

MS and relationships, we need to talk



Living with MS isn't just about the physical symptoms, MS can also impact on one's psychological well-being. Both the physical and the psychological aspects of MS can intrude into many aspect of life, including intimate relationships. While there is open discussion surrounding many aspects of living with MS, intimacy and MS may be harder to discuss with health professionals, however, looking after the health of relationships is just as important for quality of life as looking after overall health.

A research team at the University of Melbourne have been investigating many of the psychological effects of MS and most recently they have published work examining the factors that can affect intimate relationships. This encompasses not only physical intimacy, but also emotional connection and support.

Both the neurological and psychological effects of MS can affect physical intimacy, after all, every part of the body is controlled by the central nervous system. However, psychological wellbeing also plays an important role in an individual's ability to maintain a strong relationship.

In order for psychologists and other health care professionals to provide a truly holistic approach to maintaining quality of life for those living with MS, they need a good understanding of the factors that can influence relationships and find the best ways to support people with MS and their partners.

The Melbourne team, led by Dr Litza Kiropoulis and PhD student Tom Wright, conducted a survey based research study that was recently listed on MS Research Australia's MS trials website. The study has now been completed and published in the journal [Psychology, Health & Medicine](#).

The researchers investigated the psychological impacts of MS on "Intimate Relationship Quality", which is a validated psychological measure that takes into account the physical aspects of a relationship as well as the satisfaction and cohesiveness of the relationship. The researchers analysed the survey responses of 115 people with MS who were currently in a relationship. They were particularly interested in people's "self-concept" and their "disease acceptance" - these are technical psychological terms which broadly mean, the way people think about themselves or picture themselves and how well a person has come to terms with their MS diagnosis.

They found that those with a more positive view of themselves and had come to terms with their MS diagnosis had more positive and higher intimate relationship quality. Of course, the question then arises as to what comes first the chicken or the egg, or in this case does the healthy relationship lead to a more positive personal view of oneself and more acceptance of MS or vice versa. The researchers found that a person's perception of themselves significantly predicted what score they would get in the Intimate Relationship Quality measure. However, "illness acceptance" did not significantly predict the score on the Intimate Relationship Quality. In other words, those with a more positive view of themselves had a better intimate relationship. However, coming to terms with your MS diagnosis doesn't necessarily lead to the same outcome.

On the other hand, however, a person's 'self-concept' or view of themselves did predict their disease acceptance.

This provides important information for psychologists and other health professionals who are supporting people with MS with their disease acceptance and in their relationships, as it indicates that interventions and strategies that focus on nurturing and improving self-concept may help to improve both the quality of their intimate relationships and their acceptance of their disease.