overwhelmed I felt. The books provided a lifeline but without anyone or a community around me to talk with and make sense of them, it was just more information going into an already overloaded brain. For example, I quickly learned from my research that I needed to go gluten and dairy-free, so I bought the entire contents of the "free from" aisle in the supermarket every week. I begrudgingly made my way through the tasteless cereals, breads, and vegan cheeses, blissfully unaware that they were filled with sugar, sweeteners, inflammatory vegetable oils, artificial flavors, preservatives, fillers, and emulsifiers. Annoyingly, everyone else around me continued to eat delicious fluffy bread and "proper" cheese. I just didn't have the bandwidth at the time to learn more about the difference between being healthy and unhealthy while gluten and dairy-free. The whole area of what I should and shouldn't be eating felt like a minefield.

I would cycle in and out of reading through the books carefully. Afterwards, I put them back on the bookshelf, so the spines were facing inwards and out of sight. When I think about why I did this, I realize I was in denial. I could not and would not identify myself as having MS, and I didn't want my husband to either. I thought he would find me less attractive or damaged in some way. Because of this, I rarely talked about having MS and acted as though everything was normal on the outside.

Apart from being gluten and dairy-free at home (I didn't really check labels or worry too much if I was out of the house), nothing else really changed. Being a chronic people pleaser, I didn't want to cause problems or draw too much attention to myself. If family or friends had cooked for me, I felt it was rude not to eat it. I was embarrassed to be "that" person in restaurants. I also still drank the same amounts of alcohol as I did in

my early twenties, satisfied my addiction to chocolate on a daily basis, placed little importance on sleep, and still used an array of chemically laden beauty products.

MS paranoia began to creep in. I became aware of aches, pains, numbness, and muscle tightness that I hadn't felt before. I started convincing myself it was the beginning of another relapse. The more stressed I became, the worse the symptoms got. Luckily, I'd been referred to an amazing neuro physio, who quickly dispelled my fears. The muscle tightness turned out to be just that; there was no weakness or spasticity in my body. She helped me see the connection between my thoughts and my physical experience. What you think literally becomes your reality. Being a yoga and meditation teacher, the impact of stress on my MS symptoms interested me the most as it was so familiar to me, but I didn't really do much at this stage to address it.

Two months turned into six, which turned into a year. I never went back to the neurologist. We moved to Oxfordshire, and I didn't reinstate myself with a new consultant. I saw it as a clean slate. Nobody knew I had MS in the village we moved to, and I lived the next few years without thinking about it too much.

I added more books to my "healthy eating and living" collection. Inspired, I started training to be a Nutritional Therapist in 2013. I completed a year of biochemistry before studying Nutritional Therapy for three years at the Institute for Optimum Nutrition in London. During this time, I learned about the different systems of the body and how they were all connected. Not only did I learn about the health and disease promoting properties of different foods and lifestyles, but I was also understanding the importance of personalized nutrition. There is no "one size fits all". We all have genetic predispositions, but our genes are not our destiny; in fact, it is our diet and lifestyle that determine how those genes are expressed.

During my studies, I started to become more discerning about the quality of food my family and I were eating. I began reading labels and ditched a lot of the gluten and dairy-free products I had previously bought and sought out healthier alternatives, or just did without if I couldn't find a good substitution. I cooked most of our food from scratch, made my own nut milk in a blender, signed up for a huge weekly organic vegetable box, and sought out grass-fed meat and wild fish. I also swapped my self-care and household products for more natural options to avoid the toxins and endocrine-disrupting chemicals found in the majority of beauty and cleaning products on the shelves.

Where I had previously felt overwhelmed, I started to see that healthy eating was actually very simple. By focusing on unprocessed whole foods, mainly vegetables, good quality proteins, and the right type of fats, I noticed how it was actually more about unlearning a lot of the marketing hype that we have been spoon-fed by the food industry. I started buying most of my produce from the first two aisles of the supermarket instead of the middle sections, and eventually found that ordering boxes from an independent local organic farm ensured better prices, in-season, sustainable produce, and quality of food that I could trust.

