

## JOY'S STORY

Hello! My name is Joy and I was diagnosed with Relapsing Remitting Multiple Sclerosis over 17 years ago. In 2007 I was in my twenties and my adult life was just beginning to ramp up: I had a meaningful career, a loving family, and no idea my life was about to dramatically change.

It all started when I lost feeling in my legs for two weeks. I went to the doctor, who thought I was having a stroke and sent me to the Emergency Room. I went through a long seven days of invasive testing. After telling my neurologist about a Bell's Palsy episode I had when I was 12 years old, he put two and two together and diagnosed me with MS.

### **My diagnosis was devastating, surprising, and scary.**

All that I can remember the day I was diagnosed was me thinking - "wait...was my life just cut short?" There were so many doctor's appointments, a sea of test results, and of course... all the opinions. It was confusing and overwhelming to say the least.

Even more, I felt alone. I had family and loved ones around who wanted to help but they had no idea what I was going through. So, no matter the good intentions, I was dealing with something that no one I knew could relate to, and that fact made me the loneliest I had ever been.

### **I made a decision to fight - to "try it all."**

Initially I started taking medications that were prescribed to me. The interesting thing about medications is - there isn't a ton of research on how much they actually help. With MS, there are a lot of unknowns; doctors and researchers are still very much in the beginning stages of trying to understand how to go about MS treatment and management. Neurologist still don't know that much about Multiple sclerosis much less look at it from a functional medicine perspective.

I took three different medications over the course of eighteen months and my body felt off the whole time. I had allergic reactions. I struggled, and after giving it a good try, I decided that traditional meds were not for me at the moment. The second time I went on medication was in 2013 when my work life became one of the most stressful times in my life. It had been 6 years since I had taken any medication when my doctor then prescribed copaxone a daily injection. I remained on that for 4 months and slowly went off it because the medication made my head feel cloudy, disrupted my sleeping pattern and I had no appetite.

Then, even with medication, the flare ups started appearing closer and closer together and my diagnosis advanced to secondary-progressive MS.

At this stage, I decided to find alternative treatments. I was not about to give up and I wanted to improve the quality of my life. It is then, that I started to reach out to various specialists and friends for help. No more feeling alone; I was ready to lean on my community and fight in a different, more supported way.

## **I am not my diagnosis**

**Over the years following my diagnosis, stress has been a common factor in my life. However, I refuse to have it control who I am. Instead, I have chosen to fight for quality of life and to educate myself about my options.**

How did I know that holistic wellness was for me? In my early twenties I worked for an event planning company where I met Louise Hay the American motivational author and founder of Hay House. I was with Louise and we were on our way to a Laker game and I had a major asthma attack. Louise was able to talk me through it. She offered breathing and relaxation techniques which helped me tremendously. For this episode, I didn't need to use traditional medicine.

During my pursuit to find an alternative treatment plan that works, my friend Louise Hay suggested trying a more holistic approach. She mentioned therapies like biofeedback, acupuncture, massage, yoga, and positive thinking! To her, I will be forever thankful.

**From that point on, my interest was peaked and my story of healing began!**

After incorporating a number of holistic solutions into my daily life, I was able to figure out a routine and lifestyle that help me the most.

**13 years into my multiple sclerosis journey, according to the doctors I should be in a wheel chair, unable to speak, at the end of my life. Instead, I struggle yet bounce back. I have a life that I enjoy, a yoga practice that is mostly consistent, and I am surrounded by the most incredible tribe of people.**

It is not always easy and the path is never straight, but what I do know is that I'm living as fully as I can.

## **My Work Life**

I've had a number of jobs over the years. Most of them caused me extreme stress even though I enjoyed the work. These moments of stress were exhausting, and after my diagnosis they were harder and harder to handle. Also, I felt embarrassed by my disease, sometimes even judged and pitied. All I wanted to feel was normal.

I finally switched my career path and only after exploring mindfulness was I able to land somewhere that allowed me to feel more calm and connected to my work and to myself. Our career journeys are so personal! I believe that work life balance isn't just a buzzword for people to throw around when describing their work culture. Finding a workplace in which people at the top practice balance instead of just preaching it was my key to reducing overall life stress. It has been crucial in my own wellness journey.

## **My Personal Life**

When I first received my diagnosis, I was in charge of 79 staff. It was incredible to know that they all wanted to support me, even if they didn't know how to do it. At the time, I didn't know how to ask for help, or really, what I needed.

**Over the years, I've come to a realization that in order to feel connected to others I had to open up. Vulnerability was out of my comfort zone, and I had to push past it to feel better and no longer alone.**

Early in my MS journey, my now husband straight up told me that he will not treat me like I'm disabled. This is exactly what I needed: someone to listen, someone to open up to, and someone who would still treat me like I am ME. He is my biggest cheerleader. My husband and I got engaged in 2016 and planned an international wedding in 6 months. We got married in Ireland, where my family is from. It was perfectly intimate; we were surrounded by our close-knit family and friends.

We stayed in Ireland for three weeks and then went to Italy. In Italy, my symptoms got worse; I was slurring my speech and had trouble walking. My husband offered to carry me around but I insisted on walking - "let's just do it slowly," I said.

We are living our best life in San Diego, California. For now, we have decided that children are not in the cards for us. However, we have a strong sense of family with all the people who we surround ourselves with and we are parents to a really cute and extremely energetic puppy.

I want to live a full life; the kind of life that I am proud of. I hold the cards when it comes to my health and wellness. All the doctors I've chosen to keep around understand that and support that. Additionally, I am fully invested in my holistic wellness journey.

### **What works for me**

Functional medicine is a biology based approach to wellness. It focuses on finding the ROOT of the disease. What I love about this approach is that it hones in on the individual person rather than just their symptoms. Additionally, functional medicine is centered around holistic wellness; nutrition and mental health being at the center.

Some natural wellness practices that I've incorporated into my life:

- float therapy
- vitamin B and D shots
- cryotherapy
- physical therapy
- swimming
- acupuncture
- Bio-Feedback
- yoga
- nutrition
- positive thinking
- meditation

### ***Let's talk about positive thinking!***

I am not my disease. I refuse to define myself by my diagnosis. Instead, I want to live my life as a healthy young woman. There's more to me than my MS diagnosis; I strive

to remember all of the qualities and strengths that make me who I am... every single day. When things are tough, I surround myself with people who help me to remember who I really am.

**A positive mindset can save your life. It's definitely saved mine.**

In life, gratitude for the present moment is everything. Living with MS, I'm grateful for my strength, the strength of those around me, my entire doctor team, and...my holistic medicine. Follow me on my ever changing journey to wellness. My hope is to inspire those with MS and anyone else looking to pursue a healthier, more positive lifestyle. We all have and hold on to our hardships in life. My hope is that you become empowered to see your hardships as part of your strength.

***I hope that you are inspired to make your next chapter your best one yet:***

***The kind of life chapter you can be proud of.***

***You know, the kind that allows you to exude optimism, pursue health in all forms, and feel accomplished.***

***The kind that allows for many moments of JOY.***