

How To Manage the Impact of MS on Your Mental Health



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UPCOMING PROGRAMS

Friday, May 9

TAKE CHARGE

Building Your Toolchest

Thursday, May 15

JUMPSTART

Feeling More Like You: Tools To Deal
With MS Mood Changes

Tuesday, May 20

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

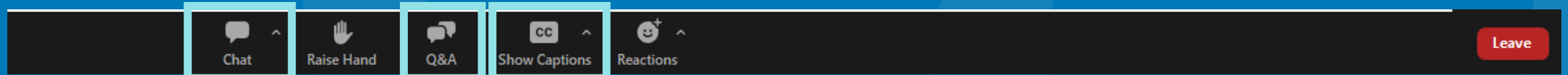
Mental Health



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Type in your questions
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NEW! Closed captioning



YOUR SPEAKERS



Chmaika Mills
Neuropsychologist

Elkridge, MD



Joshua Johnson
Psychologist

Washington, DC

LEARNING OBJECTIVES



- 1 Recognize the range of emotions that People with MS and Care Partners can experience
- 2 Recognize the impact of emotional changes on communication and daily life
- 3 Become familiar with options for managing emotional changes

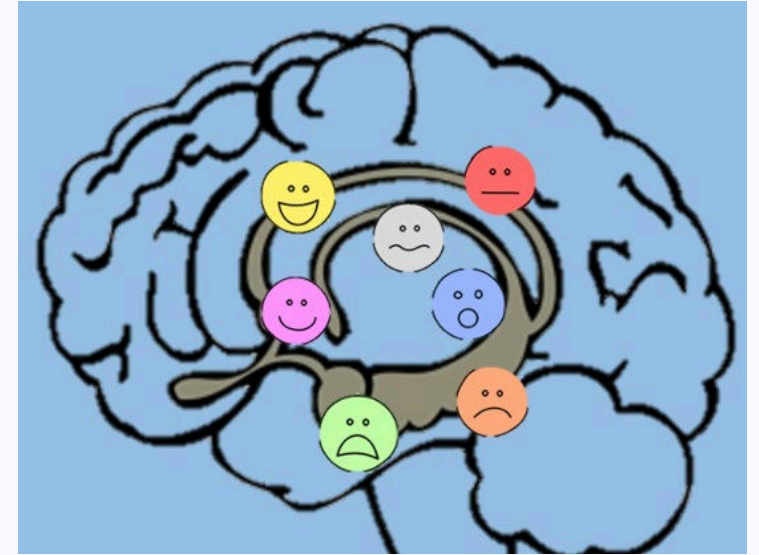
What are Emotions?

- “Emotions are conscious mental reactions (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong *feelings* usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes in the body.” APA
 - Reaction to an event
 - Experienced as a feeling
 - Chemical and physical change

