

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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I would like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to everyone who has contributed to the creation and completion of this book.

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I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to all the remarkable individuals who graciously shared their heartbreaking stories for this book. Your bravery in opening up about your journeys will undoubtedly resonate with others who find solace and strength in knowing they are not alone. I am honored to have had the opportunity to give voice to your stories and express my deepest appreciation for your invaluable contribution.

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

JOANNE MAKWANA

Diagnosed in 2009

Currently 38 years old

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For nearly five years, I had been dealing with strange, yet seemingly unconnected symptoms. In 2004, I experienced a squeezing sensation throughout my ribs and a “pins and needles” feeling that traveled up and down my leg. At that time, my initial doctor’s visits were focused on a potential blood clot or pulled muscle. Eventually, the numbness I was experiencing led my family doctor to refer me to a neurologist. After a round of magnetic resonance imaging (MRIs), it was noted that I had a small spot on my brain. The neurologist stated that although uncommon for someone my age (nineteen), it wasn’t enough for him to “hang his hat” on or diagnose me with anything.

While going through testing, I had simultaneously begun seeing a naturopath at the suggestion of my dad because my leg heaviness got really intense. He called around to find a local naturopath that would see me for an emergency Saturday appointment. He had an experience where he was overmedicated at one point in his life and had started making healthier changes for himself. When I told him what was going on, he immediately began printing off information he was seeing online about lifestyle and dietary changes that were helping people with chronic illness. Whether I was diagnosed or not, he didn't want to see me on intense medication at such a young age. He also knew that further testing and MRIs were going to take time. Why not get started on lifestyle changes that could help in the meantime?

After making some changes to my diet, I found that many of the strange symptoms had vanished—amazing! Not only did I not have MS, but my symptoms were gone! That's what I thought. Fast forward to 2009. I switched jobs and was burning the candle at both ends. All the healthy habits I'd begun to incorporate in 2004 started to go out the window. Symptoms returned more intensely than anything I'd experienced before. Extreme fatigue: There were times I had to pull over while driving because it would randomly hit me so hard that I'd feel like I was going to fall asleep at the wheel, even after a full night's sleep. Neuropathy: numbness and tingling, as though both feet were asleep 24/7. Extremely heavy legs: they felt like they were bricks of cement that were impossible to lift. Vertigo: laying down and holding the carpet because the room was flipping. Cognitive decline: extreme brain fog, trouble organizing my thoughts, feeling confused about what I was doing, and forgetting things. Loss of balance: feeling as though people would think I was drunk, based on how I walked. Swelling and edema in feet/lower legs. Headaches/migraines and sinus pressure (especially in the morning). Muscle spasms and twitching. The MS "hug": A tightening sensation that felt like a boa constrictor was squeezing me around the rib cage.

All of this had resulted in a massive loss of confidence and self-esteem. I would arrive early to work, so I could get out of my car without feeling like a colleague might see me struggling to walk. I'd linger behind in meetings, so people wouldn't see me graze the wall or a meeting table for balance. I wrote everything down, so I could remember as much as possible. I worked in public relations and was a company spokesperson. I needed to be able to think clearly to find my words in media interviews.

I went back to see the neurologist and began the process of MRIs, once again. This time there was no question about it, there were lesions on both the brain and the spinal cord.

“You have lesions all over your brain; you definitely have MS.”

Tears filled my eyes. After many doctors and late-night magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) appointments, it was the diagnosis that had long been suspected. Even though I knew multiple sclerosis (MS) was a possibility, receiving the label hit me hard (not to mention delivery of the news wasn't how I imagined). I stared blankly at the neurologist and felt as though my mind hovered outside of my body. He seemed surprised that I was affected by the diagnosis.

“Oh...do you need some tissues?” He awkwardly asked before launching into high-level treatment options, where to pick up copies of my MRIs, my need for an occupational therapist, and timing for seeing a specialist. Although I saw his lips moving, I didn't take in a word he said. I left feeling empty and overwhelmed. In July of 2009 (at the age of twenty-four), I was officially diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

My family was shocked but were most upset about the way I was diagnosed. The first time I had gone for MRIs, I had to call the neurologist's office for the results. Several years later, when I had to follow-up for results a couple of weeks after my MRIs, I figured nothing was flagged, or they would have proactively notified me. I was naive and thought they would encourage me to bring someone if they were delivering bad news. They did not, so I went alone. I wish I'd brought my parents with me.

