



**MSAA Podcast - Episode 13:
Finding Joy in the Process:
Managing Mental Health in the MS Journey
Part Two: The Power of Positive Thinking**

Host: Yahaira Rivera

With special guest: Amy B. Sullivan, PsyD, ABPP

Yahaira Rivera:

Hi. Welcome, and thank you for joining our podcast series: "Finding Joy in the Process Managing Mental Health in the MS Journey." My name is Yahaira Rivera and I'm the Director of Mission Delivery and Program Development for MSAA and your host for the program. I'm here with Dr. Amy Sullivan. She is a board-certified clinical health psychologist, Associate Professor of Medicine, Director of Behavioral Medicine and Research at the Cleveland Clinic Mellen Center for MS, and also a member of MSAA's Healthcare Advisory Council. In this second episode, "The Power of Positive Thinking," we chat with Dr. Sullivan about coming to terms with living with multiple sclerosis and using positivity as a coping strategy to improve quality of life. Welcome back, Dr. Sullivan.

Dr. Amy Sullivan:

Thank you so much for having me back. This has been so fun for me to film this with you. And I'm really excited about this episode. This is going to be a lot of fun.

Yahaira Rivera:

Yes, me too. Thank you. So, Dr. Sullivan, let's start by talking about positive thinking. What is positive thinking and how do we train our minds to think positively despite life challenges and the unknown of MS?

Dr. Amy Sullivan:

Yeah. So, one of the things I know that connects many of us is sports. In fact, I was a Division 1 athlete. I played basketball for Saint Bonaventure, very high-level basketball. My children are athletes. My husband is an athlete. And I think when we think about what you're talking about is mental toughness. I'm sure many of our audience members were athletes or people who love sports. Mental toughness is something that I think is really important that we, you know, we start training children on from a very young age because life is full of challenges. It's full of difficulties that will come into their lives. They're going to have to shift. They're going to have to learn how to move in a new path. And so, I think we're talking about mental toughness right now.

So mental toughness is, one, learning how to have that motivation; how do you get to where you want to be? So that's that goal setting, learning how to achieve those goals, learning how to work as part of a team. And mental toughness is just kind of a way of life. So, it's learning, it's resiliency, it's grit, it's learning how to get through very difficult things and coming out on the other end in a more positive light. I think about my own life or the lives of some of my patients, and the situations that were the most challenging or the ones that people feel like they almost failed are the ones that taught them the most. And I think if we start there with our patients and just learning kind of how to put into play that mental toughness.

So, yes, things may not be going down the path that we want them to right now, but in the end, we're going to learn from this and we're going to learn how to shift and we're going to learn how to adjust. And those skills that we use to get to the endpoint are the mental toughness skills. And so that's what I would love for people to take out of this today.

Yahaira Rivera:

I love that. Thank you for sharing mental toughness.

Dr. Amy Sullivan:

Mental toughness, yeah.

Yahaira Rivera:

So how does someone look for a silver lining and put a positive spin on the MS journey or experience? How does that look like and how important is it to align with current MS treatment?

Dr. Amy Sullivan:

Yeah, yeah. I think first and foremost, we want to make sure that people have a safe place to process their initial feelings about MS. I think it's a very scary disease. It's something that changes their life. And so there could be some sadness and grief associated with that. But I always teach the "3-by-3-by-3" rule with my patients, and what that looks like is that, you know, the first kind of three months of their diagnosis, it's like MS is all in their face. It's all they see. It's all that they experience. Everything around them is linked to their MS. And then three months after that, you know, MS is still there. It's in their periphery, but it's not their everyday thought. And then three years, people are adjusting pretty well. And what people will say to me many, many times at that three-year point is that, you know, MS has changed their life for the better.

