

Clinician Update

Multiple Sclerosis

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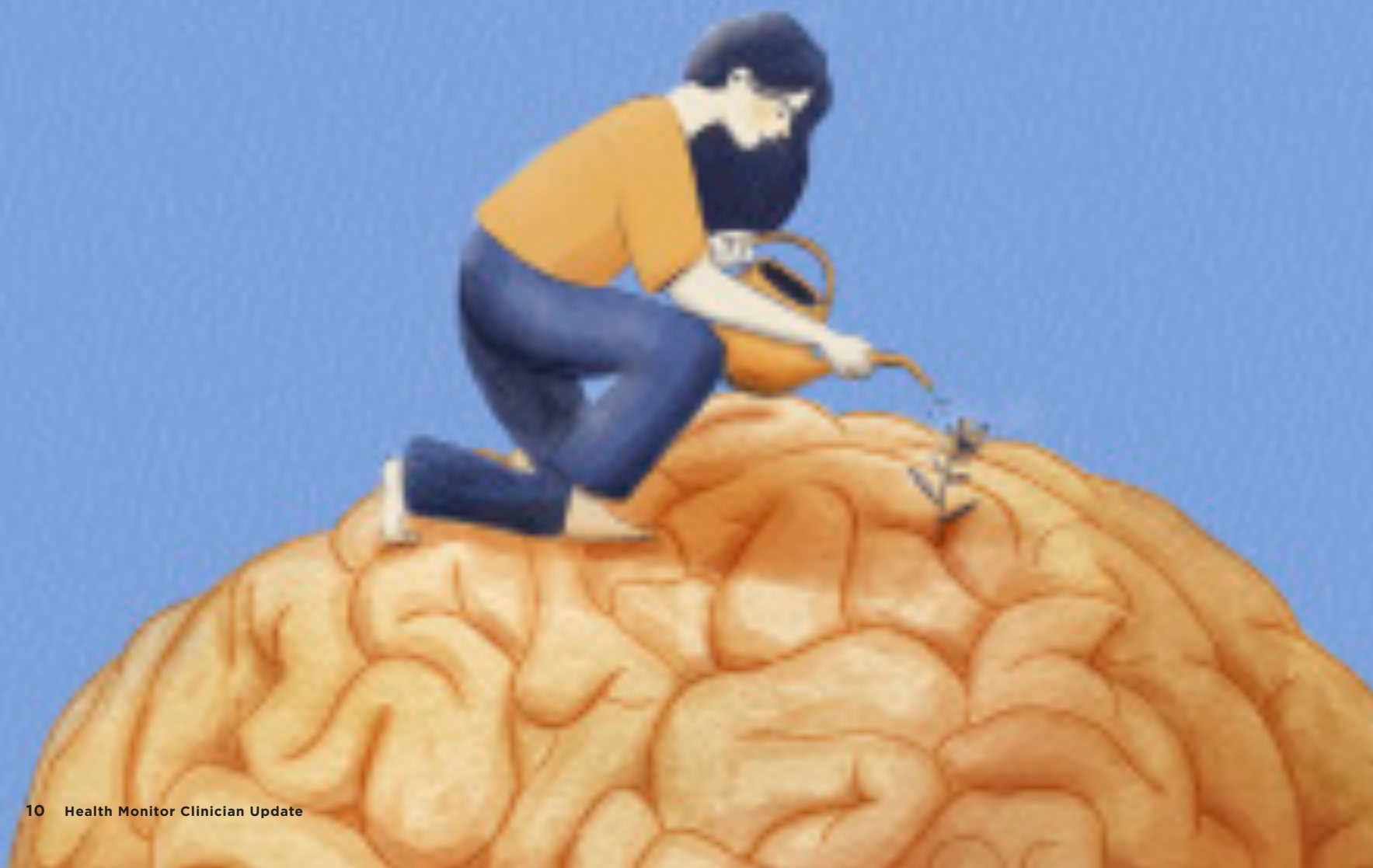
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Helping your patients maintain their QoL



Physical activity, better sleep, a healthy diet—these and other self-care strategies are a key part of a patient’s overall treatment plan. Our experts offer practical guidance on how patients can feel their best.

It’s not enough to ask patients with multiple sclerosis (MS) how their disease-modifying therapy is working; just as critical is assessing their quality of life (QoL) and taking steps to help them improve it. “That’s something we focus on a lot at our center by encouraging physical activity, a healthy diet and lifestyle measures that can help patients feel their best and live well with their disease,” says Jasmin Patel, MD, a neurologist and medical director of the Linda E. Cardinale Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Center at Central State in Freehold, NJ. Also key are behavioral interventions and complementary therapies that can reduce mental and physical fatigue, ease stress and facilitate a calmer mind and body.¹

To help elevate your patients’ QoL, try ...

