

Ep 06 OMS Guide to Getting Fit

Geoff Allix

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Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Yep. So I was diagnosed with MS with relapsing remitting MS in 2000. But I had the first symptoms probably two or three years before that. At the time, I was really doing a lot of sports, like in the gym, step aerobics, and I was doing also some squash and spinning and all that and it wasn't really great for my MS symptoms at the time. So I decided to look for a softer, lower impact option, and that's when I started yoga. I thought I wouldn't like it, because I thought it would be boring, but I discovered you can really do an awful lot with yoga. And it was so good for me that I decided to become a teacher, and also to become a yoga therapist.

Geoff Allix

And were you doing anything with the other, what we now think of the OMS pillars; with diet and mindfulness and so on?

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Not at the beginning. When I was first diagnosed, basically, the neurologist told me, the only thing we can do is to start Interferon treatment, and that's what I did for three years. But I didn't like it at all, no, I felt like a zombie and I looked like a zombie, and I decided to stop that. But then to look after myself and to look at all the options, the diet and my lifestyle and that's when I started to look at the diet, but I didn't know OMS yet. So first, I just looked at more vegetarian diet, because I was also doing yoga and that's part of the lifestyle of Yogi.

Geoff Allix

By doing yoga, you probably almost accidentally came across the mindfulness and the diet side of it?

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Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Yeah, exactly. Because when I started my yoga teacher training, then it was compulsory to be vegetarian. And also meditation was part anyway of the yoga training, so I already had these aspects in my life. Then I discovered OMS, I think about seven years ago, and it was great because the diet for me, I was, I think I was missing some nutrients. It wasn't you know, vegetarian diet wasn't really you know the answer because I was still eating dairy. So when I moved on to the OMS diet, I really felt that it you know, I feel it much, much better now. So, but I had already the exercise and meditation practice in my daily routine. So I was nearly there.

Geoff Allix

It actually came up in the previous podcast, which is about the diet, which I know you've lived a lot of different places around Europe. It came up about France being one of the harder countries to travel to actually.

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

I know. I left France when I was 21 which was a long time ago and each time I go there on holiday, I think, 'Oh my God' it is so difficult to be, even just vegetarian, but then if you are not eating cheese, or if you're not eating eggs, you know, it's really, really difficult.

Geoff Allix

Yeah, I've been to France a couple of times since I've been following OMS and they do look at you strangely, if you don't want to eat cheese. Then so you've set up Taming the Walrus, which I've seen previously. So this is a really useful resource for people who are following OMS, to show you some of the things you can do with MS and yoga.

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Yeah, because I, you know, I thought that it was so helpful for me, it really changed my life to do yoga. It helped me to manage the stress, the anxiety and it, you know, there are many, many different styles of yoga. So yoga can be very soft, low impact, it can be more cardiovascular, depending on which style you practice, but I thought, you know, it really helped me to manage my symptoms, and also to get to be less anxious. So it was very, very helpful. I think, the one thing that maybe I add, now beside yoga is strengthening, because strengthening is very important, as well. So I also now go to the gym, for instance, to do some resistance training to do really some work to make sure that my muscles are strong and flexible. So it's important to include as well that in your practice.

Geoff Allix

So there is lots of different MS guidelines encouraging different things there is an MS Gym on Facebook. There's some things on OMS, such as some yoga exercises on the OMS website. There's other various groups like 'Better Bet' diet and things like this, where they encourage different things. So this, sometimes yoga, but then running, swimming, you've mentioned resistance training, free weights. How, would you decide? Is there a sort of best one? Would you start off with a particular thing and then move on to others? Or, is there a better one for most people?

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Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

I think it depends, I mean, first thing depends on your condition. So if you, have nearly no symptoms or if you're in a really good shape, then I would say just do whatever you like doing, but make sure that you include some strengthening as well. Then if you have some issues with balance, then maybe try to do something in the pool, for instance, some aqua aerobics or some swimming, where you know, you're sure you're not going to injure yourself. If you cannot do normal exercise, then maybe look if you can do some exercise with an electrical bike or with a you know, functional electrical stimulation. So it depends first on your condition and also on what you like. The thing is, you need to keep going, you know, you need to be motivated to continue practicing forever. So if you find something that you enjoy, it's much easier to be motivated.

Geoff Allix

So if you're thinking that I really don't want to go to that class or that gym, then that's probably not the right activity.