I was introduced to the concept of functional medicine, addressing the underlying causes of disease rather than just the symptoms. It was like a light had been turned on. At last, I had found an approach that really resonated with me, focusing on root cause medicine and promoting health rather than disease management. It was a framework in which to address the big burning question I had about my MS diagnosis—why?

I was learning about different body systems and pathways, and it felt like solving a jigsaw puzzle. Gathering important pieces made me excited. However, I was unable to find the right practitioner to work with. At the time, I couldn't find a nutritional therapist who worked within a functional medicine framework, that specialized in autoimmunity, never mind MS. So, I became my own practitioner, ordering and analyzing my own functional tests, speaking with experts at the labs, learning on the job, and making a few costly mistakes along the way. I wouldn't recommend it—I lacked an independent critical eye to look over my timeline and results, but I had no other options available. I was both the jigsaw puzzle and the person trying to solve it. As I now know, you ideally need to have a bit of distance and perspective to be able to see the whole picture.

I also discovered that while diet and supplements (where appropriate) are key areas of the jigsaw puzzle; equal weight needs to be given to other aspects of health, such as sleep, movement, mindset, connection (with self and others), and a big one for me that I was about to fully discover—stress management.

I think of my MS journey as a tale of two halves. The first half spans from 2011-2018. The second half is from 2018 onwards. This is when I learned that you could eat all the organic broccoli in the world, but if you are still living under chronic stress and negative thought patterns, you can't be in a healing state.

In 2018, my husband and I were going through a very intense period of financial stress, which was having a detrimental impact on both of us. To protect each other and our children, we were both suppressing our fear, putting a brave face on things, pretending everything was okay to the outside world. This, of course, was a well-worn path and very familiar territory to me. I began experiencing a slight decline in my gait; however, I was still practicing yoga daily, teaching yoga classes, running after my children, and eating fairly healthily. It wasn't until my daughter's teacher asked me if I had hurt my knee while I was walking across the playground that I noticed the weakness in my left leg was becoming visible to others. One day, I was out shopping for a birthday card. Without looking where I was going, I tripped over a paving stone. I still don't know whether it was inherent clumsiness, which I am well known for, or foot drop that caused me to trip, but I landed badly on my left knee. There was a sharp pain in my knee joint, and it was tender to touch. Rather than getting it checked out, I hobbled home in pain and had a few sleepless nights. I thought that would be it. Little did I know, it was the prelude to months of disrupted sleep, chronic neuropathic pain, muscle spasms, muscle spasticity, and a lot of distress.

The inflammation caused by the acute injury to my knee, a normal and important immune process, did not switch off, unfortunately. This physical stress, combined with the financial stressors of our day-to-day life, as well as my own personal stress rucksack that I carried on my back, created the perfect storm. There was no resolution to the inflammation; it became chronic and continued to escalate. In his book *The Survival Paradox*, Isaac Eliaz likens a healthy inflammatory response to turning on a single light to illuminate the need for repair. However, when the light is switched on and can't be switched off, it's like a circuit malfunction. More lights are switched on, eventually pushing the body into crisis mode. I started to experience painful muscle spasms in my left leg, relentless neuropathic pain, and a tightening of the muscles in my abdomen, hips, and thighs; walking became more and more difficult. I found myself in a whirlwind of self-perpetuating stress, inflammation, and pain.

