

Many people with MS and their families seek support, understanding, information, and guidance from Peer Connections relationships. Peer Connections Volunteers, including MSFriends® and Self Help Group Leaders, who focus on empowering individuals to recognize their own strengths, brainstorm solutions and find resources are better able to meet those needs.

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## **Solution Focused Conversations in Peer Connections Relationships**

It is not uncommon for people to want to describe their problem (whether it is related to MS or not) because they believe it will help to get it off their chest. This is simply human nature. However, when we spend a lot of time finding out about the problem, we keep the focus of the conversation on that alone.

In Solution Focused Conversations, energy is spent on finding creative ways to deal with challenges rather than on exploring the problem. The questions you ask and the way you focus the conversation can really have an influence on the overall outcomes of your peer interactions.

Implementing a Solution Focused Conversation allows an individual to feel validated in their concern or issue, but instead of dwelling on what is wrong, looks at how to change the issue for a better outcome. Solution Focused Conversations also empower individuals to address their issue and concern with a forward-facing approach. These conversations affirm that the future has possibilities for a better today by utilizing strategies and implementing next steps developed through conversation.

As a Peer Connections Volunteer, it is important to pursue Solution Focused Conversations as part of your interactions, either with an MSFriends® participant or with a self help group member.

## **Principles of Solution Focused Support**

- Change is inevitable
- Respect the many strengths we each have
- Fostering strengths boosts motivation
- The peer connections volunteer is a collaborator, not an expert
- Avoid the victim mindset
- Any environment is full of resources

Change is inevitable. No situation stays static. The world is full of random events that affect people with MS. Paying attention to the exceptions, to times when things are different or better, can shift the perception from "everything is awful and unchanging" to "possibilities for change".

Motivation to make positive changes is based on fostering strengths, not dwelling on weaknesses. Solution focused support emphasizes success. When successes are identified and celebrated, confidence and motivation increase. By focusing on strengths and successes and by promoting expectations of positive change, you can help avoid a "victim mindset".

You should never be the most motivated person in the peer relationship. If you are more motivated than the person you are supporting, you may tend to push hard in directions you feel certain will be helpful. This could build resistance and often leads to a game of "yes-but". In this game, you make suggestions and the person counters each suggestion with reasons why that suggestion will not work. This is a game where everyone loses. You become frustrated and real needs are not met.

A solution focused approach can be a challenge if the individual is not yet ready to address their concern and move into a solution focused mindset. It is important to determine if the participant is looking to vent a frustration or looking for ideas. You may want to ask clarifying questions to determine your response, such as, "Would you like my thoughts around this or is this something you just wanted to get off your chest?" If a participant indicates that they simply want to vent, you should also identify a limit to move the conversation forward. This might mean implementing a five-minute venting limit or simply saying, "Tell me more about what's going on and then we can talk about the topic you mentioned before that we wanted to dig into further."

Asking questions such as, "What has worked for you in the past when you were feeling afraid and uncertain?" If they want feedback from you, remember to focus on solutions to help the person cope emotionally.

It is very easy to slip into problem talk and generally negative conversations. Your task is to keep the conversation focused on solutions, strengths, and resiliencies.

### **Qualities of Solution Focused Peer Connections**

Solution Focused Peer Connections will be noticeably different than most peer relationships. The culture in these relationships is different. It may take time and perseverance to shift the focus of your peer interactions from a problem focus to a solution focus. As a result, it may be easier to create a solution focused relationship over the phone, but it is possible to provide solution focused statements and answers in an online or in-person setting.

As the people you support recall more positive days and situations, they will realize that life is not always difficult. As each person makes this discovery, a kinship develops within the peer relationship, creating an atmosphere of change.

## Qualities to Cultivate in Solution Focused Peer Relationships

### 1. Help the person define how your interactions can be helpful.

Ask for clarification about what is wanted from the peer relationship. Needs will vary with each person and will change over time. Ask, “What would you like to focus on during our conversations? What will be most helpful for us to discuss?” This way your conversation is focused on actual needs.

**Jon:** Hello, Cindy. I am glad we were able to connect today.

**Cindy:** Thanks. I am, too.

**Jon:** Cindy, the last time we talked about the structure of the Peer Connections Program and how it might meet your needs. Have you thought about what you would like us to work on during our time together?

**Cindy:** Well, I'm not sure. I called the Society to talk about my memory problems. The person I talked with gave me a lot of information, but I told her that I wanted to talk with someone who had learned to manage life with memory problems. She recommended that I talk with you.