After being diagnosed, my symptoms immediately got worse. Isn't the power of the mind incredible? I initially felt sorry for myself and spent every spare minute watching videos of people documenting their MS struggles. I'd cry while thinking about the future—the possibility of losing my vision, being wheelchair-bound, or not being able to feed myself. My legs were weak, and I was having so many issues with my balance that being in public was a huge source of anxiety for me. I

couldn't imagine things getting worse than they already were and was suddenly forced to think about the possibility. My mind constantly gravitated to worst case scenarios.

In the weeks following my diagnosis, I did a lot of research and came to two realizations. Firstly, I understood that my mindset was going to determine everything moving forward. Anyone I had encountered with MS, who was doing well, had a positive outlook. Secondly, there is power in food and in taking better care of myself. I knew this based on my experience with the naturopath years before receiving a diagnosis. I had once been able to get rid of my symptoms by changing my lifestyle. I could do it again, regardless of a "new" MS label.

After my initial diagnosis, I had to wait for an appointment at the MS Clinic to see a specialist and discuss my treatment options. I was nervous and spent lots of time documenting my symptoms, filling out paperwork around my needs for an occupational therapist, etc. While physical therapy focuses on improving the patient's ability to move their body, occupational therapy focuses on improving the patient's ability to perform daily activities. I had no idea what this was at the time, but the MS Clinic asked me to complete several forms prior to my appointment that would determine my need for this type of support. I also compiled some of the latest research I'd come across on vitamin D and MS.

My appointment could not have been more of a letdown. The neurologist seemed rushed and annoyed by my questions. I knew there were several medication options and was curious to see which one he would recommend and why. He firmly stated there was one medication he wanted me to go on—Rebif. I was looking for some rationale behind the recommendation and stated that I wasn't sure I wanted to go on medication, given I'd had good results with changing my lifestyle. I relayed my hesitations, along with some of the latest research on vitamin D, and was immediately met with hostility: "All vitamins are placebos. They aren't going to do anything for MS." I was surprised by his unwillingness to discuss my findings.

"Well, if you look through some of the studies I've provided, there's some really promising research taking place. The vitamin D connection makes sense to me, given that Canada has one of the highest rates of MS in the world." I could tell there was no interest in what I was saying. I continued: "I have a pretty stressful job...do you think that will have implications for how things progress?"

"Stress has absolutely nothing to do with MS," he quickly retorted.

With that single statement, he lost me. Stress plays a role in EVERYTHING! I wasn't a doctor, but I absolutely recognized this, and it was concerning to me that he did not. As the appointment came to an end, he pushed a paper towards me with a drug identification number for Rebif written on it.

“Check and see if your insurance will cover it. Then, call me when you're ready to start.”

It was clear he had zero interest in working with me if I wasn't going to go on the disease modifying therapy (DMT). As I left the office, he handed me an informational packet from the MS Society. I opened it up, and the very first page was all about limiting stress and how much it affects MS! A relationship with a healthcare provider should be a partnership. You have every right to voice concerns, questions, and your own findings.

I left feeling extremely disappointed. He had belittled me and made me feel like I had no say in my own treatment, or what was happening with my body. I didn't know exactly how I was going to move forward but working with the naturopath had left me feeling so much more empowered and hopeful.

I knew several people with MS. The potential side effects of the MS medications weren't particularly pleasant, and it was something I wasn't ready to resort to at the age of twenty-four. If I was able to change my lifestyle and impact my symptoms, it seemed logical to first attempt this. Given that I was dealing with a serious condition, I would have to be very disciplined. This wasn't just about going on a diet; it was about using my food and healthier lifestyle choices as my medicine. I dove in and quickly began to see results. I was amazed at how good I started to feel again, and even noticed improvements to issues not associated with MS. Every day I found things were getting better. I was reducing inflammation, and my digestion started to improve for the first time in my life. The heaviness in my legs subsided, neuropathy in the feet went away, and I no longer had the traveling sensation in my leg or squeezing feeling throughout the ribs.

