

# Society Offers a Couples' Upgrade

by Elinor Nauen

For many people, living with multiple sclerosis feels like being crammed into a coach seat for an endless flight, with a screaming kid kicking the seat. And we're not even talking about the physical and cognitive difficulties that come with the disease, but something that may be just as tough to handle: the stress MS puts on relationships.

Financial worries contribute to that strain. Having MS is expensive. The average annual cost is estimated to be over \$57,000 per person when expenses and lost wages are factored in. And it's emotionally draining. Half of all the people with MS will experience a major depressive episode at some point.

Stresses like these can make smooth interactions tough to come by. One study found that the divorce rate of people with MS is 19% compared to 12% percent in the general population. The problem may actually be worse: Many couples who might like to end their marriage may remain together because of income, medical insurance, or guilt, according to counselors who work with people with MS.

But why fly in coach if you can enjoy the luxuries of first class? The National MS Society is committed to giving relationships an upgrade with

the new **Relationship Matters: A Program for Couples Living with MS**. Planning began in September 2006 when the Society received a generous grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This free program is designed to help couples deal with the impact of MS on their lives by learning more effective ways to communicate, resolve conflicts, and manage MS as a team.

## OUR TECHNIQUE: CHOOSING TO BE POSITIVE

by Howard Brinton

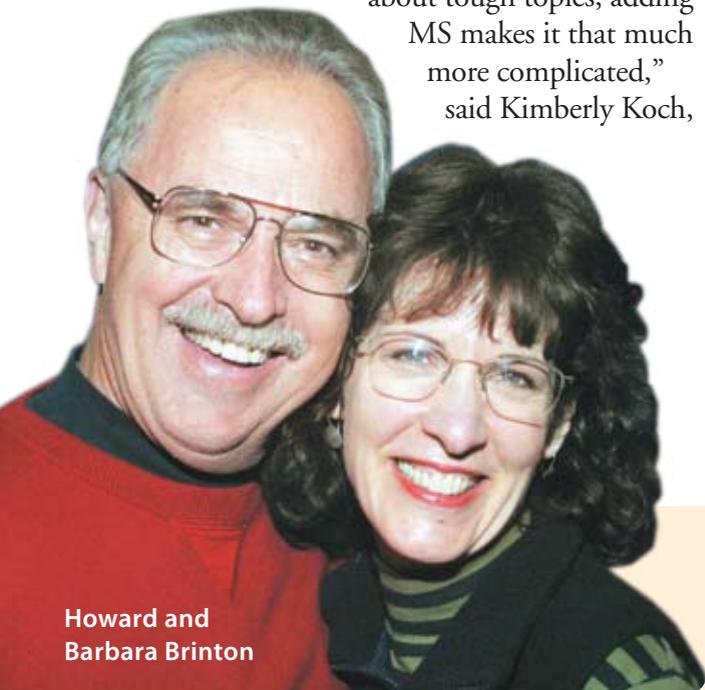
When informed by my wife Barbara that she had just been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, the first choice was upon me ... to be afraid, angry, depressed, or many other emotional states that wouldn't serve either of us well. What worked for me was curiosity. This led us to discover the Heuga Center's CAN DO Program for people with MS. (See [www.heuga.org/programs/can\\_do](http://www.heuga.org/programs/can_do).)

One of the best things we were told when we attended our week-long session was to give the illness a name. My wife dubbed her MS "Dique"

Research suggests that marriage and relationship enrichment programs help couples form and sustain truly first-class relationships.

For more information on Relationship Matters, or to enroll, call 1-800-344-4867, or e-mail couplesprogram@nmss.org. The program is free.

“Communication is tough in any relationship. People come into it with different views, and if they don’t have the ability to talk about tough topics, adding MS makes it that much more complicated,” said Kimberly Koch,



Howard and Barbara Brinton

(pronounced “Dick”). We focused on what we could do now that we had to have “Dique” along. Her summary of a particularly difficult day might be: “Well, Dique kept me in bed for half a day!”

