Find realistic hope and a full life, find OMS
Overcoming MS at a glance

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OMS offers me a blueprint to be a healthy human who just happens to have a diagnosis of MS.”

Rachel, OMSer
Over 2.8 million people worldwide live with multiple sclerosis, with many experiencing progressive disability over time. Although there is currently no cure for MS, we believe that people with MS can lead positive and fulfilling lives. This belief is based on substantial scientific evidence of the benefits of holistic self-care, alongside medical therapies when appropriate.

At the heart of OMS is a self-management program for people with MS, devised to support their physical and mental health, based on clear, practical actions.

The OMS approach gave me strength to play an active role in a condition that is widely promoted as one that only destiny can determine. But I don’t believe in destiny.”

Maria, OMSer
Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a complex neurological condition, affecting individual’s central nervous system in many unique ways. Symptoms range from blurred vision and limb weakness to balance issues and fatigue. They vary widely from person to person. Changes can be frequent and dramatic at one extreme, or almost imperceptible at the other. MS can occur in relapses and periods of remission, or it can follow a progressive pattern. Life with MS can be difficult and unpredictable.

Over 2.8 million people worldwide have an MS diagnosis — that’s one in nearly 3,000. The disease distribution across geographies varies greatly, being significantly more prevalent in Western countries, and increasingly — in countries further away from the equator. For example, in the UK, some 130,000 people are living with MS today, with 7,000 diagnosed every year, while in the US it is estimated that around one million people are currently living with MS.

MS occurs in several forms. The most common type of MS, accounting for 85% of all cases, is relapsing remitting MS (RRMS). Up to two in three people with RRMS will go on to develop a secondary progressive form of the disease with a gradual worsening of symptoms. The remaining 15% of people with MS will have a primary progressive form of the disease where it leads to gradual loss of function.

It is a disease that can run in families, although not typically thought of as being hereditary. Around a quarter of a person’s risk of developing MS is genetic. Environmental and lifestyle related factors account for the remaining 75% of risk and are largely responsible for disease progression. MS is one of the most common disabling illnesses of young adults, affecting three times more women than men. Recent research has shown that prevalence continues to increase largely due to improved diagnosis, lifestyle factors and rising life expectancy.

People with MS — regularly in the prime of their lives, are often told to accept a future with increasing levels of disability. But the reality is, there is hope of living well with a diagnosis of MS.


2.8 million
people worldwide have an MS diagnosis

75%
of an individual’s risk relates to environmental and lifestyle factors

130,000
people are living with MS in the UK today

1 million
people are living with MS in the US today

85%
of all MS cases are Relapsing Remitting MS (RRMS)

3x
more women than men are affected
The impact of COVID-19 has been profound across all sectors and will no doubt continue to be felt for years to come.

In the charitable arena, the financial impact on funders, especially grant giving trusts and foundations, but also community donors has been tremendous, adversely impacting charitable income, necessitating access to reserves where these have been available and making it challenging to plan robustly longer-term. Demand for charitable services has risen exponentially across all areas, especially those targeting frontline support for people hardest hit by the pandemic, homelessness, domestic violence, mental health and others.

The impact of the pandemic on our organization and community has been significant, with both challenging and encouraging effects, as follows:

- We were unable to hold face-to-face meetings in 2020 — especially direct support focused through OMS retreats and reunions, or Circles — local community outreach activities.
- We had to put on hold the recruitment of new Ambassadors — voluntary leaders of our Circles, thus pausing the growth of our community facing activities.
- Virtually no challenge fundraising events were undertaken by our supporters, having a significant direct impact on the charity’s finances. In line with overall giving trends, our supporters focused more on causes closer to healthcare systems in their effort to meet vastly increased demand for services. Our income in 2020 fell by over 50% compared to 2019.
- We made a significant investment in boosting our digital capability, both internal via a new Customer Relationship Management System and external — further developing our digital platform/website in terms of content and functionality.
- We re-purposed our front-facing work to focus on digital information distribution and engagement channels, including a new webinar series and podcasts to ensure as wide a reach as possible.
- Our community members reported increased isolation, anxiety and worry about the impact of the pandemic on them and their families, and the disruption to healthcare services they were experiencing.
- There was a significant impact on the team and their wellbeing with work shifting to home-based with limited access to the office and reduced face to face interactions with colleagues.

