

Anger, laughter and tears:

Understanding emotional outbursts in MS

It's common for people with multiple sclerosis (MS) to feel a range of emotions – including fear, anxiety, anger and depression. These emotions can be caused by the MS itself, by living with the condition, or perhaps by side effects of medication.

A few people, however, experience changes to their emotions that don't seem to make sense, or that they aren't able to control. These uncontrollable emotions are often grouped together under the heading 'emotional lability' or 'emotionalism'.

“It's awful when it happens. I used to get it at work and people looked at me like I was mad... tears running down my face and doubled-up with laughter. It was very scary as at that time I had no idea I had MS.” Snow leopard (forum user)

This factsheet outlines some of the most common forms of emotionalism, what to do if you think you – or a friend or family member – is experiencing these symptoms and how they can be managed.

The first part of the factsheet is written for anyone finding it difficult to control their emotions. But if you are reading it because you have noticed this symptom in someone you know, there is a short section at the end just for you.

How it might affect your emotions

If you're experiencing emotionalism, you may find that you have very sudden, intense periods of emotion that seem out of proportion or unrelated to whatever triggered them.

For example, you may find yourself laughing or crying when you didn't mean to, or getting easily angry or upset – you might hear this called pseudobulbar affect. You may feel as though you're on a rollercoaster of emotions.

You may easily burst into tears, or suddenly get very angry. These emotions can build up very quickly and unexpectedly.

Sometimes, these emotions are related to what you're actually feeling. For example, you might fly into a rage with someone over a minor disagreement, or you might find yourself in floods of tears and unable to stop, simply because you thought about something sad.

At other times, the emotions you show may not reflect how you're feeling inside.

You may react to hearing some bad news by laughing hysterically, or you may start crying when you're feeling happy. Sometimes, you may swing from one to the other with no warning. Whether your emotional outbursts reflect how you're actually feeling or not, they can be very distressing.

Why is this happening?

Emotionalism is more than simply part of a reaction to being diagnosed with, or living with, MS. It's often caused by MS-related nerve damage in the areas of your brain that control your emotions. However, as with any emotional symptom of MS, there may be a number of different factors involved.

If you're experiencing changes to your emotions that you can't control or that don't make sense, you should speak to your GP or MS nurse.

Are there any treatments for it?

Emotionalism can be a difficult symptom to manage, and you may not be able to make it go away completely.

There are some drug treatments that may help. The NICE guideline for MS, which outlines how MS should be treated on the NHS in England and Wales, recommends prescribing amitriptyline, an antidepressant, for emotionalism.

Other antidepressants, such as fluoxetine or citalopram, may also help.

Talking therapies can also help, either in combination with medication or on their own. There's more on talking therapies on our website www.mssociety.org.uk

“I have found myself with tears pouring down my face while not feeling sad or down (it's happened at work a couple of times, which was rather embarrassing). And I reacted to my neuro telling me I had inflammation of my brain by laughing hysterically. Very odd.” Gail

How can I help myself?

As well as medication and talking therapies, there are things you can do to help yourself. These include tips for when you find yourself becoming overly emotional, as well as suggestions for things your friends and family can do.

- Some people find that taking a break from a conversation helps when their emotions get out of control, while some need to leave the room for a 'time out'. Other people find they don't need to do anything, and that if they carry on the conversation their emotions will return to normal
- You can also tell your friends and family how you would like them to react if you do start becoming overly emotional. For example, you could ask them to carry on the conversation, change the subject, pause for a moment, ask if you are OK, or touch your arm or hand – whatever you find works for you
- Talking to the people around you and explaining that it is a symptom can help to make both you and them feel less embarrassed when it happens. This can be important, as many people find that other people's embarrassment makes it harder for them to get their emotions under control

- If there are situations that you know are likely to make you overly emotional – for example, someone else getting emotional – you may find it helps to tell others how you're likely to react so it's not a surprise for them
- It can help if people around you know that it's not something you can control – simply telling you to stop crying or shouting won't work
- Remind people that not all emotional outbursts are emotionalism. If you are genuinely feeling upset about something, make sure that the people around you know, so you get the support you need from them

There is also support available to help you. This might be a talking therapy, such as counselling. Your local branch of the MS Society may also be able to help, or you can contact the **MS Society Helpline on 0808 800 8000**. If you're the person's carer, local carers' organisations can offer support.

What if I know someone with these symptoms?

If your friend or family member has been showing extremes of emotion – perhaps getting very angry or crying over something very small – or behaving in a way that you consider out of character or wrong, this can be difficult to deal with.

It may be affecting your relationship with the person. For example, you may feel like you're treading on eggshells. You may be at the receiving end of their emotional outbursts, and you may be feeling hurt and upset. You may feel as though you no longer know what the person is feeling, or you may be avoiding them because of their behaviour – perhaps because you're embarrassed by it.

It may be easier to come to terms with the behaviour if you understand that it's a symptom of MS, and that they can't control it.

We're the MS Society. Our community is here for you through the highs, lows and everything in between. We understand what life's like with MS.

Together, we are strong enough to stop MS.

The MS Society provides this information free of charge but if you would like to help cover the cost, which will help towards our essential work, please call **0800 100 133** or visit the fundraising section of our website to make a donation. Anything you can give will be greatly appreciated.

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