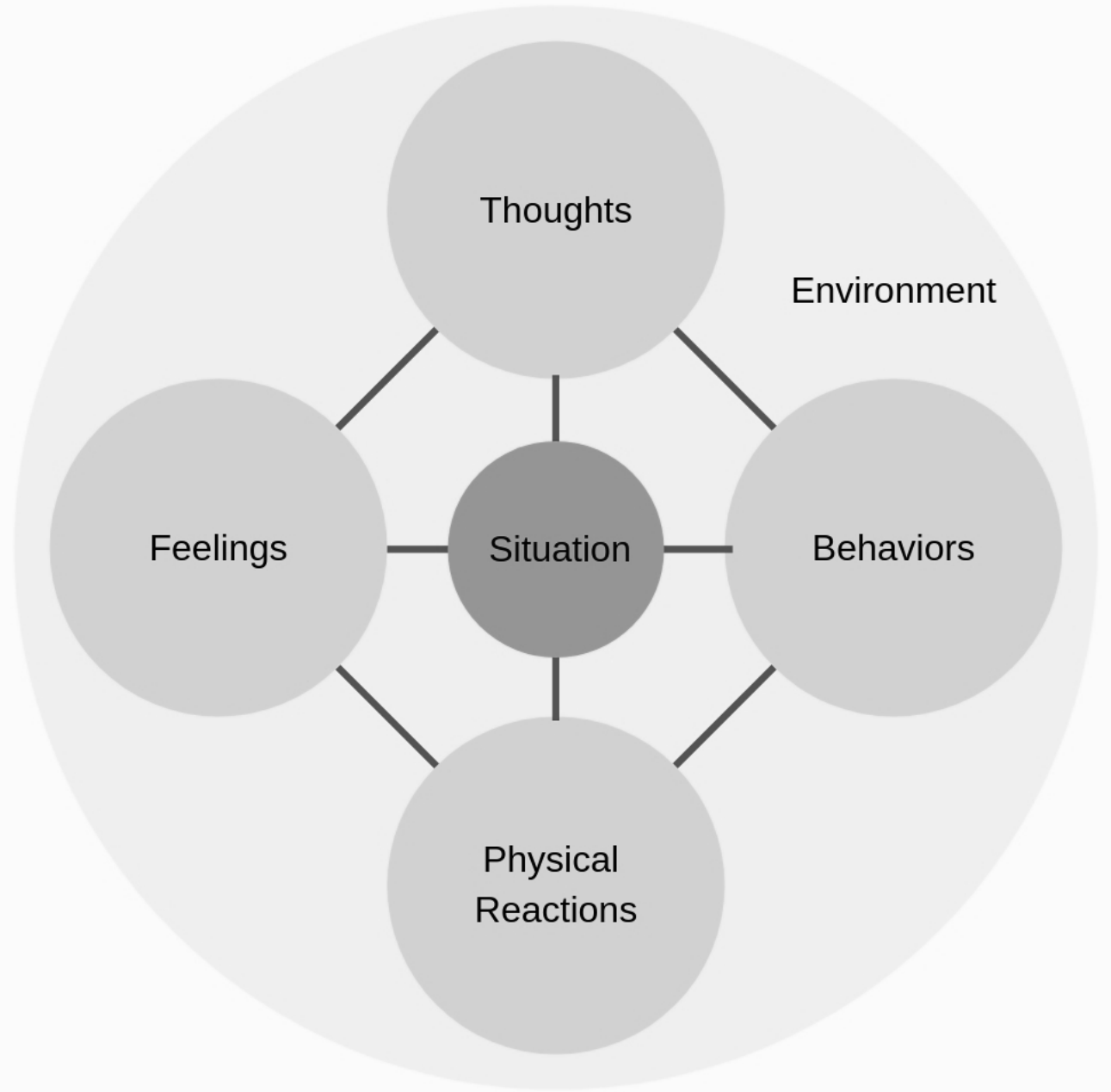


The Emotional Brain

- Emotions originate in the Limbic System.
 - Amygdala – fear, anxiety, anger
 - Hippocampus – processes emotions and connects memories to emotions
 - Hypothalamus – stress hormones (cortisol)
- Prefrontal Cortex – evaluates situations and choose the emotional response
- MS lesions can affect emotions/mood by damaging these regions
 - Partly explains the of occurrence mood swings, depression, anxiety, and pseudobulbar affect (uncontrolled laughing or crying, especially in response to events that wouldn't normally cause such a strong emotional reaction).



It's Not All About The Brain!



What Causes Emotional Changes?

- Brain changes due to MS
- Reacting to challenges of living with MS
- Pre-existing conditions worsened by 1. & 2.
- Emotional challenges affect people with MS, care partners, and/or others



You'd think it would be easy but...

- Emotions are subjective.
- Emotions are dynamic.
- Emotions are multifaceted.
- Emotions can be mixed or blended.



Common Emotions in MS

- Depression/Sadness
- Anxiety/Worry
- Irritability
- Grief
- Frustration
- Confusion



Emotions vs Disorders

The background image is a landscape photograph. The foreground is filled with tall, golden-brown grasses that appear to be blowing in the wind. In the middle ground, there is a dark, dense line of trees. The sky is a deep, dark blue-grey, and a massive, dark, swirling storm cloud dominates the upper half of the frame, creating a sense of drama and intensity.

Overview of Mood Disorders

Some mood disorder symptoms may look like MS symptoms

- Sleep difficulties
- Fatigue
- Difficulties with concentration

Not uncommon to experience multiple (comorbid) mood disorders at the same time



Adjustment Disorders

Definition per DSM-5-TR:

- Emotional or behavioral symptoms within 3 months of having been exposed to a stressor
- Causes significant distress and/or affects relationships, work, etc.

Can occur due to:

- Diagnosis of MS
- Changes in roles and relationships
- Changes in abilities
- Adapting to changes in symptoms

PwMS and care partners may develop adjustment disorders



Depressive Disorders



- PwMS have higher rates of depression than the general population
 - Estimated 27% of PwMS had depression (Peres et al., 2022)
 - Up to 50% of PwMS may experience depression in their lifetime (Feinstein, 2004)
 - In the US, 8% of adults had at least one major depressive episode in the past year (NIMH; retrieved April 19, 2025)
- Depression is more than just sadness
- For people with MS, it can be due to multiple factors
 - MS's effects on the brain
 - Challenges of living with MS
- Good news? – It can be treated if recognized

Major Depression Sx

Low mood

Lack of interest in
pleasurable activities
(anhedonia)



Sleep difficulties

Fatigue

Significant changes in appetite and weight

Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, or shame

Difficulty concentrating

Moving slow (or being fidgety/restless)

Thoughts of suicide*

Notice any overlap with MS?