We will look to exploit the following opportunities in the coming year and beyond:

- Ramped up focus on prevention — alleviating pressures on health systems by enabling more people with MS to self-manage their condition day to day.
- Tackling health inequalities and supporting marginalized communities.
- Boosting grassroots support in local communities via digital means and face to face when we are able to.
- Growing connections and expanding our work in new geographies — US, EU and Aus.
3. **Who we are and what we do**

Overcoming MS is the world’s leading multiple sclerosis healthy lifestyle charity. We are unique in our whole person approach and practical, evidence-based focus upon self-management of MS, formulated as a holistic program. We are registered to work in the UK (England, Wales, Scotland), the US and Australia.

The OMS program addresses those lifestyle factors that are shown to influence MS progression the most, such as diet, sedentary living, stress and a lack of vitamin D. We provide extensive tailored information and support for people living with multiple sclerosis to help them make practical changes in their day-to-day lives.

The OMS program is a product of pioneering work by Professor George Jelinek and the Neuroepidemiology Unit (NEU) of the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Australia. Its evidence is broad-based and incorporates over 1,000 research studies from some of the world’s leading medical journals.

The OMS charity was established by Linda Bloom in 2012, whose life was transformed by the approach. She wanted to distribute the OMS program and its powerful message of realistic hope across the globe empowering ever more people to live well with MS. Today, our reach has exceeded 20,000 people affected by MS worldwide. Our team is small and punches above its weight, supported by a passionate and growing group of volunteers and led by the CEO Grazina Berry. A committed Board of Trustees is chaired by the founder, Linda Bloom.

“...IS DOING WHAT I CAN TO HELP OTHERS...”

Nicole, OMSer, USA
4. The OMS Program

The program promotes a comprehensive and holistic approach to multiple sclerosis management.

The focus is on...

- **Eating well**
  A plant-based, whole-food diet, very low on saturated fat, no dairy, with seafood and Omega-3 supplements.

- **Sun and Vitamin D**
  Managed daily sun exposure and Vit D supplementation as a preventative measure.

- **Regular exercise**
  Combining cardio and progressive strength/resistance training.

- **Meditation**
  Management of daily stress and development of a healthy, positive and empowered attitude towards controlling one’s health.

- **Medication**
  Medication as an important part of MS care, enabling people with MS to make personal decisions about medication use.

- **Family prevention**
  Focus on smoking cessation, Vit D and sun exposure for family members and dietary recommendations for children and siblings of people with MS.

- **Changing life for life**
  Long-term behavior change, with guidance and motivation.

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© Photo by Blake E. Zra Photography

1 The HOLISM study showed strong association between healthy dietary habits and improved physical and mental health related quality of life and reduced risk of advanced disability (Hadgkiss, E.J. et al. The association of diet with quality of life, disability and relapse rate in an international sample of people with MS. Nutr Neurosci, 2015)
Our vision is a world in which every person with MS is empowered to take control of their health, is making informed lifestyle choices and is living the fullest life possible.
5.1 Our strategic goals

Inform
We ensure people affected by MS are fully informed about evidence-based ways to help self-manage multiple sclerosis.

Support
We help people living with MS to feel supported through OMS Circles (our growing global volunteer community network). OMS Circles are accessible and responsive to the diverse needs of people affected by MS.

Empower
We advocate for and with people living with MS to demonstrate how self-management and lifestyle choices are a vital part of living a full life. We influence policymakers and campaign to raise awareness of the importance and benefits of MS self-management.

Collaborate
We support and contribute to the growing body of evidence around lifestyle choices and self-management of MS to help influence and create change amongst healthcare professionals and policymakers. We work in partnership with individuals, communities, healthcare professionals and other charities to create genuine and sustainable benefits for people living with MS.
I love the Overcoming MS podcast. I found it very useful at the beginning when I was trying to teach my family and friends about what I was doing.”

Facebook follower, Oct 2020
Content
We provide an online forum and engaging social media content to empower people with MS to take control of their health and become hopeful about the future. Over 15,000 people currently benefit from person-centred advice and support round the clock. We now have 42,000 social media followers.

