

## CHAPTER 1

# General Tips for Making Life Easier

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**B**EING DIAGNOSED WITH multiple sclerosis (MS) forced me to simplify my life. I was 32 years old, and it was clear that life as I knew it had changed forever. As much as I wanted to deny it, I could not physically, mentally, or emotionally keep up the break-neck pace I demanded of myself.

As I began writing this book, I realized there were several over-riding principles that everyone with a chronic medical condition like MS should know:

- Alternate periods of activity with periods of rest
- Plan ahead
- Take advantage of labor-saving devices and new technology

In this chapter, you will learn the most basic lessons for conserving time and energy, so that you will be able to do what you want to do. Using these techniques, you will be more organized, able to work smarter, and, most important, more independent than you otherwise would have been.

At times, I have included unique products that make everyday tasks easier. Some are available in drug stores, discount department stores, building supply stores, and home improvement stores. Others are unique and more difficult to find (i.e., tube pens to make writing easier or offset door hinges for making doorways wider); these are marked with a 🌀. A resource section at the end of each chap-

ter will help you find the special items most helpful to you. Keep in mind that product offerings change from time to time, so if you have difficulty locating an item at the resource listed, do an Internet search on the term and you will likely find alternate sources.

### *General Tips*

1. Keep balance in your life. Prioritize, eliminate, consolidate, and streamline activities in all aspects of your life.
2. Take care of yourself. Be sensible about how you spend your time and energy. Do those things that are most important to you and to your family. Try to eliminate unnecessary or difficult tasks. Give yourself permission to rest; put your feet up whenever possible. Make compromises and remove the word “should” from your vocabulary.
3. Pace your activities; try to break an activity down into a series of smaller tasks. Rest before you become exhausted and, if need be, enlist the help of others.
4. Eat a healthy diet. Do not skip meals. Carry trail mix, nuts, and/or fresh fruit with you. Eat a healthy snack, and avoid the temptation to grab a candy bar with hollow calories and little nutritional value.
5. Arrange your home for your convenience. Sometimes, this means putting furniture in strategic locations to help you walk from room to room or placing a chair halfway down a long hallway so that you can stop to rest. Sometimes, it means purchasing duplicate cleaning supplies for both upstairs and downstairs rooms.
6. When you need help, take advantage of the products, services, and people available. When you need something or someone to help you, don't look at it as giving in. Instead, look at it as making an intelligent decision that will make your life easier and safer.
7. Use technology. New technology is created every day that may make it easier for you to do what you want to do. Remote-

controlled devices and cordless phones save steps. Speakerphones, answering machines, and wireless intercoms can be used to save time and energy. Computers are good for keeping records, keeping a journal, and writing letters. An electronic personal data assistant (PDA) can be synchronized with your computer and help you keep track of appointments and your schedule. An Internet connection can expand your research capabilities and provide opportunities to communicate with others who have MS. Keep abreast of changes, and make full use of every option helpful to you.

8. Walkie-talkies can help you communicate around the house or while shopping, traveling, at museums, theme parks, art shows, or anywhere you might become separated from others in your group. They also can be used to monitor someone sleeping in another room. Walkie-talkies are sold at electronic, discount, or office supply stores.
9. Use labor-saving devices. Many labor-saving devices are available to make almost any task easier. For example: Reachers come in various lengths, weights, and means of operation; find the styles that work for you in various situations (reaching cans on a shelf, picking something up off the floor, etc.). Automatic can and jar openers, toothpaste twisters, hair dryer holders, and quick-release mops and tool holders are just a few of the many products that may make everyday tasks easier for you to accomplish.
10. When shopping, pushing a grocery cart may give you added stability as you walk. If fatigue is a problem, use a wheelchair or scooter anywhere excessive walking is a probability. A growing number of stores, shopping malls, museums, zoos, art galleries, and attractions provide three-wheeled battery-operated scooters or wheelchairs for patrons who tire easily or have trouble walking. Scooters and wheelchairs usually are available on a first-come, first-served basis at the service desk or information booth.
11. Before going out, call ahead to a restaurant, theater, new doctor's office, and so forth, and ask if the facility is handicap-

- accessible. Ask about parking facilities and where the restrooms are located, the most convenient entrance, and so on—anything that might create a challenge or concern you.
12. When noisy environments in restaurants, grocery stores, and department stores exhaust you, select quieter places in which to spend your time. Look for places with drapes, low ceilings, and carpeted or vinyl floors that absorb the sound; avoid establishments that have wooden floors, loud background music, multiple TVs, or high unfinished ceilings. As an added safeguard, carry earplugs in your purse or pocket.

### *Community Resources*

13. Contact the National Multiple Sclerosis Society (NMSS) to find out about client services and support groups. Their telephone number is 1-800-FIGHT-MS. 🌐 The NMSS can tell you about current research and treatments that will help you keep a positive attitude and give you hope for the future. Some NMSS chapters have “loan closets.” From which members may borrow devices to make daily living easier.
14. Consider joining an MS or other support group. If you are reluctant to attend because you’re afraid you will see others with more advanced cases and you don’t think you can emotionally handle it, attend an MS group for the newly diagnosed or talk on the phone with people who have MS. Another alternative for getting the support you need is to contact a local hospital or clinic to see if they offer coping-type support groups for people with chronic illness or those who are going through life-altering changes.
15. Contact your local independent living center (ILC). Every community in the United States is part of a national network of more than 500 community-based, nonprofit, independent living centers that serve people of all ages and disabilities and their families. ILC goals are information and referral, advocacy, peer support, and independent living skills

training. The following are a few examples of their many services:

- Assist you in finding out about disability services in your community
- Connect you with others to advocate for changes in the law or rules
- Help you hire and manage personal care attendants
- Put you in contact with people who have faced challenges similar to your own

Most centers have adaptive gadgets and devices that you may borrow and try for a while at no cost, and a vast computer database of the companies and manufacturers that make these products.

Your local library, hospital, or social services agency should be able to assist you in finding the nearest ILC. For a national directory of Independent Living Centers, contact the National Council on Independent Living, 703-525-3406. 🌟

16. Contact a hospital rehabilitation department and speak with an occupational or physical therapist about those assistive products that you feel would be helpful. You also might call local medical supply companies, home health agencies, and/or hospital stores to see if they have devices in stock. Whenever possible, try out a device before purchasing it.
17. Research books at the library and through online sources for information, agencies, and organizations that can help you to meet your personal life challenges. 🌟

Life is all about choices, and I'm convinced that, if you follow these basic principles, you'll feel better, have more control, and get more enjoyment out of your life.