*If you have thoughts of suicide, please call:
988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline); 911; or go to your nearest emergency room

Anxiety Disorders



- Many PwMS may develop an anxiety disorder
 - Estimated 35% of PwMS had anxiety (Peres et al., 2022)
- For people with MS, it can be due to multiple factors
 - MS's effects on the brain
 - Challenges of living with MS – especially uncertainty
- Care partners may also develop anxiety

Types of Anxiety Disorders

- Generalized
- Health-related
- Panic
- Phobias
- Obsessive-Compulsion



Anxiety Features

Thoughts

"I'm going to
burden everyone."

"I can't handle
this!"

Body Sensations

Tension
Increase heart rate
Shortness of
breath

Behaviors

Avoidance
Misuse of
healthcare
Arguing with
others

Other Considerations

Irritability

- Less energy to tolerate stress → short or angry
- Anger isn't a bad emotion, it is how you use it!

Unique to MS:

- Euphoria
- Disinhibition
- Psuedobulbar affect



Care Partners

- Care partners have emotions too.
- DO NOT ignore the “bad” emotions.
- Potential consequences of not addressing emotions: sleep disturbance, illness, maladaptive coping, substance abuse, etc.
- All of your emotions are ALLOWED and VALID and IMPORTANT!
 - How you USE them can make them more (or less effective)



Common Emotions of Care Partners

- Ambivalence
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Boredom
- Embarrassment
- Fatigue
- Fear
- Frustration
- Grief
- Guilt
- Irritability
- Isolation
- Jealousy
- Loneliness
- Loss
- Overwhelmed
- Powerlessness
- Resentment
- Sadness
- Unappreciated

Identify Your Emotions

1. What am I feeling? Go beyond “fine,” “okay,” and “good.”
2. What physical sensation do you feel?
3. What is causing this feeling?
4. What will help manage this feeling?