Reading my journal from this time is a hard thing to do. There were some very dark moments where I felt I was in a downward spiral. I just wanted the pain to end, whatever that meant. It was a disorienting time when the days merged into nights; I didn't know what to do with myself. I would dread going to bed because I knew I had a night of waking up every thirty minutes or spending hours awake in the dark in excruciating pain. Sometimes I would wake my husband because it was so unbearable, but most times, I would sob silently into my pillow because he had to be up

early for work the next day. When the light broke in the morning, I would roll out of bed onto my hands and knees, puffy-faced, and rock back and forth on my yoga mat in an attempt to bring movement to my stiff body. I would splash my face with cold water and slowly make my way downstairs, one painful step at a time, to make a cheery-faced breakfast for my daughters before they went to school. I canceled all the plans I had made, didn't want to see anyone, didn't even want to speak to my closest friends because I simply didn't have the energy to call them. I had completely lost myself. I couldn't practice yoga, I was in too much pain to sit and meditate, and I couldn't stay still long enough to read. I had to keep moving, but I was utterly exhausted. I couldn't sit at my desk to work. I was no longer able to watch my girls play sports, go shopping with them, have fun in the garden, go out for dinner with my husband, or meet my friends for lunch. The pain was occupying all the spaces in my head where my identity and joy had previously resided.

Even though it's difficult to read now, journaling became an important process for me. By writing negative thoughts down, it helped me to offload things from my head onto paper, often multiple things, which overall helped lighten the load. Reading my scribbles now has enabled me to look back and see how far I have come, as well as what worked for me and what didn't. No matter how relentless or dark you are finding your days or nights, by journaling and looking back over the years, you realize that nothing remains the same. We are more resourceful than we ever give ourselves credit for. Patterns will start to emerge that will become our greatest guides. I recommend journaling to everyone with MS—especially during the dark times.

I booked an appointment with a doctor to get something to help with the pain. I tried gabapentin and baclofen (both made me feel nauseous), as well as tizanidine, which made me even more drowsy and disoriented. I tried clonazepam to help me sleep. For the first time in months, I slept for a few hours. It was really effective, and I started to sleep for longer periods each night. However, it is only meant to be taken short-term as it is a benzodiazepine, which increases risk for addiction. Plus, not only has long-term use been linked with cognitive decline, but sleep deficiency has also shown similar associations. Therefore, I found myself caught between a rock and a hard place, as sleeping provided immense comfort despite the potential risks involved. I decided to stay on it for a while longer.

The doctor also referred me to a new neurologist. This time when I went to see him, I didn't feel pressured to take immunosuppressant medication. He was a lot more relaxed during the appointments about

what he thought were my next steps. We agreed that I should have an MRI to see if there had been any further activity since 2013. Unfortunately, the scan was inconclusive, probably because, after an hour of being in the cylinder, the muscles in my legs were spasming. The movement blurred the images. However, without the scan and just considering the progressive worsening of symptoms in my left leg, the neurologist re-diagnosed me with Primary Progressive MS (PPMS). He believed that the fall and subsequent inflammation had been a catalyst, catapulting me forward to a place where I probably would have been in my MS journey if I hadn't done so much work on my diet and lifestyle. I would need another MRI to qualify for Ocrevus—the only DMT suitable for PPMS.

This was hard to hear. In truth, it sent me into a depressed state for quite a while. However, as I replayed the conversation over and over again in my head, two things began to stand out. Firstly, the neurologist's acknowledgement that it was likely diet and lifestyle that had significantly slowed the progression of the disease. Secondly, if I did have PPMS, the potent medication that had been strongly recommended to me in 2013 after my diagnosis would not have made a lot of difference.

With the help of the clonazepam at night, I was able to cope better during the day. I started to double down on my efforts. I went back to my original resources and read *The Wahls Protocol*® cover to cover. I followed the elimination diet for 100 days to see if anything I was eating was adding to the inflammation. When I started to systematically add different foods back into my diet over time, I discovered that my symptoms worsened when I added most grains and legumes back in. I started following The Wahls Paleo Diet™ (level two): eating meat, liver, fish, eggs (I was fine with them), even more vegetables, berries, and soaked, activated nuts and seeds. Then, I tried The Wahls Paleo Plus Diet™, which is a ketogenic diet, focusing on a higher fat, lower carbohydrate macronutrient distribution to encourage more mitochondria production (the organelles which make energy in the cells). I switched between the paleo diet and the ketogenic diet to encourage metabolic flexibility (the ability to easily switch between fat and glucose metabolism). I also started going to bed earlier and invested in an Oura ring, so I could track my sleep and see what was disturbing it. Over the next six months, I was able to come off the clonazepam. My energy levels slowly began to improve. I was able to move more and started to practice some light yoga. As my brain fog also began to clear, I started researching the impact of stress on my health in more depth.