Letting go of the “old normal” means accepting Barbara’s “new normal.” From playing golf to going to the bathroom, we have daily opportunities to take baby steps toward our new life with “Dique.”

Our deep belief that we are all born magnificent and are given the chance to enhance that gift throughout our lives has served me and Barbara well. She has accepted her shining spirit and soul and now

director of Family and Support Programs at the Society, and project director of **Relationship Matters**. “We want people to come away from the program with a good foundation in communication skills. That’s the framework

of the whole program. We’ve built it to address six issues that cause distress: conflict resolution, careers, intimacy, money, having fun, and parenting.”

**Relationship Matters** is open to any couple interested in a healthy, productive relationship. The key requirement is that the two people are committed to each other and want to improve how they function.

“Participants who have challenges in their relationships will discover how to defuse conflicts and reduce stress. Couples who already have a fairly successful relationship will discover new ways to protect and enhance their relationships,” said Len

places less of her “self-worth” on such things as a need to be right, or for order or neatness.

When we both vowed “**for better or for worse ...**” we never thought either of us would be tested with the “worse” portion. We’ve been given the chance to realize that neither illness, nor gifts, neither background, nor looks define who we really are. We’ve been given an opportunity to test the level of love we have for each other. We spend as little time as possible looking backward for cause, fault, or blame. Such energy is better used in finding ways to create the “better” in all we do.

Howard and Barbara Brinton have become outspoken advocates for taking a positive approach to living with MS. Howard now serves on the Heuga Center board of directors and last summer hosted the Sanctuary Golf Tournament to raise funds for the Center.



Chatman, a marriage and family enrichment specialist. He and his wife, Cheryl—who has MS—lead couples' workshops for **Relationship Matters**. "The whole focus of our workshops is how to make your life make sense now that you or your partner has MS," he continued.

The Chatmans regularly deal with a wide array of questions from people who either attend their in-person seminars, phone in to their scheduled conference calls, or e-mail. The person with MS often asks how to get a spouse or family member to recognize MS fatigue. "A woman e-mailed that her husband says, 'We'll talk about it later—but we never get to it. Then we argue because I want to discuss things,'" Chatman said. "A participant in a recent weekend workshop told me she and her husband are no longer able to hike and fish, and he's frustrated because they spend too much of the day dealing with MS. She has a great deal of fear because their lives are changing so much and it's overwhelming. She wants to know how others manage."

Partners and family members also struggle. Chatman often hears things like this: "My wife doesn't think I understand how she feels because I don't have MS, but I do understand that she's not feeling well. How can I help her believe that I am sensitive to her needs?"

"We know the MS is not going to go away. So how do we continue quality of life together? That's

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what this new Society program is about," he concluded.

**Relationship Matters**, developed by some 50 experts, offers telephone- and Web-based courses, facilitated online chats, telephone self-help groups, and MP3 files of telephone conference calls. (These files can be downloaded to a personal computer or an iPod and listened to when it's convenient.) In collaboration with an MS Navigator—a trained staff member—each couple negotiates a personalized "MS roadmap" as their education plan.

All participants complete six hours of training in communication and conflict resolution skills, followed by classes that are customized to meet the personal learning goals they have set.

This nationwide program is designed to help good relationships become great when the special challenges of MS move in. It is not traditional marriage counseling. Approximately 2,750 couples are expected to go through the program over the five-year grant period.

"We've been happily surprised at how comfortable many couples are talking about their challenges and how open they are to suggestions," Len Chatman commented. "In traditional couples therapy, there's often a resistant partner, but we're seeing many partners without MS being interested and wanting to learn. At the end of a workshop, we hope that the participating couples will embrace new ideas in how to manage MS in their relationships."

Koch summed up this way: "When someone says, 'It's the best thing we could have done for our relationship,' we know the program is accomplishing what we set out to do." ■

Elinor Nauen reported on the status of the disease-modifying drugs in the December 2006 issue of **InsideMS**.