I wasn't eating gluten or dairy. I had drastically reduced sugar and was trying to avoid processed/packaged foods. I also started to try different foods for specific therapeutic properties (ginger, turmeric, tahini, new vegetables, lots of berries, and greens). I was drinking more water and focusing on organic, overall food quality (avoiding genetically modified ingredients or food laden with pesticides). I also began taking supplements to address nutrient deficiencies and inflammation. I spent

my spare time reading and following the latest research on autoimmune/neurological diseases. I stumbled upon the work of Dr. Terry Wahls, who has Secondary-Progressive MS (SPMS) and was able to restore her health and get rid of her wheelchair, using her education and experience in the areas of research, medicine, and nutrition. Seeing others relieve chronic disease symptoms was incredibly inspiring and helped me to BELIEVE that I, too, could restore my health.

By 2011, most of my major symptoms had gone into remission, and the changes I'd implemented had really made a difference in my overall health. I did have some lingering issues I was hoping to resolve though, such as fatigue, numbness, and headaches. In an attempt to address some of these symptoms, I opted to pursue a new, controversial treatment for Chronic Cerebrospinal Venous Insufficiency (CCSVI), or the "Liberation" Therapy. CCSVI was a term coined by Dr. Paolo Zamboni. It describes the theory in which the head/neck veins are narrowed or blocked and are unable to efficiently remove blood from the Central Nervous System. The pressure caused by the build-up of blood, in turn, causes reflux of blood back into the Central Nervous System through new blood vessels which develop when the others are not working. Dr. Zamboni suggested that because these new blood vessels don't have the same structural integrity as larger veins, they tend to leak blood into the surrounding tissue, depositing iron into the Central Nervous System, triggering an immune response associated with MS. The procedure leverages an angiogram (a balloon that helps open the vein), so blood can flow through.

The first clinic I went to told me I had no issues. Something in my gut said to keep pursuing, so I went to another clinic. It wasn't until the second scan that an issue was identified. (The extent of the narrowing can't be determined until they go in for the procedure.)

I traveled to the Hospital Clinica Biblica in Costa Rica for the procedure through Passport Medical. The procedure itself was very quick. Patients are put under anesthesia. A small incision is made in the groin, and they go in with a camera to see the extent of the narrowing. Then, a balloon is inserted to open the vein. In many places, it was a simple same-day procedure. I purposely selected the procedure in Costa Rica because you were kept in the hospital overnight for observation. Then, ten days of physical therapy were completed at the hotel patients stayed in. It was an amazing experience. The hospital and hotel staff were all incredible at making sure you felt comfortable and were getting what you needed. It is costly; the procedure and accompanying therapies were about \$16,000. Fortunately, my friends and family held a benefit for me to help raise the funds.

The following is an excerpt from the report following my surgery:

“During the procedure, a 75% stenosis of the right internal jugular vein was seen, as well as a 90% stenosis of the left internal jugular vein. The lesions were dilated through the placement of a 14 x 50 mm Boston XXL Balloon and an 18 x 50 mm Boston XXL Balloon. Following the dilations, improvement of both vessel caliber and blood flow was observed.”

My jugulars were 75% and 90% blocked; I was getting almost no blood flow! Following the procedure, the surgeon showed me images of where my body had created new veins to compensate for the lack of blood flow through the jugulars. The body is truly remarkable!

Following the procedure, I noticed an improvement in my remaining symptoms. I had more energy, my balance seemed better, and I had a reduction in headaches. It was interesting to observe others who were there for the treatment. In my case, I'd been managing MS through a healthier lifestyle for two years with minimal symptoms. Others who arrived for the surgery had progressed quite a bit. As a result, some of their improvements were even more noticeable.

Since 2011, CCSVI has fizzled out. You'd be hard pressed to find anyone offering the procedure today. Although some responded very well, over time, many who'd undergone the procedure had re-stenosis of the veins, meaning they'd need the procedure again to re-open them. There was additional controversy; in some cases, the procedure was completed using stents instead of an angiogram, as Dr. Zamboni recommended. Many clinics were using doppler ultrasound to detect stenosis but were not following his protocol.

CCSVI led us to many more questions about a potential vascular connection to MS. Why do so many MS patients have problems with these veins? Does MS cause the narrowing? Does the narrowing result in the presentation of MS symptoms for some? How does impaired blood flow affect the brain's ability to drain/clear toxins, etc.?