I conducted more tests. One that was pivotal was genetic testing with Lifecode GX. My training with them to become a Nutrigenomics Practitioner really helped me place quite a few of the jigsaw pieces around stress and its impact on me. Nutrigenomics looks at the role of nutrients in gene expression. The food you eat doesn't change the sequence of your DNA, but your diet and lifestyle can switch certain genes on or off, or change the way they are expressed, which plays a major role in health (and disease) outcomes. These genetic tests can pinpoint unique vulnerabilities and highlight areas that can benefit from additional diet and lifestyle support.

My own test results showed a lot of vulnerabilities in the nervous system report. They highlighted that I have a genetic susceptibility that makes cortisol, the stress hormone, upregulate inflammatory pathways more than necessary. This also creates "tryptophan steal", which means less tryptophan is available to produce serotonin and melatonin. The upshot of this is that high levels of cortisol, especially when produced over long periods of time, can be highly inflammatory for me. It can also have a detrimental impact on the quality of my mood and sleep. On top of this, I also found that I have a reduced ability to clear the stress hormones out of my body (via a slow COMT gene), which means that they circulate around my body for much longer, making the problem even worse. It began to dawn on me that the cascade of inflammation triggered by my fall did not subside, particularly due to my prolonged state of elevated cortisol. It highlighted just how important an anti-inflammatory diet and nutraceuticals were for me. Alongside all the anti-inflammatory foods I was eating more of on the Wahls Protocol®, I further increased my dose of omega 3 (found in oily fish), curcumin (found in turmeric), ginger, and green tea. I also introduced cold water therapy and infra-red light to my daily practices, as well as limiting behaviors and avoiding people and situations that raised my cortisol levels as much as possible. By this point, it had been about eighteen months since my knee injury, but better late than never! I used to say that I wanted to be the practitioner I wish I had met when I was first diagnosed in 2013 and couldn't find anyone to support me. When I look back now, I want to be the practitioner I wish I had met in 2018! Hindsight is a wonderful thing.

I learned that while stress is not inherently bad (as we are equipped with a strong survival mechanism and have adapted as a species because of it), it is unrelenting chronic stress and the subsequent inflammation that is the driver for many of today's diseases, including MS, as it:

- Down regulates the immune system - when you are in a chronically stressed state, you are more susceptible to infections from opportunistic pathogens.
- Dysregulates blood sugar levels, which is a driver for inflammation.
- Has a negative impact on gut health - we can't digest or absorb nutrients from our food as effectively. It can lead to intestinal permeability or "leaky gut" and has a negative impact on the balance of our microbiome.
- Causes mitochondrial dysfunction - the inability of cells to produce energy effectively.
- Increases oxidative stress, which can cause damage to DNA and cell structure.
- Creates hormonal imbalance - the production of stress hormones is prioritized over sex hormones as a key survival mechanism.
- Creates nutritional deficiencies - the adrenal glands, which produce the stress hormones, adrenaline, and cortisol, use up a lot of B vitamins, vitamin C, magnesium, and zinc, draining resources from the rest of the body.

We are supposed to move with ease between the two arms of the autonomic nervous system: the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), known as "fight, flight, or freeze", and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), known as "rest, digest, and restore". Yet in today's society, we are SNS dominant as we are inundated with constant pings from texts and emails, work deadlines, traffic jams, overexposure to blue light, alarming news stories, and social media 24/7, 365 days a year.