Encouraging activity

Patients with MS may hesitate to begin regular exercise due to physical limitations or fatigue, but it’s important to remind them that staying active can help them build strength and confidence.² “If a patient is not accustomed to exercising [beyond their daily activities like cooking or driving], I’ll refer them to physical therapy,” notes Dr. Patel. “A physical therapist,

one who has experience with patients with neurological diseases like MS is ideal.” The physical therapist will determine the correct regimen and show the patient safe and effective exercises they can perform on their own.

For patients who are new to exercise, recommend they start slow with 5-10 minutes of activity. “A slow, steady increase in exercise can help patients with MS build stamina,” says Dr. Patel. “Beginners should incorporate cardiovascular exercise and resistance training using body weight or resistance bands.”

When poor balance is a deterrent, suggest yoga. “They can do it in a chair if they like, and it can help with mobility, flexibility, balance and strength,” explains Dr. Patel. Other benefits for MS patients include improved bladder function, increased lung capacity, reduced depression and less fatigue.² You can direct your patients to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society’s (NMSS) website for links to specific yoga videos for patients with MS. (nationalmssociety.org)

Managing their pain

“Many patients with MS deal with neuropathic pain or nerve

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pain ... and they may need prescription medications to help,” says Dr. Patel. She encourages clinicians to ask specific questions about the pain to figure out if it’s more burning sensations or electrical sensations, or if they experience a lot of numbness and tingling, which is kind of on the spectrum of nerve pain, or restless legs, she says. Treatments include infusions, oral treatments and subcutaneous injections that can help address their pain problems.¹

Promoting good sleep hygiene

Sleep disturbances are common among patients with MS. They can create a vicious cycle since

many with MS are already fatigued from the disease, and sleep problems compound the issue, worsening pain and cognitive function.³ Ask questions to figure out the underlying cause of sleep problems: “What kinds of sleep disturbances do you have?” “Are they better sometimes and worse at other times?” “When did you first notice your sleep is not restful?” Common sleep issues in patients with MS include restless leg syndrome (RLS), depression and/or anxiety, wake after sleep onset, sleep disordered breathing and bladder problems.

Sensory abnormality issues like numbness, tingling and pain

can be aggravated at nighttime, so those can also interfere with sleep. “Sometimes, prescribing medication to help with those symptoms can make a difference,” says Dr. Patel. “Bladder problems are common for people with MS, and if they’re waking up many times a night to use the bathroom then they won’t get restful sleep. Treating the bladder urgency—sometimes with medication—can improve sleep as well.” In patients with insomnia, Dr. Patel has initial discussions about sleep hygiene measures that may help. For instance, if the insomnia is severe, she might refer her patient to a cognitive behavioral therapist who specializes in insomnia (CBT-I). “Treating mood issues like anxiety and depression can make sleep easier,” she says.

According to Nusha Nouhi, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist and founder of Marina Health of California, San Diego, “Quality sleep can be supported by relaxation techniques like body scans or a light meditation before bed, calming music and a consistent sleep-wake schedule. Suggest a quiet, dark, cool atmosphere to promote a more restorative night’s rest.”

Recommending a healthy diet

Suggest patients reduce or cut their consumption of processed foods and red meat, cook with healthy fats like olive oil and eat more plant-based foods. Explain that the resulting boost in fiber intake may help relieve common MS symptoms like constipation. Additionally, eating a com-

bination of the Mediterranean and DASH diets—known as the MIND diet—can reduce atrophy in the thalamus and lead to a higher intake of omega-3s, which has been associated with a healthy brain tissue structure.⁴ Consider a printed list to give your patients.

Offering information on support groups

If your hospital or practice has an MS support group, ensure that your patient is aware of it or any local groups that can help them connect to other patients going through similar experiences. “A lot of younger patients tell me they’ve found support groups online and through social media,” says Dr. Patel. You can refer them to the NMSS website (nationalmssociety.org), where there’s a “Get MS Support” page with options for peer-to-peer support, virtual meetups and online communities.

“We know that maintaining social connections and having a support network—whether it’s through other people who have MS or even just your own family members or friends—helps with overall wellness, mental health and cognitive function,” says Dr. Patel. “I think having a support network can help patients feel more empowered and like they have more control, potentially, over their disease.”