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Yeah, I think it's very hard to stay motivated. But you can still try and maybe if you're in a group, then what will motivate you is to go and meet this group again. Because there is you know, especially in group activity, there is a social aspect of exercise, which can be very important as well, you know, you go and you meet people. And it's nice to have this kind of weekly or twice a week meeting this same group of people. So, yeah you know, sometimes people when they see that I've got MS and I'm really, really fit, they think Oh, you're lucky. And my reaction is to say, well, I'm not lucky. I think I am good because of all that I do because I follow this program strictly. The only thing where I say I'm lucky, is I'm lucky that I like moving. You know, so it's much easier for me because I enjoy sports. I enjoy trying different things. But the good thing is that now you've got so many options. Like, if you don't like going to the gym, maybe you like dancing. I tried for instance; Tango. Yeah. Tango is hard work. No, It seriously is for your legs and for the posture. It's a good workout. I mean, I heard you laugh a little bit, but I think you should try tango.

Geoff Allix

The reason I am laughing is because I was a terrible dancer before I had MS.

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

And now you're better?

Geoff Allix

Well, no, not exactly. I tried to do dance classes so that when I got married with my wife, we would have a wonderful first dance, and it didn't work out very well, and now my balance isn't very good. It's the dancing, but it's probably got worse. I'm very much, I mean, I was very active before, I used to run a marathon probably about 10 years ago, now. I used to surf a lot, I used to rock climb, and actually I quite like with exercises to have a goal. And so I really, so I can't surf now there's a particular you have to pop up onto a surfboard, when you sort of get to the standing up bit, and you have to do it very quickly and I have real trouble with my left leg. But that's but I do have this, you know, I will be able to surf again, that is an absolute. That's a real target. And similarly rock climbing, I'd like to do it again, and then slightly worried about the safety aspects. But then you can go to climbing walls and do it in a very, very safe way and so those are sort of targets I have, I'd like to I'd love to be able to run further again as well. So it's good to I think to have like that as a target where I can try and get there.

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Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Yeah, definitely, I completely agree with you. And the the thing that I would say for that is I'm personally, I'm getting better and better all the time, and when I was diagnosed, 18 years ago, I could never have run, like even two kilometer. And last year, I ran my first half marathon, so I think for me, you know, if you keep working on it, you will improve and I hope I mean, my target is to run a marathon for OMS. I'm not sure when, if it's next year or the one after. But, it is my target. I really want to do that one day, just one. I mean, I probably won't want to do it twice. But, you know, it's good to have targets like this.

Geoff Allix

That was my thinking before I had MS was to do one marathon, I didn't really intend to do another one. So do you think it's best to stay within my comfort zone or push boundaries and really sort of work as absolutely hard as you can when you're doing exercise?

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Well, it depends where you start from. So if you're completely new to exercise, obviously, you need to start slowly and and build up, little by little. Otherwise, you know, you might injure yourself. So start slowly, but once you reach a certain level, then you can really push yourself a little bit harder. I mean, research now shows that it's good to push yourself to go a little bit harder for instance, when you strengthen. It's good to do intensive; high intensive training, for instance. But when you start, go slowly, be safe.

Geoff Allix

Okay, but so if you get really exhausted, it's not going to hurt your MS. I know initially, my father had MS and he was very much told to really stay within his comfort zone. But the worst case scenario won't make your MS any worse if you get really exhausted?

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Now it's important to say that I knew as well when I was diagnosed, I was told to stop physical activity, but now it's, you know, it's proven that it's not going to make your MS worse, it's the opposite, it's going to make it better. Exercise has disease modifying effect, so it switches the immune balance away from inflammation. So the more exercise you do, the better for your MS. So it might be that you know when you practice afterwards you feel maybe you know you have sensation, sensory symptoms, or you're a bit more fatigued, but this won't make your MS worse. Exercise is good for you and you should really try to include exercise three times or five times a week, half an hour each time, it's really, really important to manage MS.

Geoff Allix

And would you target the area's that you're less able? MS for some reason affected my left side of my body, I can guess there is probably a lesion in the right side of my brain or something. But it certainly my left side, strength is less, all the way from my foot to my fingers. I'm less strong left side to that than I am right side, would you sort of target those areas? Is that something that exercise can overcome? Because the muscles aren't less strong, it's just I think the messages to the brain.