While opening the veins was by no means a cure for MS, and results of the procedure varied for many, I'm grateful I was able to have it done. Having blood flow impaired to that extent is NOT a good thing—whether you have MS or not! Was I just supposed to leave them blocked? I'm grateful that Dr. Zamboni and other researchers continue to challenge the status quo and investigate these findings. There are

researchers still pursuing the potential vascular connection to MS, despite the fact that many others have dismissed it entirely.

One of the most challenging aspects of MS is not knowing how it will affect you in the long-term. What does the future look like? It can also be difficult determining when to disclose chronic illness to someone you are dating. People are often diagnosed in their early twenties, a time when they may begin to think about their long-term family planning, etc.

When I met my husband, he knew that I had been diagnosed with MS but really didn't know much about it or what it meant. Although we had been acquaintances, we didn't start dating until about a year and a half after my diagnosis. Initially, he thought my lifestyle was a bit drastic and that I had some crazy ideas. He was trying to understand why I chose to treat MS without medication, but knew I was well informed and could determine what was best for my body. Not only was he supportive, but he became invested in learning how the same principles might apply to his own health. The eye rolling and sarcastic comments in social settings were a regular occurrence, but he never made me feel like my choices were silly or a burden. Remember, this was nearly fifteen years ago when going gluten-free was NOT mainstream. I recognize how blessed I am to have had his support.

I'm sharing this because after speaking to many others with MS, I know one of the biggest challenges is partners or family members not agreeing with the changes being made. Having a chronic illness can be overwhelming, but it's amplified when thinking about how pregnancy and caring for children can impact your health.

For many women with MS, pregnancy seems to be protective. There is a much lower risk of a flare during pregnancy itself. This was my experience, aside from typical pregnancy symptoms, such as morning sickness, etc. For many, the postpartum period is where they are most at risk of a flare. This was my experience, as well.

While seven months pregnant with my first child in 2014, my dad passed away unexpectedly. After my daughter's birth, grief, coupled with being a first-time mom, took a toll on me. My healthy eating began to slide, I wasn't sleeping or working out, and MS symptoms quickly began to flare-up at about six weeks postpartum. I had joint pain (especially in my fingers and knees), my balance was off, and I struggled to get up with my daughter at night. After tightening up my diet, identifying some new food intolerances (pregnancy can change us), I was able to get things under control within about eight weeks.

I had gone into pregnancy in the best health of my life. My husband and I had been planning to get pregnant, so my body was able to rebound pretty quickly. I'd really focused on upping my nutrient status. I was avoiding processed foods, focusing on food quality, and taking prenatal vitamins (plus a variety of other vitamins) to ensure I was well-nourished. In 2012, I had adopted a vegetarian diet, but when it came time to get pregnant in 2014, I began craving meat. I truly believe the body tells us what we need, but it is up to us to listen. I incorporated meat back into my diet and consumed cod liver oil. I felt revitalized. I had more energy, less brain fog, and could feel there was something my body wasn't getting on a vegetarian diet. I needed more bioavailable protein, good fats, and other nutrients coming from pastured meats. I revisited Terry Wahls's work, given good quality meats and organ meats specifically were an integral part of her program. I ended up revising my diet to more of a paleo-style, limiting overall grain/legume consumption while prioritizing meat, berries, and a wide variety of vegetables.

I became pregnant again in 2019. During this pregnancy, I didn't feel well right from the start. It wasn't really MS symptoms that were flaring, but I just didn't feel great. Sure enough, I lost the baby at three months. I didn't notice a return of symptoms after the loss but felt very rundown and tired. It was extremely traumatic. The miscarriage occurred at the same hospital my dad passed away in, triggering a lot of big emotions. We had no issues with our first pregnancy, and I was almost out of the first trimester with the second, so it really caught us off guard. We had waited almost five years after our first baby to have a second; I was worried that my body had changed, and I wouldn't be able to have a healthy pregnancy again.

Several months after the miscarriage, we got pregnant with our rainbow baby. Little did we know what was about to transpire. COVID hit, and the world as we knew it was forever changed. Being pregnant during a pandemic is stressful: lockdowns, masks, not being able to take my husband with me to appointments; no social interactions, baby showers, or maternity shoots. I knew that I was likely going to feel good throughout the pregnancy itself, but the stress of it all, plus getting pregnant so quickly after the miscarriage, would likely put me more at risk of a flare in the postpartum period.