Suggesting ways to reduce stress-related flares

Since stress can cause worsening of MS symptoms, whether

physical, cognitive or mood related, anything a patient can do to reduce tension and anxiety may prove beneficial. “Remind patients that if they’re experiencing stress due to their job or are concerned about having to go back to work after working from home, they can talk to their managers or HR department about their limitations or need for energy expenditure management,” suggests Dr. Patel.

Inform your patient of the benefits of breathing and relaxation exercises. “Five-minute breathing exercises, guided imagery or progressive muscle relaxation may help calm their nervous system.” Practices like these can be found on the NMSS website (nationalmssociety.org).

If a patient asks you about practicing tai chi to reduce overall symptoms, acupuncture for muscle spasms and pain or medical marijuana to help with sensory issues and tremors, advise them that some patients experience relief but that these complimentary modalities require more scientific data for patients with MS, says Dr. Patel. “Alternative therapies for MS are helpful for managing symptoms, but they don’t help with the actual disease itself. That’s where medications and other therapies play more of a role.”

Advising them to mind their Ps and Q

“Tell patients they can practice energy conservation by using the ‘4 Ps’ [prioritize, plan,

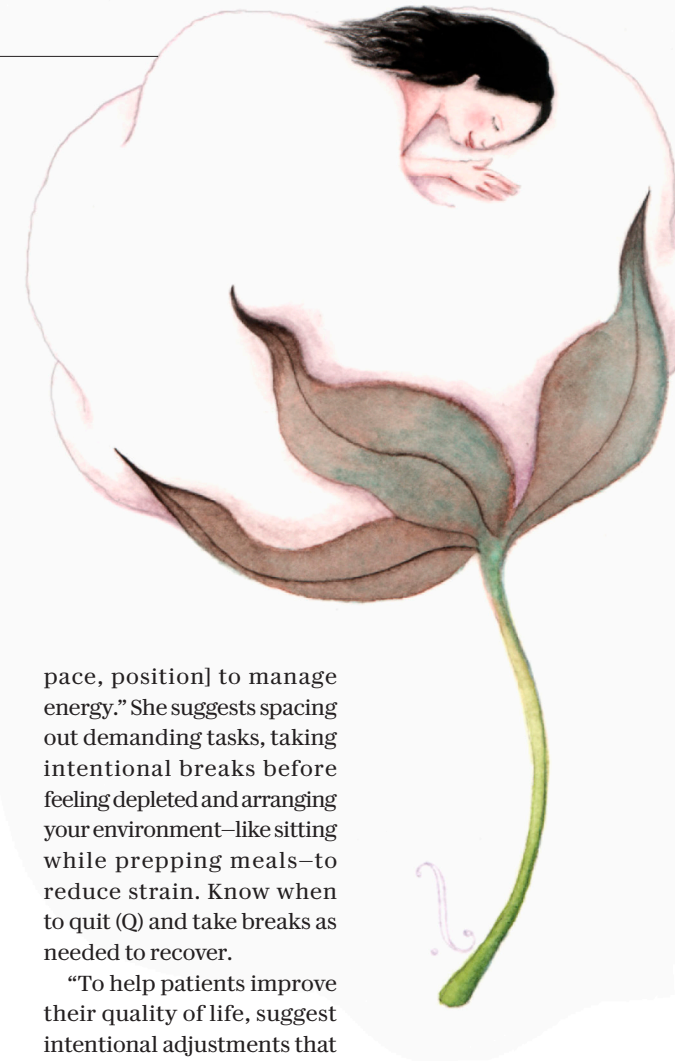
pace, position] to manage energy.” She suggests spacing out demanding tasks, taking intentional breaks before feeling depleted and arranging your environment—like sitting while prepping meals—to reduce strain. Know when to quit (Q) and take breaks as needed to recover.

“To help patients improve their quality of life, suggest intentional adjustments that empower them to manage their day and environment, helping them feel more in control and supported,” says Nouhi. ●

—by Diana Kelly Levey

References

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Watch the thermostat

Patients with MS often experience increased symptoms with temperature changes, particularly heat. This syndrome, known as Uhthoff’s phenomenon, is characterized by temporary worsening of MS symptoms when body temperature rises. While the effects are usually short-lived and resolve when the body cools, they can be distressing to patients and limit daily activities. Nusha Nouhi, PhD, a licensed clinical psychologist and founder of Marina Health of California, San Diego, recommends reminding your patient to create a comfortable environment for themselves by using lightweight, breathable clothing, taking cool showers and controlling the room temperature whenever possible to help keep their body temperature regulated. “Remind your patients to minimize their time in the sun, taking breaks in air conditioning or shade whenever possible, and to stay hydrated.”