It is the PNS that holds the key to health. In this system, the body is shifted to a state of homeostasis. Our heart rate slows down, our breath is regulated, our digestion works effectively, and our hormones are in a state of balance. Our bodies are fully equipped with healing mechanisms while in the parasympathetic state to fight infections, clear damaged cells, improve cellular energy, repair and restore damaged tissue, and reduce inflammation.

When I shifted my perspective and conducted a "stress audit" of my life, I transitioned from asking "Why me?" to asking, "What is stressing me?" I saw that, even though I had done a lot of important and necessary work to reduce my physical stress through nutrition and functional medicine, my stress bucket was overflowing from psychological, spiritual, emotional, and perceived stress. The list below is what I run through now with my MS clients to see what is stressing them:

- Physical – injury, infections, sleep deprivation, blood sugar imbalance, gut microbiome imbalance, oxidative stress, nutrient deficiencies, environmental toxins, heavy metals, mold
- Psychological – relationship conflicts, financial strains, increased demands, loss of a loved one, exposure to traumatic incidents
- Spiritual – not connected to a higher purpose, not having a “big why”, not having a supportive community or framework
- Emotional – not living in alignment with your values, not speaking your truth
- Perceived – mindset and positive/negative beliefs, ruminating over the past and worrying about the future

My upbringing hardwired my nervous system for a fight, flight, or freeze sympathetic dominant state. I was in a constant state of second guessing what the mood at home would be, so compliance and anxiety became second nature to me as I tried to make everyone happy. As a child, I remember feeling different from everyone else. I felt disconnected from myself and those around me and was desperate to be seen and heard, so I developed people-pleasing as a survival mechanism really young. As a young adult, not feeling like I fit in made me say yes when I meant no. I was hyper vigilant about what everyone else was doing, so I could know how to feel and act. I was a born introvert who, for most of my life, had been acting like an extravert to fit in and be liked.

Part of my life audit included reducing my alcohol intake considerably. This helped me to see how stressful and exhausting I found larger social groups. The fact that I used to do tequila shots to relax before I went into larger social situations probably should have been a clue! I also discovered that I really needed a lot of time alone regularly to re-energize. I’m an only child, so I don’t know if this is nature or nurture, but I start to feel untethered if I’m around too many people for too long. Feelings of anxiety allowed me to reflect on whether it was the person or situation I was in that was wrong for me rather than thinking something was always wrong with me. Removing myself allowed me to define my acceptable boundaries. In doing so, I was able to start carving a life that is now bringing me much more joy.

Despite being a yoga teacher for quite a few years, when I did some honest self-reflection, I could see that I had been good at talking the talk—but not so good at walking the walk. When I initially practiced yoga, it was as a panacea to my stressful job in London. It gave me a strong, flexible body which I liked. Then, when I did my yoga teacher training, I was honestly more focused on producing perfect lesson plans and being the best yoga teacher rather than teaching from a place of practice and

authenticity. When I opened a yoga studio and therapy center, yoga became more of a business for me—another source of stress. I think this caused quite a bit of internal tension. I was practicing from my head rather than my heart while teaching others to do the opposite. Consequently, I felt inauthentic and out of alignment with my own values.

When I had to stop my yoga practice after I fell, it felt like a large part of my identity had been taken away. I was devastated that I could no longer practice at the advanced level I had once been at. Eventually, when the pain and muscle stiffness eased a little, I was able to slowly introduce some yoga movements and a seated meditation practice. I was forced to practice as a beginner, learning what my body could and couldn't do. As infuriating as this was at the beginning, approaching my practice with a “beginner's mind” helped to deepen my mind-body connection; I felt a state of flow and ease that no amount of advanced yoga postures had ever given me before. This was a profound shift for me, and I started to rebuild my yoga and meditation practice with complete integrity and authenticity. My meditation practice became consistent because I wanted to keep returning to it rather than always feeling like I should do it because it was on my to-do list. The more I practiced, the calmer my nervous system became, and the more spacious my mind felt—settling back into a place of awareness and observation rather than anxiously jumping between every thought and emotion.