After my second baby, I did NOT have a flare because I found out I was pregnant again when she was five-and-a-half months old. What can I say? We were in lockdown! Being pregnant while caring for a newborn baby and simultaneously helping an older child with remote learning is a lot. It's even more daunting during a pandemic when you can't go

anywhere, leverage community resources, or have any social interactions.

I started to have small symptoms six months after the birth of my third child in 2021. My father-in-law had just passed, my husband was going through major transitions at work, we had two kids under the age of two, an older child doing remote learning, plus we were still dealing with lockdowns and restrictions. I hadn't had time to build myself up in preparation for a fourth pregnancy. It was a good pregnancy, but truthfully, it was a blur.

Growing humans is MAJOR work. Many nutrients are passed on to a growing baby. Then, after birth, you may continue to pass nutrients on through breastfeeding. Not only did I breastfeed, but I tandem breastfed my littles simultaneously. All my kids have been nursed until at least two years old. I think this has been very beneficial but also depleting. Between pregnancy and breastfeeding, I have been giving away my nutrients to little people for over three years! If you've done this back-to-back, you're 100% going to need some major tender love and care to optimize nutrient levels. How many women do this though? Most of us grow and deliver our babies, then put 100% of our attention into the baby, older children, maintaining a household, WORKING, and any other life task that falls on our plates. Building ourselves back up is at the bottom of the priority list. What MS has taught me is that slowing down and caring for myself is not selfish—it's necessary. If you don't make time for it, your body WILL do it for you, and it won't be when it's convenient.

When my two youngest were thirteen and twenty-eight months, I learned this the hard way. I went into the largest MS flare I'd had since diagnosis. I was completely depleted. Three back-to-back pregnancies within eighteen months, breastfeeding continuously for two-and-a-half years, lack of sleep, a pandemic, and major postpartum hormone/immune shifts all caught up with me. I went grocery shopping one day, and upon returning home, found I couldn't get out of the car. I had no ability to hold myself up, let alone unload groceries and get my kids inside. I had to call my husband to come home from work and help us in the house. The next several weeks were hell. I was in denial that this could be happening to me after all these years. Did this mean I had failed? I tried to hide how bad things were, but my legs were covered in bruises from crawling around to care for the kids. I finally agreed to be admitted to the hospital.

This journey has taught me that not everything has to be “all or nothing”. I had stated previously that I would never use intravenous (IV)

steroids in a flare. It's one thing to say that when things are going well, but entirely different when you haven't walked in close to a month and have small children relying on you back home. I made the decision to use IV steroids, hoping they would jump-start function, so I could get home to my babies. From there, I could focus on giving my body what it really needed to heal. There was no guarantee they would work, but I was willing to try. It wasn't what I had wanted or planned, but sometimes we are faced with tough choices. Once I made the decision, I realized I had to be okay with it. I couldn't feel guilty; I couldn't stress over potential side effects. The mind is powerful, and I chose to believe the steroids would do what I needed them to do. And they did. I'm grateful that I had the option and ability to decide which tool and modality was best for me at that time.

Even though I've been on this journey for over a decade, I'm still learning new lessons. This last year, I've learned that as much as my young kids need me, they need me to care for myself MORE. I can't do everything for everyone—I need to ask for help. It's okay to say no, to have a movie day on the couch, and to have dishes piled in the sink. I've learned to lower my own expectations and to address the nervous system work I've been avoiding by constantly running from one stressful/traumatic event to the next. My kids taught me that managing MS looks different at various stages in life. The way I did things while twenty-four and single looks much different than how they do now, at thirty-eight, with three kids. I have less time for myself, but it needs to happen. The balance between motherhood and chronic illness isn't always easy, but the more your lifestyle changes become a habit, the easier it becomes (for everyone). Thankfully, in the six months since my flare, I've regained full mobility. I continue to work on building myself up and am learning to “mom” while still prioritizing/meeting my own needs.