Community
This is at the heart of what we do. Our voluntary groups, Circles, help people stay connected at a time of increased anxiety and isolation as a result of the pandemic. By the start of 2021 we had 84 Circles with 2,100 members worldwide providing peer support to people living with MS.

Research
We have been developing a digital area on our website to host the latest research which our lifestyle interventions are based upon and that showcase the health benefits of everyday actions, including diet, exercise and stress management.

The book
The Overcoming MS book has proven over time to be a hugely popular guide for people with MS to become active participants in making decisions about their health. In 2020, we distributed 1,000 free books in the UK and Ireland, along with 1,880 e-book copies in the US.

Information
Our digital information offer focuses on providing accessible, diverse and practical resources that recognize the unique challenges people face. The majority of our digital content is developed with our community members and includes inspiring blogs, recipes and exercise programs. Our website visits average 33,000 every month. In 2020, we had 1,380,471 web page views. Our recipes attracted 186,970 views, blogs — 221,050. Over 19,000 people are subscribers to our monthly newsletter.

Events
Pre-COVID-19 we ran face-to-face events, from one-day workshops to week-long retreats. In response to the pandemic, we launched an interactive webinar program. Our first webinar series was attended by 434 people from 55 countries with 96% rating the quality of information provided as high or very high and felt better supported as a result. We anticipate developing our webinars further and that they will remain a permanent part of our information offering.

Podcast
“Living well with MS”. Podcast series is one of our most popular and highly rated activities that motivate and connect people living with MS. In 2020 we produced 27 full-length episodes, interviewing various experts including scientists, fitness specialists and nutritionists. As a direct result of COVID-19, a series of shorter Coffee Break episodes were produced capturing conversations with people with MS sharing their experiences. The podcast is available on all the major podcast platforms such as iTunes and Spotify, averaging above 1,000 downloads per episode.
Evidence-based

The OMS Program draws upon an extensive body of evidence of the benefits of lifestyle changes on the health outcomes and quality of life for people with MS. Its evidence is broad-based, incorporates over 1,000 research studies from some of the world’s leading medical journals and is supplemented by a long-established HOLISM study. We will continue to build collaborative partnerships with leading scientists to ensure the evidence base continues to evolve.

Empowering

We believe that the realization that each of us can take control of how we experience illness and disability is both powerful and positive. We provide the tools to enable people with MS to take care of themselves and become active managers of their own health. We provide people with MS with realistic hope of living well.

Community-focused

We focus on building a supportive, positive and empowered community of people with MS. We recognize and celebrate the experience and knowledge of people with MS, which we harness in our efforts to influence a broader understanding of the value of MS self-management. We treat people with MS as equal partners in the work that we do.

Inclusive

The symptoms and experience of MS are diverse and unpredictable. While in some people with MS, their disease course will be relatively mild, others may experience a range of symptoms, including pain and spasticity, mobility problems, difficulties with vision, cognitive impairment, bladder and bowel problems. OMS is an inclusive and diverse community, which both welcomes and gives voice to the experience of each individual.

Collaborative

We work within, and seek to influence, an active and well-developed field of research into the treatment of MS, as well as the expanding arena of advocacy for people with MS in relation to healthcare policy, access to resources and the benefits of self-management as a complement to medicinal therapies. The impact of OMS within these fields of action and debate is increased through collaboration with other charities, healthcare professionals and researchers, and the MS community itself.

Dynamic

As a small charity operating on a global scale, we value focus, efficiency and creativity.
To develop our new strategy, in autumn 2020 we organized four community focused Theory of Change workshops.

25 community members, representative of different types of MS, diverse backgrounds and geographies, worked as equal partners with the OMS team, to help us define what our success will look like, what change is needed to achieve our goals, what assumptions we’re making, what activities are needed to achieve our vision and required resources. We spoke with healthcare professionals, colleagues from other MS focused organizations and other charities, alongside analysis of data available to us.

Some of the feedback we received that we will work hard to address over the next three years:

- We need to be even more inclusive
- Our language and resources need to be more tailored to diverse audiences
- We need to hold people’s hand to help them adopt the program recognizing that lifestyle change is not easy
- We need to work with Healthcare Providers and systems to alleviate pressure
- We need to influence change so that lifestyle modification approaches become more widely accepted
- We need to be more open to emerging new evidence in the international research community as to the efficacy of lifestyle and self-management approaches
- We need to build a bridge between community of people with MS and researchers.