So maybe, as we go back to kind of that mental toughness piece, maybe they needed this to refocus their life or refocus their priorities. And people will oftentimes say, you know, that MS has changed my life for the better. I've met people that I would have never met. I've learned new things about myself. I've learned that I can get through very difficult situations. And they have a sense of gratitude about the journey. That, also, that gratitude journey is part of what we do in my practice. So, we focus a lot on gratitude and finding happiness in their life. I think it's important for all of us, you know, even people who don't have MS, to look at our lives every day and say, you know, I'm grateful for X, Y, or Z. And in my practice, I have people name something new every day that they're grateful for. Even on the most difficult days, there's still something to be grateful for.

And I think the last thing I would say is that happiness is a choice. It's really easy to say, "Gosh, the world around me is falling apart", or, you know, "I have this chronic degenerative neurological disease." It's really easy to be negative and it's really easy to get stuck in there. But happiness is a choice. And happiness takes active work every single day to do that. So, one of

the things that I like to do in my practice is I love to have people choose an adjective that describes them. So, what is an adjective, a positive adjective, that describes who you want to be and who you want to portray to the world so that if you got on an elevator and somebody was standing next to you, you would protrude that adjective? For me, which is why I really align with this topic, it's joy. And I've chosen that for two reasons.

One is one of my best friends named Joy, who brought joy everywhere she went, passed away, sadly, at a very young age. And I've chosen to live for Joy since then. I also choose to live with joy. And joy to me is the adjective that I want, if I'm walking in the hallway and somebody sees me, they would say, She's full of joy. And so, I think it's really important for people to really think about their adjective and talk about that. In fact, I wear mantra bracelets, and you probably can't see them here, but every day I think to myself, what is it that I want to give to the world today? And this one says "joyful," and the other one says "blessed." And so that's what I wanted to come in today with. And I hope that's how people perceive me, as well. But I think we all have the ability to give that adjective to the world. It could be strength, it could be happiness, it could be joy, whatever it is that that adjective is that you choose to live with, that you give that.

Yahaira Rivera:

That's beautiful. Thank you for sharing that with us. I love that. Choosing an adjective and choosing joy. So, Dr. Sullivan, are there any other strategies that you would like to recommend or resources that could help our listeners jump-start implementing this positive thinking approach?

Dr. Amy Sullivan:

Yeah, yeah. So, what I'd like to do is give a couple of tools knowing that one will probably stick for somebody because we're all very unique individuals. So, I'll start again with gratitude. So, for me it's a gratitude journal. So it could be on your phone, in your calendar, every day, you write the thing that you're grateful for. And I have my patients do this, and I think it really works for them to see how many things they actually have in their life that they're grateful for, that is positive in their life.

Another thing is a gratitude accountability partner. So, you know when you're on a weight loss journey and you have that partner that holds you accountable, or you want to get more fit and you hire a personal trainer that holds you accountable and you show up to that, it's no different from our mental health. So, we've talked previously about the fact that mental health is just as important as our physical health. And so, finding that accountability partner to say, you know, this is my gratitude accountability partner.

I think one thing that's really important that I do share, though, is that we still need to be able to process our emotions. So, this is not taking away from the fact that people may have an off day, they may have an off minute, an off hour where they're just not feeling very happy. That's okay. This isn't all about having happiness all the time. I think it's important to process that, but then it's important to move on. It's important to say, yep, I'm feeling this way, and having your gratitude partner can be somebody that you process that with, and then the gratitude partner and yourself have the option to kind of, you know, pivot and move towards gratitude. Again, happiness is a choice. It's also very easy to stay negative and to stay down, but happiness is an active choice. So having that gratitude partner. And so, I think, you know, we talked about finding the adjective, we talked earlier about your mantra. But I think it's important that we present all of these to people so that they have the opportunity to choose what works best for them.

Yahaira Rivera:

Thank you, Dr. Sullivan. I loved what you said about happiness being a choice and an active choice. I think that's a choice that everyone deserves to make every day.

This concludes our episode. Today's program was once again hosted and produced by Gradwell House Recording. Thank you, team, and thank you, Dr. Sullivan, for another wonderful discussion. We look forward to continuing this conversation. Our next and final episode of this series will touch on the topic of social interactions and connections as part of "Managing Mental Health and Finding Joy in the MS Journey." Thank you for listening.