MS has been my greatest teacher. I'm grateful for the wave of change it brought into every aspect of my life, and the role it played in shaping who I am today. Prior to 2009, I wasn't taking care of myself, and MS was the alarm bell I needed. Had it not been for a diagnosis at twenty-four, I'd likely still be eating crappy food, burning myself out, and practicing unhealthy habits. I also wouldn't be passionate about helping others take control of their health. In 2015, I felt called to pursue further education in the field of health and became a Holistic Nutritionist. Now, I facilitate group classes, online workshops, and co-host the *Tipping Point Nutrition* podcast with my husband.

Throughout my journey, I've had periods of amazing health, followed by times where life challenges have led me off-track, causing symptoms to manifest. MS or not, is it surprising to display signs of poor health when

not taking care of ourselves, physically and emotionally? We can eat the best organic, gluten-free foods, take supplements and exercise, but if we're constantly stressed out and not supporting our nervous system, we can't truly heal. Going the natural route doesn't mean MS will magically be cured or that you will never experience an MS symptom again. It's about building your body up, so that it has the nutrients and resources to most effectively combat the emotional, physical, mental, and environmental stressors that we face today. It also helps us learn how to "get to know" and listen to our bodies, something so many of us have lost the ability and the confidence to do. By focusing on prevention, following the latest research, and making better choices, I believe that I am adding less fuel to the fire and there is an element of health that is within my control. I often hear people complain about aging, but truthfully, thirty-eight-year-old Joanne feels a hundred times better than nineteen-year-old Joanne did.

If you're currently in a place of fear and uncertainty, know that you're not alone. It doesn't mean there won't be difficult periods but take things one day at a time. There are so many incredibly supportive people within the MS community who are willing to share what they've learned along the way. Invest in yourself, not because you are sick with MS, but because you want to THRIVE. I promise you will never regret it!

We are all different. What works best for me might not be what's best for you. We have varying health histories, environmental exposures, food intolerances, and nutrient statuses that all affect how our body functions and responds. If you're just starting to make changes, there's a good chance people in your life will begin to comment on your choices. You do NOT need to justify them. Often others are threatened when someone close begins making positive changes. That's their issue, not yours.

Focus on whole foods, containing anti-inflammatory and therapeutic properties. Lots of ethically sourced, grass-fed meats, deeply colored fruits and veggies, leafy greens, and spices, such as ginger, turmeric, and cinnamon. Remove gluten and dairy. Both have been identified as a trigger for many with MS/autoimmune disease. This has to do with how it contributes to leaky gut and systemic inflammation. Limit consumption of grains due to anti-nutrients that can aggravate the gut (even gluten-free varieties). Oats are a very popular gluten-free alternative. Many people with gluten sensitivity may also react to oats due to avenin, a protein that presents in a similar way to gluten (a process called molecular mimicry). Shop for organic food to avoid excess pesticide exposure. If you can't afford everything organic, use the Environmental Working Group's "Dirty Dozen" list to prioritize organic versus conventional purchases. Consume good quality fats from avocados,

coconut, wild fish, etc. The brain is primarily made up of fat! Low fat typically means high sugar. Avoid unhealthy fats. Vegetable oils, such as canola and margarine, are heavily processed and highly inflammatory. Avoid deep fried food and hydrogenated oils. Shop the perimeter of the store, read labels, and purchase foods with minimal ingredients. Eliminate inflammatory foods that wreak havoc on the gut lining (gluten, dairy, soy, corn, and sugar). Consume fermented foods daily as a natural source of gut-friendly probiotics. Drink lots of clean, fluoride-free water. Herbal teas have been very beneficial to me, as well.

The beginning of my MS journey was all about food. When I became pregnant with my first baby almost nine years ago, I started to learn how the many home and personal care products we use today could be impacting mine and my developing baby's health. The skin is our largest organ—anything you apply or smell, you're absorbing! Many of the chemicals in our products do not have to be labeled due to "trade secrets". In recent years, researchers have been sounding the alarm on all these products containing known endocrine disruptors that affect fertility, cause cancer, and wreak havoc on our hormones. In the last hundred years, nearly 100,000 industrial chemicals have been introduced in consumer products. An example is fragrance—an umbrella term, consisting of over 3,100 chemicals. Fragrance can mean a combination of any number of chemicals. How are these all affecting us? Epigenetics has taught us that while it's genes that load the gun, it's environment and lifestyle choices that pull the trigger. These exposures literally have the ability to turn genes on and off.