As well as building on my yoga and meditation practice, I intentionally found lots of other ways to signal to my brain that I was safe and relaxed in order to move into the parasympathetic state. These included:

- Waking up and going to bed earlier, so I could follow my morning meditation practice with journaling, writing, breathwork, or just sitting listening to the birds with a cup of tea. I kept my phone out of sight as allowing the outside world in straight away by checking our emails, reading the news, or social media is never a good idea for nervous system regulation. The book *Miracle Morning* by Hal Elrod really inspired me.
- Directly activating the main component of the PNS—the vagus nerve. This is a long nerve, reaching from the brain into the gut and is activated through deep diaphragmatic breathing, gargling, chanting, humming, and singing. I love yoga chanting, so I also started incorporating this into my day at the beginning and end of my yoga practice.
- Becoming much more aware of people and situations around me that provoked a fight-or-flight response for me, I would either avoid them

or, if I couldn't, then I would make sure I spent time afterwards calming my nervous system down.

- Spending more time in nature
- Doing more things that brought me joy, such as reading (I have listed my favorite inspirational books at the end of this chapter), cooking new recipes, and designing our garden. This meant a lot of enjoyable time spent observing the seasonal cycles of the garden, the wildlife, and birds in it, as well as searching for new plants in nurseries, planting them, and of course, weeding.
- Cryotherapy (cold water therapy)
- Infra-red light exposure
- Improving my circadian rhythm by morning light exposure, wearing blue light-blocking glasses, and using blue light-blocking light bulbs in the evening.
- Social connection – spending more time with a few close friends and less time in larger social settings. I also started to connect with others in the MS community and other practitioners involved in supporting people with MS.
- I began having appointments with a Clinical Psychologist, which has been tremendously helpful in processing a lot of my past experiences. We have been using Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), which uses side-to-side eye movements, combined with talk therapy in a specific and structured format to process and help me recover from some of the traumatic experiences in my past.

The progression of my symptoms in 2018 forced me to strip away the inessential; rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I started to rebuild my life. I had been trying to fit into perfectly wrapped boxes my whole life. Trying to be the perfect daughter, the perfect friend, the perfect girlfriend, the perfect wife, the perfect mum, the perfect yoga teacher—I had completely lost any sense of who I was at my core. It was a wake-up call to face and embrace my MS diagnosis, and it forced me to stop, slow down, and look within. I had thrown myself into learning about nutrition and eating well but neglected some of the other fundamental pillars of health, such as prioritizing rest and stress management, as well as connection to myself and the wider community. I had been isolating myself from the MS community when I had needed to be around others who understood how I was feeling. In this way, MS has been a guide, showing me how to live a fuller, more purposeful life that is more in alignment with my values. I now see my MS diagnosis, not as a jigsaw puzzle to be solved, but as a lesson that has taught me that the way I was living my life before was completely misaligned.

My experience has also given me true empathy for others with MS who are suffering from their symptoms. Without those three years, I wouldn't have the same depth of understanding what it's like when symptoms progress. I struggled to feel authentic as a nutritional therapist specializing in MS because I hadn't really experienced any suffering, so how could I relate with anyone who had? When I faced true suffering, I felt inauthentic discussing health in the context of MS, as I was personally going through the challenges myself. It wasn't until I subsequently felt improvements in my health, contrary to everything that I had been told and read about what to expect with PPMS, that I felt I could truly help others. This is when I decided to complete the remaining modules with the Institute for Functional Medicine and become certified as a Wahls Protocol® Health Practitioner, so I could start making a difference in others' lives who were living with MS, too. I am also enrolled in a "Compassionate Inquiry" training with Dr. Gabor Maté and Sat Dharam Kaur, starting in September 2023. This psychotherapy approach will further support my clients by helping them safely uncover and release trauma and suppressed emotions, enabling them to access deeper healing and transformation.

