

Interview with Mary Ehly

SESSION 1 (8/18/2020)

Timed Log

[00:00:00] Small talk and introductions. How MCS has had a positive impact on her life: Getting MCS (Multiple Chemical Sensitivity) was a gift that gave her the push she needed to get healthy, exercise, eat well, and get toxins out of her body.

[00:03:40] Work and health: Traveled the world because her late husband was in the service, but she had a weak immune system. Worked at a bank, where she and many of her coworkers began to feel sick in their temporary office building—experienced fogginess, women had menstrual difficulties, and she lost her coordination; became worried that she could no longer function at work. Once the office moved into their new building in December 1982, she hoped she would feel better, but she didn't. In February 1983, she had to leave her job.

[00:08:10] Workers' compensation: Took three months off to work on her health, then was brought back for a thirty-day trial. Things were not getting better and they were close to firing her, so she filed for workers' compensation and Social Security Disability. Her late husband was supportive, helped her with the paperwork and other tasks, supported her financially since she didn't get much from Disability. Doctor she saw to qualify for workers' compensation tried to discredit her, told her she was weak-minded and had hysterical conversion. Sought out environmental doctors, specifically doctors that didn't have any fragrances in office. Doctors couldn't help her too much, but luckily she found one who gave her practical solutions, taught her to eat healthy and avoid certain foods. Read Mary Lamielle's paper, which influenced her to change out all her plastics and products. Learned how to work with her sensitivities.

[00:17:36] Early sensitivities: Was sickly as a child. Moved into a new house at eight years old, would get rashes and burning sensation from the new furniture. In third grade, was known to be a smart, high-achieving student—had even tested out of eighth grade—but after moving into the new house, she couldn't concentrate in school. The same thing happened when she moved into her college dorm. Brother has intellectual disabilities so she thought she might as well, didn't relate her learning and concentration issues back to her living environment until much later.

[00:20:10] Family's chemical sensitivities and support: Father had migraines, thought it was from work as a longshoreman, also used kerosene lamp. Sister tries to discredit her because her husband is an insurance salesman, thinks she's making it up. Ehly's late husband was incredibly supportive, encouraged her and protected her. If restaurant tables were made of particle board and made her feel sick, they would leave. He was supportive of all the changes to her lifestyle and diet, said it would be good for the both of them. Would also shop for her, buy her cotton clothing because she could no longer wear synthetics.

[00:25:03] Navigating triggers in public: Would go to health food stores and other places that were non-toxic. Avoided toxic places for the most part, or will call ahead of time to ask them to remove air fresheners in the bathroom. Mother's nursing home was also fragrance-free. Book

stores and department stores are still difficult for her, so she utilizes online shopping. Went to a restaurant that made her sick, called them and convinced them to take out scented product in bathroom.

[00:27:19] Advocacy: Moved to Lincoln county for the air quality and because there was a ban on aerial spraying. When the ban was going to be overturned by the forestry department, she joined community organization Lincoln County Community Rights for people to protect themselves from herbicide and pesticide spraying. She supports them mostly through online means to avoid MCS triggers. Also part of Pollinator Habitat Corridor Project, which—in agreement with the Department of Transportation in Oregon—cares for twenty-five miles of Highway 101 to keep it free of invasive species so it doesn't have to be sprayed with pesticides and herbicides. While living in Lincoln County, has found that her health has improved but her MCS hasn't been reversed like she had hoped.

[00:32:05] Online support groups: Part of MCS Northwest and MCS TILT, which she uses for both scientific and product information support. These groups helped her find safe building materials for her house.

[00:33:48] Bed and breakfast: Ehly runs a fragrance-free bed and breakfast from the spare room in her house. This was a dream for her because she always wanted to travel but would get sick from the accommodations; she wanted to create a place where people with MCS can go without getting sick. Only uses natural and organic products and furniture. Advertised through Airbnb and then through word of mouth. Difficulties of running a bed and breakfast: Some people don't understand fragrance-free so she really has to screen guests; sometimes guests would bring scents home from when they were out. Thinks of it as a service to the community, being a resource for people with MCS.

[00:41:35] Finances: Felt fortunate that her late husband's salary could support the both of them. Eating organic and buying clean products is expensive. After he died, she later remarried, but when her second husband passed, he left her with a house that was falling apart so she had to pay to get it fixed. Her money was going towards supplements, massages, and other things to keep her healthy. She doesn't have any excess money.

[00:43:50] COVID: Caught COVID in March when visiting daughter and son-in-law in Portland. It was hard for her to recover all by herself. It's taken five months of recovery for her to start feeling more like herself, though she still doesn't have her sense of smell. Otherwise, social distancing is similar to her life already, though the isolation can still be tough.

[00:49:11] Likes to be around holistic and healthy people. Daughter is also sensitive and fragrance-free. Started Dynamic Neural Retraining System (DNRS), Annie Hopper's program to retrain the limbic system, with a group of people to encourage each other to overcome MCS together. Recalls her first husband's friends at NASA, who also didn't like fragrances.

[00:52:11] Discussion on race, gender identity, and chemical illness: Does not have observations on how race affects experience with chemical illness. Sees how women are exposed to toxic and unregulated products, either for beauty, or through their household labor such as laundry. Ehly

also added after the interview that she and her husband were treated differently for having MCS—she was fired while her husband’s employers helped him get Disability; she was also timid and felt uncomfortable advocating for herself while her husband asserted his needs. Hopes in ten years that people will have more compassion and understanding of MCS. Thirty-five years ago she made the commitment to eat organic, but it was hard to find products—now organic is everywhere. Hopes we will achieve this level of awareness for MCS, need to protect our bodies and the planet.

[00:55:18] Ending notes.