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

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Yeah, it's not the muscles, no, even if you strengthen the muscle, if the message doesn't go through, you know, it won't really influence that. So I would keep a holistic approach and work on everything. If you've got balance issues, I would work on making sure that your core is strong, for instance. Well, that's a lot what we do in the yoga, we work a lot on the core strength, and that helps with balance. What you need to work on your upper body, the lower body, the core everything as much as possible.

Geoff Allix

And with classes, you said classes are good, because you get to meet other people, socialise as well. Are most classes, happy to modify what they do? Because obviously, some things are going to be hard for people with mobility issues or without complete mobility?

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Well, the one thing you should do is talk to the teacher, to the instructor. Because the instructor, whether it's Yoga, or Pilates, or whatever class you do, should know what your issues are, and then give you an alternative. Or maybe if you go to a teacher, the teacher might say, Listen, I'm not sure what you can do, I would recommend you go to another class or you go to a 'one to one' class at the beginning, but talk to the teacher. In yoga, there are loads of options to modify poses. So, you know, if you cannot do the balance poses, then you might go close to the wall, or you might work with a chair. So you can really modify depending on the the symptoms that you have.

Geoff Allix

And they're actually on the OMS website, there's quite a few yoga exercises on there, as well on there which are adapted.

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Yeah, exactly. So you can practice these and see how you feel and how it works for you.

Geoff Allix

And for people who've been doing OMS for a while is there with exercise, Is there anything which is sort of somewhat changing? Certainly, since the books that you'd say that the advice might slightly have moved forward?

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

What the main thing is now really the stress on include strengthening as well, in your exercise routine, because that definitely is important.

Geoff Allix

Whether that's sort of, like using a machine or free weights are those sort of things?

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Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Yeah. But also, you know, you can do some resistance training, without any prop, you can, for instance, if you do lunges, I mean, lunges are quite tough. The only thing you do is with your body, but you you're working against gravity, and that is quite strengthening as well. So, you know, you can you can do quite a lot. It doesn't have to be with weights. No, it doesn't have to be in a gym.

Geoff Allix

Okay, so just that distinction between cardio and resistance? And finally, I was, I know I'm the host but it was actually something I wanted to bring up which is that in the UK, I don't know if this applies to everyone but it might be worth finding out. I have a neurological physio and they actually do exercise classes as a weekly exercise class that we go to a local school gym, and they're quite useful because it's a neurological physio. So although there's only one other person with MS who regularly goes, but they're really similar, actually people who've got head injuries or other conditions and they adapt things so I don't know who would apply to but it's worth checking out whether your healthcare professionals have something dedicated.

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Definitely and it might be the you know, the MS center the MS Societies in the, you know locally they might have some some classes, they might have some equipment as well, like the you know the electrical bikes or the functional electrical stimulation bikes, that might be there available for you. Or you could have some, I know that when I used to live in England, I had as well, a kayak club and you know, you could practice kayak as well with the group of people with MS. So there are more and more options available in, you know, in different countries. So, it's definitely worth looking and asking around what you can do. Yeah, now you can look online as well. But I think I mean, I teach as well online, so I think it's good as well, but sometimes, especially if you're completely new to a practice, it's good to have a teacher that you can ask and a teacher can that can correct your position, correct what you do so if possible, especially at the beginning, try to go to either a class or to go to your physiotherapist, your occupational therapist, or you know, try to be to talk to someone because then you can ask, is that correct? Or I feel you know, I've got a pain when I do that, what can I do? So it's important to be able to ask these questions as well.

Geoff Allix

Okay, that's fantastic. I think that's all the questions I had. That's been really, really useful to sort of some of the tips there and actually sort of where things going, where resistance works useful and, really just getting something you enjoy in the classes are a really good idea. So I just wanted to thank you for joining us on this podcast. Yeah, it's been forever useful. So thank you very much Veronique.

Véronique Gauthier-Simmons

Thank you, and when I wish everybody all the best with their OMS program.

Geoff Allix

With that, I'd like to thank you all for listening to this episode of Living Well with MS. Remember, there is a wealth of information at overcomingms.org. Once again, that's overcomingms.org. There you can find OMS friendly recipes and exercise tips. Connect with other OMSers in your local area to our OMS circles program, and learn about the latest research going on in the MS world generally and related to OMS specifically. I encourage you to register on the site and

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