So, where am I now? As I write this in 2023, five years after my "MS awakening", I have seen improvements in my physical and mental health. I feel more energized; I am sleeping well again; the pain, muscle spasms, and frequency of muscle spasticity have vastly reduced; my brain fog has completely vanished; and my moods are much better. I am also feeling more at ease in myself and more aligned to my purpose—what brings me joy. I am aware of the boundaries I have set up. However, I still have minor balance issues, and some of the nerve pathways in my left leg are disrupted or dysfunctional. This means that I am not able to bend my left knee fully or kick my heel back completely, which has an impact on the quality of my walking. This is where my journey with electrical stimulation (E-Stim) began.

In April, my husband and I traveled to Austin, Texas, so I could attend an "MS Bootcamp" at the Neufit headquarters to try their Neubie device. This is the same technology that Dr. Wahls has used to help restore her health, alongside functional medicine. It uses direct current, working at the level of the nervous system, to accelerate rehabilitation, restore function, and increase mobility by using neuromuscular re-education (neuroplasticity). We were so impressed with the Neubie that we made the investment and brought the device back for me to use at home, alongside a personalized training program. It's still early, but if you want to follow my progress on Instagram, you can find me at www.instagram.com/elisaferguson_msnutrition.

As I write this chapter, I have two teenage daughters who I am aware have been watching me face this adversity over the last few years. From my own experience, I know how important it is to give them the space to speak their truth and feel their feelings, for them to live in alignment with who they are, and to find joy in what they do. They have been the main driver for me to keep going, to keep getting back up when I have felt utterly defeated, and to be a role model to show them how to cope when life sometimes gives you lemons. So far, my MS story has been a tale of two halves, yet I feel there is a lot more to come. I feel positive about it. Maybe it's going to be a tale of three thirds or four quarters? After telling my daughter when she was one year old that everything was going to be okay, I now know that it is.

Some of my favorite inspirational books:

- *Cured* by Jeff Redriger
- *The Biology of Belief* by Bruce Lipton
- *The Survival Paradox* by Isaac Eliaz
- *Spontaneous Healing* by Andrew Weil
- *Mind over Medicine* by Dr Lissa Rankin
- *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* by Robert M. Sapolsky
- *Atomic Habits* by James Clear
- *The Miracle Morning* by Hal Elrod
- *When the Body Says No* by Dr. Gabor Maté
- *The Myth of Normal* by Dr. Gabor Maté
- *Molecules of Emotion* by Candace Pert
- *Radical Acceptance* by Tara Brach
- *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* by Eckhart Tolle
- *The Diamond Heart: Book One* by A. H. Almaas
- *The Presence Process* by Michael Brown
- *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel Van Der Kolk
- *Waking the Tiger* by Peter Levine
- *The Drama of the Gifted Child* by Alice Miller
- *My Grandmother's Hand* by Resmaa Menakem

FINAL NOTE

"Before you heal someone, ask him if he is willing to give up the things that made him sick." -Hippocrates

As we reach the end of this book, I hope these stories have not only inspired you but also encouraged you to take a moment to reflect on your own life. The purpose of this book has been to shine a light on aspects that deserve recognition and change. It's not just about MS or autoimmune diseases; it's a call to awareness, an invitation to slow down and reevaluate our lives.

Our ancestors had wisdom we can learn from, and with today's technology and knowledge, we can create a healthier, more harmonious world, instead of heading down a destructive path. It's as simple as pausing to take a deep breath, enjoying the smell of flowers, and appreciating the beauty that surrounds us.

We hope you've found this book to be a valuable guide. In closing, remember that while healing isn't guaranteed, it's always within reach. The life you choose to lead is firmly in your hands. Join us on **www.BeatingMultipleSclerosis.com** to explore all the limitless possibilities together.