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Lay Summary:

An investigation of factors related to adjustment in multiple sclerosis

Psychological growth and self-compassion are two important qualities for well-being. Psychological growth, also called resilience, is the ability to “bounce back” or grow positively following challenging experiences. Self-compassion is the ability to be kind, accepting and understanding of oneself in times of difficulty. Both of these qualities are important for coping with chronic illnesses, including multiple sclerosis (MS). MS is a health condition where the immune system wrongly attacks the brain and/or spinal cord. This results in a variety of difficulties including physical disabilities, problems with memory and thinking, and emotional difficulties like anxiety and depression.

Research into these areas in MS is fairly new. Some research studies have looked at whether people grow positively from living with MS, but these individual findings have yet to be comprehensively summarised. Furthermore, how self-compassion can help people with MS has only been looked at in one study to date. This project therefore aimed to add to the evidence base for adjustment to MS. The project consisted of two parts; part 1 aimed to increase our knowledge of how people cope with MS by comprehensively summarising the results of studies looking at whether people grow positively from living with MS and whether this can improve well-being and reduce distress. Part 2 looked at whether self-compassion can help people adjust to MS, particularly whether self-compassion is helpful for reducing people’s reports of difficulties with their memory and thinking.

Part I combined the results of 22 studies looking at whether people with MS grow positively and whether this improves well-being and reduces distress. Findings showed that

improved positive growth was connected to reduced distress and improved well-being in MS; these relationships were of medium strength. How positive growth was measured made a difference to these effects with resilience having a larger impact than other types of positive growth.

Part II was a two-part survey looking at self-compassion in MS over time. The study looked at whether higher levels of self-compassion leads to improvements in quality of life, stress, ability to cope and reported difficulties with memory and thinking. It also looked at whether self-compassion improved reported memory and thinking difficulties and whether this improvement was due to reduced stress or an improved ability to cope. The survey was completed by 278 people with MS, then again by 202 people after a 6-week gap. Findings showed that higher levels of self-compassion were linked with improvements in quality of life and coping. Higher levels of self-compassion were also linked to reduced stress and lower reported difficulties with memory and thinking. Self-compassion did not lead to improvements in reported memory and thinking difficulties on its own, but as a result of reduced levels of stress. Therefore, higher levels of self-compassion resulted in lower levels of stress, which in turn reduced people's reported memory and thinking difficulties.

These findings together showed that growing positively or “bouncing back”, and self-compassion are important for positive outcomes for people with MS, and they protect against poorer outcomes. Future research should focus on looking at psychological interventions aimed at supporting people with MS to grow positively and increase their self-compassion.

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