Helen, OMSer, Wales, UK

I really enjoyed the workshop on Friday: not only because it was a pleasure to meet, listen to and talk with a group of such inspiring people, but also because I felt that the conversation developed some very useful ideas and possible directions for OMS — and was very worthwhile.”
As a result of this extensive engagement exercise, we formulated our new strategic framework 2021–23 and a new business plan 2021.

Our measures of success will focus on meaningful community growth and engagement, positive impact on OMSer quality of life in a broad range of areas, expanding funding sources, productive partnerships and effective campaigns to help make healthy lifestyle approaches widely acceptable and accessible.

We will continually review, refine and further develop our strategy and approaches, as we gather more feedback from the communities we serve, learn from what works well and strive to improve.

We will monitor progress and report it to the OMS Board of Trustees quarterly, with an annual assessment of impact and will share our achievements with our community.
Looking forward to the next three years, Overcoming MS will continue its drive to be the world’s leading multiple sclerosis healthy lifestyle charity.

Our three-year plan

Our values will guide all of our activities and projects over the coming three years and beyond.

The path ahead of us is uncertain, but we will work our hardest to respond to and fulfill the needs of our communities.

2021 will be marked with significant organizational development, focused on:

- Getting to know the OMS community better so we can support them fully
- Welcoming new colleagues to the team, new Trustees to the OMS Board and further growing the number of committed volunteers so that we’re ready to face the challenges ahead and explore new opportunities
- Building new and strengthening our existing partnerships with healthcare and patient-focused organizations and communities, in recognition that we are stronger together
- Developing and launching a new fundraising strategy so that we can grow as a charity and with bigger impact.
We will ensure people affected by MS are fully informed about evidence-based ways to help self-manage multiple sclerosis.

Plan

• Listening to the diverse OMS community to make sure we understand and serve their current and future needs better.
• Developing and launching a new webinar series, focusing on topics most relevant to the OMS community.
• Airing a new season of the Living Well with MS podcast including special series such as Coffee Break, to keep our communities connected.
• Testing and introducing the new OMS smartphone app to help our community adopt and better follow the OMS program.
• With the better understanding of our community needs, we will be developing new support initiatives such as a digital helpline, whole family-focused support and peer-to-peer mentoring.
• Presenting Prof Jelinek’s new book “Roadmap to OMS” offering fresh and diverse perspectives on living well with the OMS approach.
• Expanding our informative events offering as soon as the external environment allows, to inform both people with MS and healthcare professionals of the benefits of MS self-management.

Outcomes

• More people will be aware of the work of OMS and the impact we achieve.
• Informed of the benefits of MS self-management, more people with MS will be following the OMS program worldwide.
• We will have introduced more personalized and practical information resources to make the OMS program even more accessible to people with MS and their families, across diverse communities.
• More OMS information resources will be distributed across treatment centers.
• More healthcare professionals will be supportive of holistic self-care in the treatment of people with MS, alongside medical therapies.
• The OMS website hosting our digital information resources will be considered the go-to platform for practical, current and relevant evidence-based healthy lifestyle advice.
• More people with MS following the OMS program, will be reporting positive health outcomes.
• More people with MS following the OMS program, will be recommending OMS to their family and friends.
9.2 Support

We will help people living with MS to feel supported through OMS Circles, our growing global volunteer community network. OMS Circles will be accessible and responsive to the diverse needs of people affected by MS.

Plan

• Developing and launching a new community engagement strategy responsive to the diverse needs of people with MS, so that OMS Circles can grow and flourish, providing local peer support and motivation.
• Improving how OMS Circles work and our support to Ambassadors and Circles members by listening to their feedback.
• Welcoming new Ambassadors to expand local OMS Circles and communities, providing vital support to more people with MS.
• Providing OMS Ambassadors with support and practical tools to help increase local community engagement and making being an OMS Ambassador an enjoyable and fulfilling experience.
• Creating a safe, welcoming and effective environment for Circles online through our new custom-built platform.
• Growing the Circles program across targeted global geographical areas.
• Developing a training and mentoring program for Ambassadors, to increase access to community resources for all.
• Developing and launching themed Circles bringing together OMSers with shared interests, experiences and challenges.