Today, I attempt to live a low-toxin lifestyle. I use and teach others to leverage therapeutic grade essential oils for home, beauty, and personal care products. We are the gatekeepers to what is brought into our homes and vote with our wallets every single day.

Daily movement is imperative. If you don't use it, you lose it. This is especially true with MS when muscles tend to weaken and atrophy. I've learned focusing on foundational movements and proactively working the muscles that are weakest for me (hip flexors, ankles, etc.) helps keep me mobile and my brain feeling sharp. My favorite activities are rebounding, swimming, yoga, and hiking. The MS Gym and Dr. Gretchen Hawley both have amazing resources/exercises to help address some of the most common MS issues, mobility challenges, and more.

Over the years, I've taken many different supplements. Some are taken on a regular basis, while others are leveraged when I need additional support. The supplements I take most regularly include: magnesium (I prefer bis-glycinate or threonate), B Complex, cod liver oil, alpha lipoic

acid, lion's mane, vitamin D, vitamin C, and essential oils—DiGize, peppermint, marjoram, frankincense, R.C., Progessence Phyto Plus, and Stress Away.

I use a ton of essential oils for both emotional and physical support. Some are used on a regular basis, and others are used when I need help with something very specific. Some of the oils I have found most success with are:

- Frankincense - for reducing inflammation and supporting the immune system (applied to the brainstem, added to an Epsom salt bath, applied to bottoms of feet, or specific areas of pain).DiGize - applied over the abdomen for digestive support/upset stomach.
- Progessence Phyto Plus - includes vitex and wild yam, which have been traditionally used to naturally bring estrogen and progesterone into balance. We know that estrogen dominance can be prevalent in MS, evident by the fact that majority of people affected by MS are women. I apply this over the throat area twice a day.
- Peppermint - applied over the forehead for headaches. Used in a spray bottle with water to keep cool on a hot day (heat is a big trigger for my MS).
- RC - contains three different types of eucalyptus, plus some other powerhouse oils to support the respiratory system. I put this in a roller with some carrier oil and apply it along the side of the nostrils, brow line, low cheekbones, and around the ears to help alleviate sinus pressure. I also spend time each morning washing my face with ice cold water (good for the vagus nerve), then do some massage techniques, using my oils to help promote drainage.
- Marjoram - I have found marjoram to be particularly grounding/calming and supportive of the nervous system. I simply like the way this one makes me feel and often feel called to use it.
- Cypress - helps me to reduce swelling/edema in my feet and lower extremities. I apply this to my legs and feet in the morning, and again before bed, if I have any swelling.
- Joy - this was the first oil I began using. After my dad died, I'd apply a drop over my heart each morning. It's amazing how

much calmer, uplifted, and supported I felt when using it. It truly helped me to process and work through my grief. I was initially drawn to oils because of all the physical ailments they could assist me with (especially as a new mom), but I was not expecting them to be so effective as calmatives, supporting the nervous system and my emotional state.

- Rosemary - historically has been used for memory, focus, and overall cognitive function. I diffuse this with an uplifting citrus oil any time I really need to concentrate.

With my flare at the end of 2022, I saw another neurologist for the first time since being diagnosed. It was a better experience than fourteen years ago, but she still reiterated that if I wasn't going to go on medication, there really wasn't much she could do for me. I mentioned how I'd been successfully managing things for over a decade through diet, and she continued speaking as though she didn't hear me. I'm always amazed that there isn't more interest in learning about what's working for patients.

I choose to focus on the present. There is no point in stressing about unknowns or hypotheticals. I'm fourteen years into my MS journey, and while there have been setbacks along the way, I've also seen how incredible the body is, and what can happen when we support it. I have absolutely no regrets. I believe every experience has led me to where I am today. I want those who are in their darkest moments to have hope and know that they can still be empowered to take control of their health. Your mindset will 100% affect your state of health. It doesn't matter what changes you make—if you don't believe you will see your health improve, then it won't. MS is hard. But like everything in life, it becomes harder when we allow ourselves to go to a place of hopelessness and despair. This journey requires you to become your own biggest advocate. It also requires you evaluate relationships with those who hold you back or don't recognize the need to do what's best for your health. In the words of Michael J. Fox, “Gratitude makes optimism sustainable.”

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.