**Jon:** So, you would like to learn to better manage your memory issues?

**Cindy:** Yeah, that sounds like a good place to start.

Now, Jon can help Cindy develop solutions and ideas about this issue.

### 2. Peer connections volunteers are collaborators, not experts.

The dictionary defines peer as “a person who has equal standing with another or others, as in rank, class, or age.” In your peer relationship, you should cultivate a culture of shared responsibility. You will need to avoid the temptation to be the one with the answers. In a peer relationship, your role is to create a collaborative, brain-storming environment.

It is not your job to identify things that need fixing, to offer advice, or to try to fix the problem. If the person you are supporting is not identifying something as a focus of change, you should not be trying to fix or change it. Allow the person you are helping to take the lead and set the pace.

### 3. Focus on solutions and strengths.

It is very easy to slip into problem talk and generally negative conversations. Your task is to keep the conversation focused on solutions, strengths, and resiliencies.

**Cindy:** I have had a terrible week. My fatigue was so bad I had to stay home from work. On top of that, my husband was out of town and I had to get the kids ready for school by myself.

**Jon:** It sounds like fatigue is an issue for you. I certainly admire how, despite your fatigue, you were able to get your kids up, dressed, fed, and off to school. How did you manage to do it?

#### **4. Strengths Perspective**

Solution focused support is built on the strengths perspective. This perspective requires a shift from an old way of thinking to a new way. The old way is like the traditional doctor-patient relationship where the doctor is the expert and authority figure and has most of the responsibility for "fixing" the patient. The patient is defined by the disease and is seen as being weak, needy, and dependent on the doctor for solutions. This old way of thinking tends to cultivate dependency, emphasize problems or deficits, and reinforce the helplessness of the patient. The strengths perspective requires a shift in thinking from this disempowering viewpoint to one based on empowerment.

#### **Key Strengths Perspective Concepts**

The following concepts form the foundation for solution focused support. Understanding these concepts will help you make the shift to an empowerment model of support. This shift will help you foster a collaborative relationship based on appreciation of and faith in people's strengths and ability to find solutions to their own problems.

##### **Empowerment**

- Create an environment where people can discover the considerable power within themselves to handle their own problems.
- Encourage the people you support to define their own worlds, challenges, aspirations, and strengths.

##### **Membership**

- Work collaboratively.
- Affirm people's perceptions and stories.
- Recognize and validate survival and coping efforts and successes of the people you support.

##### **Regeneration and healing from within**

- Focus on wellness rather than the disease.
- Promote expectations of positive change.

##### **Synergy**

- By working together, a better result is created than by working separately.

## Dialogue and collaboration

- Collaborate and consult instead of giving answers.
- Acknowledge people as the experts on their own life experiences.

## Suspension of disbelief

- Respect the perceptions and statements of the people you support.

Letting go of the idea that you must solve everyone's problems can be liberating. Instead of giving advice, you can concentrate on helping identify and focus on strengths. You can assist with identifying available resources that can contribute to solutions. You can help in the recognition of intentional or random events that make new outcomes possible.

A shift to a strengths perspective incorporates the idea that no matter how dire a situation may seem, there are many strengths that can be drawn upon. Every environment, no matter how impoverished, is full of resources that can be used for positive changes.

Here is an example of a typical conversation about a problem a person is having (Jerry is the peer connections volunteer):

**Jerry:** Hello, Mary. How are you today?

**Mary:** Not good. I've been depressed lately. My MS is acting up and I'm feeling tired all of the time. My husband and daughter just don't get it.

**Jerry:** That sounds awful. I can understand why you have been feeling depressed.

**Mary:** Yeah. It has been so bad that I really haven't been able to go to work. I stayed home three days last week and haven't been able to do much around the house. My family should know that I'm exhausted. My daughter told me that I look fine. I think she thinks I'm lazy.

**Jerry:** Those must have been some very depressing days—missing work and feeling that your family doesn't understand.

**Mary:** I spent most of the day in bed or on the sofa. It was really too much for me to deal with.

The conversation is focused on the problem and you can almost feel Mary getting more and more depressed as she is reminded of her difficult week.

Here's another conversation about the same topic, but this time with a solution focused orientation:

**Jerry:** Hello, Mary. How are you today?

**Mary:** Not good. I've been depressed lately. My MS is acting up and I'm feeling so tired. My husband and teenage daughter just don't get it.

