

# Hybrid retreat model supports health improvement in multiple sclerosis

Charlie Peel, Dr Rachael Hunter, Dr Jonathan White, Jake Connor, Sian Southward

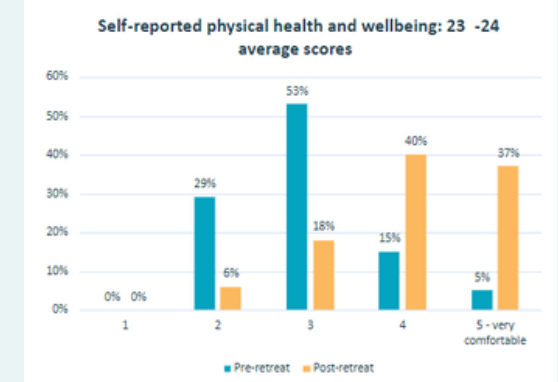
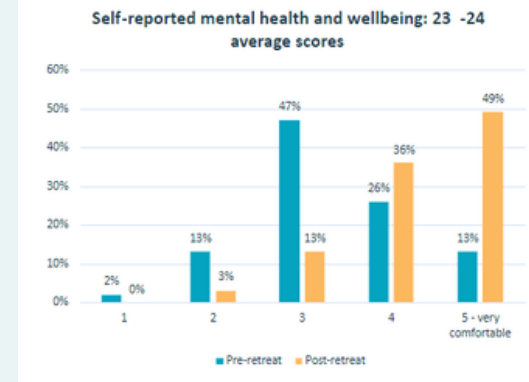
**“Phenomenal from start to finish. I nearly didn’t come but it helped me accept my diagnosis, lean into my ownership of my disease, build a community with and around me. Leaving full of hope – I can’t thank you enough.”**

## Background

Overcoming MS has been providing the multiple sclerosis (MS) community with lifestyle medicine since 2012, underpinned by growing evidence that positive lifestyle choices can improve symptom management and, with some behaviours, slow disease progression (Giovannoni 2024). Overcoming MS advocates for a lifestyle medicine program deliberately tailored to the needs and experiences of people living with MS, and relevant to the whole family.

From 2013–2019, 14 multi-day retreats providing lifestyle medicine and practical workshops supported 430 people with MS and saw significant results in self-reported improvements across mental and physical health (Hadgkiss 2015). Recognising barriers to engagement including cost and time away from home, Overcoming MS developed and piloted a hybrid Retreat model, seeking to reduce these barriers.

Graphs 1 & 2: combined % of participants self-reporting physical and mental wellbeing scores (1-5) pre- and post-Retreats ('23 & '24)



## Method

The hybrid Retreat model comprised six online learning sessions, circa one hour each, delivered by expert patient Facilitators, with an online social 'Circle' providing peer support, prior to an in-person 2.5 day residential retreat. In 2024 an additional online consolidation session was also offered. Bursary places (2023 n=5 and 2024 n=4) and 10 places funded by the charity were offered to decrease financial barriers. Pre- and post-intervention surveys gathered data across five domains: 1) physical and 2) mental health (both subjective), 3) confidence in understanding and adhering to the lifestyle change Program, talking to 4) healthcare professionals (HCPs) and 5) family and friends about the Program. Two pilot retreats were delivered and evaluated; in 2023, to 43 attendees, 78% of whom were female; and in 2024, to 35 attendees 77% of whom were female.

## Results

100% of Retreat participants across both years reported marked improvements in all five domains. Scores for subjective reporting of physical and mental wellbeing rose by 57% and 46% respectively (graph 1 and 2). Across the two cohorts, confidence in understanding of, and adherence to the lifestyle medicine Program rose by an average of 34.5% and confidence in talking to healthcare professionals about lifestyle medicine by 57.5%. The hybrid approach was also well received in both pilots; the quality of the online sessions, Facilitators' guidance, activities and venue were rated an average 93.8% across all 78 participants.

Table 1 shows the percentage of participants who rated themselves 4 or 5 out of 5 pre and post Retreat across the five domains and the two years.

Table 1

Year	Physical wellbeing		Mental wellbeing		Confidence & adherence to Program		Confidence in talking to HCPs re lifestyle		Confidence in talking to friends & family re lifestyle	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
2023	32%	74%	30%	90%	71%	100%	24%	67%	27%	77%
2024	8%	79%	47%	79%	60%	100%	18%	90%	48%	85%

## Conclusion

These findings demonstrate the value of the piloted hybrid Retreat lifestyle medicine program for people with MS, and by extension of their confidence in self-managing their MS, to clinicians (Barker 2017; Dineen-Griffin 2019). With 100% of participants experiencing improvements in their perceived mental and physical health, and increased confidence in adopting an evidence-based lifestyle medicine Program proven to improve quality of life (Fidao 2023), manage symptoms and slow disease progression (Giovannoni, 2023), the findings demonstrate that the hybrid Retreat was as impactful as previously reported in-person Retreats (Hadgkiss 2015).

Moreover, the piloted hybrid Retreats were considered more affordable and accessible, extending the reach and impact of this intervention. Further research to map scores at six- and 12-months post-Retreat to determine whether these changes in health behaviours are sustained is underway.

**“A life-changing experience. The power of connection, of belonging. Of being seen and safe... The community, hope and the opportunity to really understand and question the evidence and application of the different pillars. It wasn't just transformative for our knowledge, but also the way we live.”**