Outcomes

• Sustained growth in the number of Ambassadors willing to create supportive Circles in their local community.
• More people will be aware of the work of OMS and the impact we achieve across local communities.
• More people with MS and their families will be feeling less isolated, more resilient, understood, better supported and hopeful about their future.
• More Ambassadors will feel supported by OMS and energized, retaining them in their role for longer.
• Increase in funding by community groups and events, fueling our effort to achieve our ambitious goals.
• Building meaningful connections with community organizations, local to Circles so that additional support can be accessed by Circles members.
9.3 Empower

We will advocate for and with people living with MS to demonstrate how self-management and lifestyle choices are a vital part of living a full life.

We will influence policymakers and campaign to raise awareness of the importance and benefits of MS self-management.

Plan

• Giving OMSers a voice and creating a platform for speaking out about the benefits of MS self-management by convening a Patient Advocacy Group.
• Shaping an influential Advocacy Strategy to influence MS treatment policy and practice and engaging with regulators in fruitful ways.
• Raising awareness of the importance of MS self-management by launching a campaign for International MS Awareness Day.
• Developing and sharing across our expanding communication platforms persuasive “narratives of hope” to empower more people with MS to champion healthy living.
• Creating and evolving healthy lifestyle resources and education programs on the OMS website designed for healthcare professionals by increased engagement with them.
• OMS advocates speaking out about the benefits of our whole-person evidence-based approach to MS self-management in publications, at influential conferences and events, both digitally and physically in the post-pandemic world.

Outcomes

• More people with MS, healthcare professionals and policy makers will be aware of the work of OMS and the impact we achieve.
• More OMSers will become passionate champions and vocal advocates for evidence-based approaches to MS self-management becoming accepted as part of treatment for MS.
• Standards of care for people with MS will be improved and inclusive of evidence-based holistic healthy lifestyle approaches.
• Persuaded by diverse “narratives of hope”, more people with MS will be following the OMS program worldwide.
• More people with MS will be accessing OMS support and becoming active participants in their care.

THE OMS STRATEGY 2021–2023
9.4 Collaborate

We will support and contribute to the growing body of evidence around lifestyle choices and self-management of MS to help influence and create change amongst healthcare professionals and policymakers.

We will work in partnership with individuals, communities, healthcare professionals and other charities to create genuine and sustainable benefits for people living with MS.

Plan

• Convening a research round-table and establishing a Research Advisory Group, so that the evidence base underpinning the OMS Program continues to evolve and gains broader acceptance.
• Continuing our productive collaboration with the Neuroepidemiology Unit (NEU) at Melbourne University and sharing research findings supporting the OMS program across communities.
• Developing and implementing a new partnerships strategy that leads to new relationships and partnerships in key OMS program areas with a diverse group of stakeholders, to ensure the program continues to be effective and responsive to the needs of our diverse community.
• Boosting OMS contributions to impact-oriented organizations, such as the Neurological Alliance and MS Academy in the UK to promote healthy lifestyle in MS.
• Initiating new collaborations with “like-minded” MS organizations in the USA, EU, Australia and New Zealand, leading to new projects.
• Communicating and sharing the findings of research showcasing that holistic lifestyle change works and building a bridge between people with MS and researchers.

Outcomes

• More people with MS, healthcare professionals and policy makers will be aware of the work of OMS and the impact we achieve.
• Our knowledge base and resources we will share with our OMS community, people with MS and healthcare professionals, will continue to grow.
• We will expand and update the evidence base underpinning the OMS program, boosting further our credibility and growing the number of supporters.
• More people with MS following the OMS program, will be reporting positive health outcomes.
• More healthcare professionals will be on board with OMS and our holistic and evidence-based approach to MS self-management.
• We will be collaborating with more diverse partners globally to increase a positive impact on the health outcomes for people with MS.
THANK YOU

Thank you for believing in us and our passion for championing the OMS program, so that every person with MS can lead a full life.

Thank you for all your support, volunteering your time and skills, and giving generously to fuel our effort. The road ahead of us will be challenging, but together — we can fulfill our vision and ambitions!

Grazina Berry, CEO of OMS
Fran, OMSer

The OMS program is my new normal. It has afforded me the opportunity to take control of the disease and make big lifestyle changes to improve health and well-being.”

Fran, OMSer