**Jerry:** That sounds very frustrating. Have there been days that you've felt less depressed than others?

**Mary:** A few. I was able to keep focused and get some work done from home. I also read a book with my daughter and helped with her homework — which we enjoyed.

**Jerry:** What do you think made those days better?

**Mary:** I'm not really sure. To be honest, I think it was my attitude toward the day. I was just as tired, but I was determined not to let it ruin the day. I also told my family in the morning that it was a high fatigue day, and that seemed to help. They said they were glad that I told them.

Notice that Jerry acknowledged Mary's feelings about her family, but then moved her focus to the days that didn't feel as difficult. That subtle change in conversation helped Mary to see what she could do differently (solutions) to manage her distress.

### Power of Exceptions

A key principle of solution focused conversation is the power of exceptions. In the view of most people who ask for support, the problem is the rule. What seems to be a rare exception to this rule can be built into a powerful force for change.

We all have some variation in our lives. If yesterday was horrible, then today could be better. Further, solutions are easier to find when you are focusing on the more positive days.

When a better time can be identified, you can ask how that was accomplished:

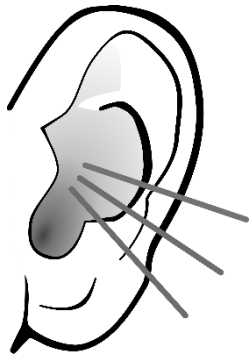
- "What did you do differently?"
- "What's been better?"
- "What's good?"
- "What's the best thing that happened in the past week?"

These are not trick questions. You really want the person to talk about a positive exception, so that you can amplify and reinforce it.

When someone does something different that makes a day better, that action can be amplified, reinforced, celebrated, and punctuated so that it becomes more important. This kind of exception is deliberate. The person did something deliberate that led to the positive exception.

Another kind of exception is a random exception. This kind of exception just seems to happen. Perhaps the fatigue is gone today, the spouse is in a good mood, and the person you are supporting just feels good for no reason. Many legitimate exceptions are random.

Whether exceptions are random or deliberate, once they are identified, you can use them to help construct solutions.



## The EARS Guide

The EARS Guide will help you identify exceptions with the person you are helping and use these exceptions to create solutions:

- E** = Elicit the positive exception
- A** = Amplify the exceptions
- R** = Reinforce the exceptions
- S** = Start over

### Step 1: Elicit the Positive Exceptions

When the focus is on the problem, you can ask, "When doesn't it happen?" or "Tell me about the times when it isn't like that, when things are better." We know that MS symptoms can vary from day to day.

Does the person you are supporting focus on the bad days or the good days?

If the person maintains that all days were equally terrible, you can ask, "What about yesterday?" Another strategy is to ask, "Which was the worst day of the past week?" If it can be admitted that there was a worst day (for example, Monday), the follow-up is, "What was better about Tuesday?" In this way, the exception can be identified, highlighted, and amplified.

### Step 2: Amplify the Exceptions

Ask some or all of these five simple questions:

- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Who were you with?
- What did you do?
- How did you do it?

With each answer, the exception begins to gain importance. When time is taken to answer the questions in detail, the importance of the exception becomes obvious.

### Step 3: Reinforce the Exceptions

When you are on a call you can use your voice to show how excited you are about the exception. Always validate the exception and use exclamations of approval like "Wow!" and "Sounds good," etc. in all forms of communication.



## Step 4: Start Over

Go back and elicit another exception, amplify and reinforce it, etc.

## Additional Tips and Techniques for Working with Peers

### Understanding the Stages of Change

The following chart follows a peer who is proceeding through the Stages of Change. The two columns show sample statements indicative of a peer in each stage and the techniques for the volunteer to consider.

Stage of Change	How to Recognize this Stage
<b>Pre-contemplation</b> "Someone told me that I need to get an accessible parking placard for my car."	The peer is not convinced that they need this assistance, so they are not ready to act. She/he may have responses like: "Yes, but..." Understand that this is a normal stage for peers to present. Awareness of this by volunteers are necessary to avoid expressing your own potential feelings of frustration or resentment towards your peer. The peer is gathering information at this point and trying to decide if this applies to them. This is often seen when peers are in the denial stage of adaptation. Respond briefly to questions, and then turn the conversation back to the peer: "What about you? What are your thoughts/how do you feel about that?"
<b>Contemplation</b> "I'm having trouble walking to my car after work and I'd like to find out about getting one of those accessible placards for my car."	The peer is now more aware of their need for help in this area. They have accepted that the problem applies to them but are ambivalent about taking action. They may change their mind or not follow through on the available options. If they need information about applying for the accessible parking placard, refer them to an MS Navigator. Discuss benefits/risks of obtaining or not obtaining a placard.
<b>Determination</b> "I can't find parking spots close enough to my office – it is too far for me to walk. I want to get an accessible parking placard."	The peer is now ready – they have made a decision to act. Ask them to identify times or places they need the placard more than others. Ask them to plan the initial use of the placard for those identified times/places. Also, ask them to list all of the places they can now visit if they use the placard.