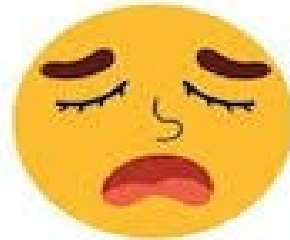




happy



scared



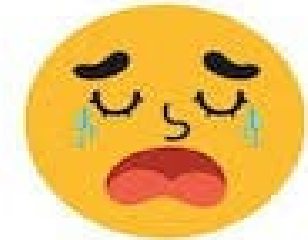
tired



surprised



angry



cry



shy



confused



sad



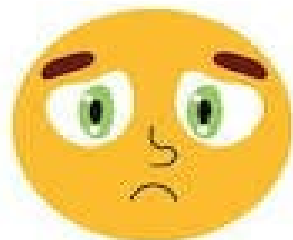
proud



excited



silly



disappointed



sick



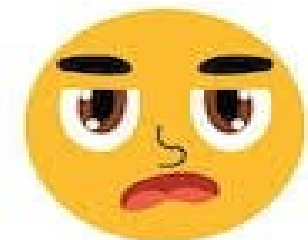
loving



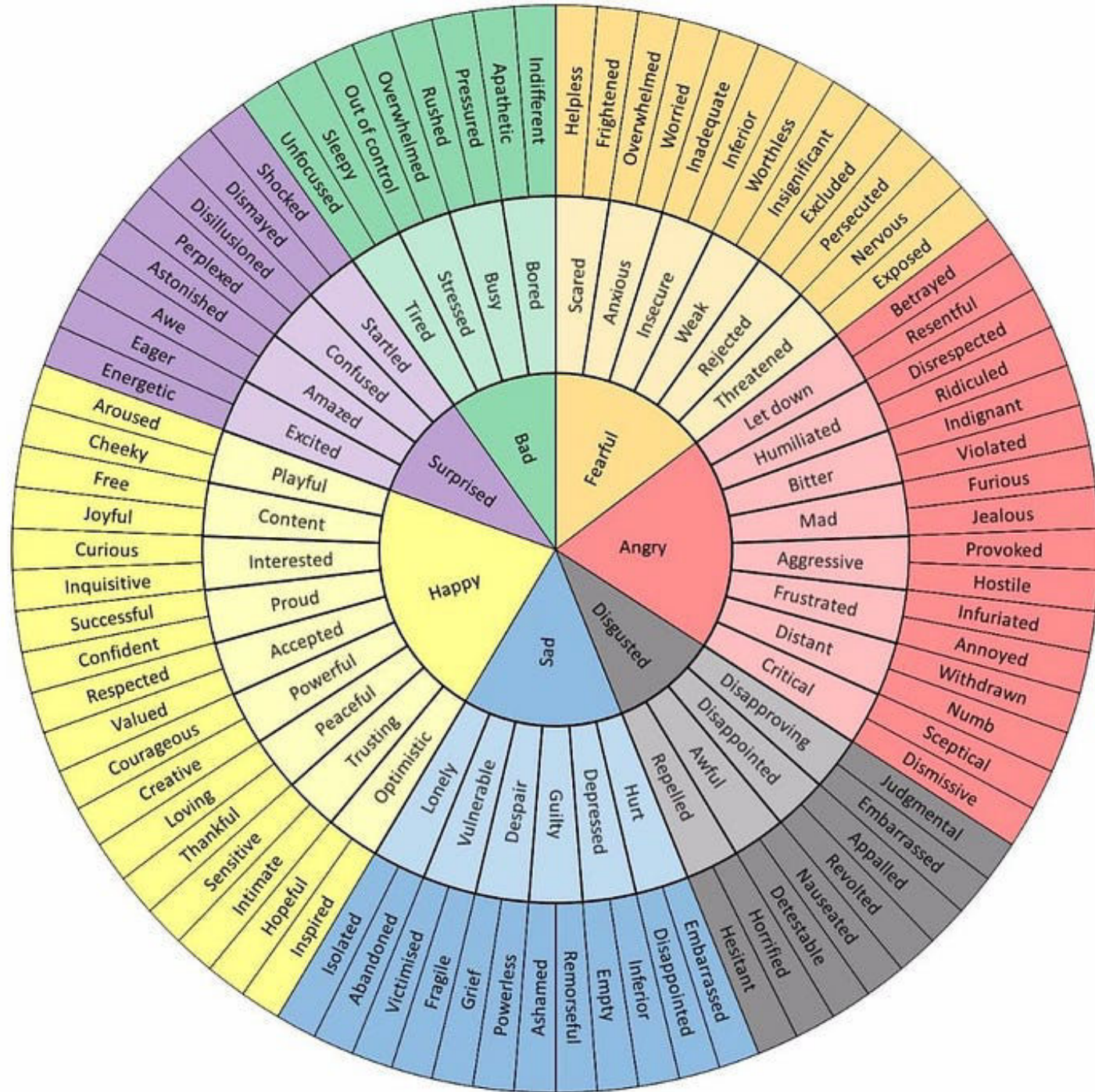
nervous



disgusted



jealous



Communication

Goal: To share information between 2+ people

- Receive/Understand (take in)
- Express (send out)

Communication is crucial when living with a chronic illness

- Interacting with care partners, healthcare providers, family/friends, etc.

Our emotions can impact effective communication

- Depressed: shut down or be negative
- Irritable: short or harsh; not listening well
- Anxiety: may seek help a lot or avoidant

Verbal

Actual words said

Example: Thanks for your help.

Non-verbal

Body language

Eye contact

Facial expressions

Gestures

Inflection

Posture

Tone of voice



Respect for Others

High

Low

Passive

Inhibiting your own wants and needs in favor of being overly accommodating of others.

Example:

Oh, no problem, Joan. You can get them to me whenever.

Assertive

Expressing your own wants and needs clearly and in a way that's respectful of others.

Example:

Hey Joan, I know you're busy this week, but please get those numbers to me by Friday at noon.

Passive-Aggressive

Expressing your own wants and needs indirectly and in such a way that you avoid responsibility.

Example:

Things would sure run a lot more smoothly around here if people actually submitted their reports on time.

Aggressive

Expressing your own wants and needs in a way that's disrespectful to the rights of others.

Example:

If you don't get those numbers to me soon there's gonna be hell to pay around here.

Low

High

Respect for Self

Coping



- “Don’t forget you!”
- Recognize that feelings are normal.
- Forgive yourself for how you feel.
- Ask for help – friend, family, etc.
- Join a support group.
- Keep a journal.
- Do an expressive activity. Dance, sing, draw.
- Physical activity

Reduce avoidance – isolation, unhealthy eating, substance use, etc.

Seek a mental health professional

- Psychotherapy
- Assessment
- Medication

Grounding

Diaphragmatic Breathing

Problem Solving

Mindfulness

SMART Goals

Progress Muscle Relaxation

Journaling

INTERVENTIONS

Visualization

Behavior Activation

Pleasant Activity Scheduling

Thought Record

Cognitive Restructuring

Chain Analysis

TIPP Skills

Diffusion Skills

Grounding Skills

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1

When to use: Helps bring you into the current moment so you can better respond to emotions

Identify in your current environment:

5 things you can see

4 things you can feel

3 things you can hear

2 things you can smell



1 thing you can taste



Thank you!



Q+A



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