<p><b>Action</b> "I got one of those accessible parking placards. I need to use it so I can keep my independence."</p>	<p>Talk about ways the peer can practice using the placard by visiting at least one place they have missed visiting due to parking. Discuss scenarios for managing disapproval of others using the peer's strengths. For example, role-play a response to someone who questions their use of the placard. You may want to play the role of the peer. "I have MS and the symptoms vary. Some days/times I don't have the stamina to walk very far, so I use it as needed."</p>
<p><b>Maintenance</b> "I have the accessible parking placard, but I don't use it as often as I should because I feel guilty."</p>	<p>Have the peer review where and what they can do independently, and when the placard is needed. Have them take responsibility for deciding to use it as needed vs. missing activities or creating more problems during the day due to not using it. Reiterate that this may change from day to day, or based on the time of day, symptoms or other unpredictable factors. Talk about self-care and consequences of not using the placard as needed, e.g., lack of energy at work may cause problems focusing, completing tasks or even staying for the whole workday.</p>
<p><b>Relapse</b> "I fell in the parking lot today because I was too ashamed to use my accessible parking placard."</p>	<p>Relapses are often expected in certain cases. Build on the strength that the peer already has a placard. Review the benefits of using it by talking about her experiences having used the placard previously. Ask the peer what they plan to do next about the placard. Ideally, they will proceed to the action stage again and move forward.</p>

In closing, Solution Focused Conversations allow Peer Connections Volunteers the opportunity to recognize and use an individual's strengths to refocus on possible solutions for the problem or concern they are experiencing. With the use of active listening, Peer Connections Volunteers can help identify and validate an individual's concern while also working together to explore and develop a solution to address it. Through conversation and questioning, you can focus on creative ways to deal with the challenge or concern that the individual is experiencing.

Remember, the Society's MS Navigator® team is available to help identify potential community resources that could be part of the solution- you can encourage program participants to reach out to a Navigator directly for follow-up resources. MS Navigators can be reached by calling 1-800-344-4867 or by visiting [www.nationalMSSociety.org](http://www.nationalMSSociety.org)

### **Helping Your Peer Stay in the Present**

Mindfulness is about being fully present in the current moment. The application of mindfulness in daily life is about experiencing fully whatever you are doing with all

senses. This is a technique that might be very helpful with a peer that is experiencing anxiety, depression or being easily overwhelmed.

It is important to note that when someone is practicing mindfulness, their mind will still try to wander to other things. This happens to everyone. You simply recognize it when it happens (sometimes sooner, sometimes later) and label that experience as ‘thinking’, and then redirect your attention to the sensory experiences of the moment.

It is also very important to remember — there is no judgment when the mind wanders, or about what you are experiencing. It is not wrong or bad to have your thoughts wander, it simply is a reality — that is what minds do. Simply refocus on the present moment. The lack of judgment is a critical factor in how effective someone’s mindfulness practice or application of mindfulness in their daily life will be.

### **Mindfulness Practice Exercise**

If someone is washing dishes, this might mean feeling the soapy water on your hands, smelling the scent of the dishwashing detergent or other smells, feeling the heaviness of the dishes in your hands, seeing the multi-colored soap bubbles, hearing the splash of the water as you rinse the dishes and any tastes you might recognize. Mindfulness is the act of fully ‘being there’ — wherever the person is — and fully engaged in the moment.

As your peer expresses anxiety about the future, regrets from the past or overwhelming thoughts about their present state, you may want to engage in a moment of mindfulness with them. What room are they sitting in right now? What colors do they see? What sounds do they hear? This is particularly helpful over the phone because the peer has to engage in describing words to explain the feelings, sights, smells and sounds they are experiencing. Help them to live in this very moment for a brief amount of time and encourage them to let themselves BE in the moment without judgment.

Adapted from: “Solution Focused Conversations,” National Multiple Sclerosis Society, 2014 & Someone To Listen Manual, National MS Society, 2016.