



## 2024 REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS

### Identifying a Self-Management Solution to Support Depression Management for People Living with Multiple Sclerosis

**Objective** The mission of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society is to cure multiple sclerosis (MS) while empowering individuals affected by MS to live their best lives. A high-priority objective is to improve the treatment of depression for people with MS. The first step in addressing this need is identifying strategies to help people overcome barriers and pursue resources to manage their depression.

**Background** Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic, immune-mediated disorder of the central nervous system. MS may follow a relapsing or progressive disease pattern, with a wide range of symptoms and challenges that people may need help managing. Common symptoms include changes in cognition and ambulation, as well as changes in mental health that often result in reduced quality of life. Approximately 50% of people with MS report having episodes of depression. Disease-modifying therapies have had a considerable effect on long-term disease outcomes, with the natural history of MS changing substantially over the past 20 years; however, disease-modifying therapies do not directly affect mental health symptoms.

Despite strong evidence linking MS and depression, it frequently remains undiagnosed, untreated, or undertreated, negatively affecting the person, family, and the larger economy. Evidence suggests that untreated depression and depression-related disorders (e.g., anxiety) exacerbates other symptoms, including fatigue, pain, and cognition, reducing quality of life. Furthermore, depression can be life-threatening. Addressing mental health symptoms like depression provides additional opportunities to reduce the burden of living with MS.

Social determinants can also affect MS-related depression including the impact of societal infrastructures, health care, and social support. The overall economic burden of MS is \$85.4 billion, of which 74% are direct medical costs (\$63.3 billion). The cost of mental health care specifically for people living with MS can vary depending on factors such as location, severity of the symptoms, and unique individual needs which often limit treatment overall. Depression care often requires financial support for therapy or counseling, medications, visits to psychiatrists or psychologists, support groups or programs, and diagnostic tests, all in the context of additional comorbidities. Costs can range widely, and insurance coverage plays a significant role.

The National MS Society recognizes the significant role that depression plays in people's lives as a consequence of the disease. Information and resources about depression are freely available

on the Society's website, in addition to a variety of virtual and in-person social connection opportunities. Trained MS Navigators, employed by the Society, provide assistance, information, and access to resources, addressing the common concern of depression among people with MS. These professionals offer emotional support, information on treatment options, and connections to mental health specialists and support groups, with limited financial support. However, a limitation with these approaches has been determining how to encourage people to utilize the resources on their own, and more specifically, self-tailor the approach to their needs over time.

We are seeking innovative, scalable, intervention approaches to support people in managing their depression. A significant gap is that we don't have a sustainable way to get people living with MS the expert care they need to manage depression in their environment. Limited availability of expert care providers, local resources, and support groups can hinder access to necessary mental health services, particularly for those in remote areas. The Society acknowledges the importance of long-term follow-up and continuity of care, as individuals often need ongoing mental health support even after their initial engagement with the Society. Addressing a critical need like depression poses several challenges, and the Society is committed to finding solutions that meet people where they are along their MS journey.

Depression has a significant impact on the lives of people with MS and approaches to identify and manage depression have many limitations, including identifying the right expert, insurance coverage, accounting for social drivers of health, and access to sustainable care. **This RFA is designed to bridge the gap of limited support for managing depression in MS by identifying steps to help people overcome personal barriers and pursue the resources they need.**

**Purpose of the RFA** This Request for Applications supports research aimed at recognizing the unique constraints that result from depression and depression-related disorders (e.g., social stigma, low activation energy), understanding the needs of individuals with MS who have depression (e.g., financial, time), and exploring tailored approaches. **A key element of this RFA is to promote the use of evidence-based tools or interventions that promote individual capacity and autonomy while optimizing available resources so people can continue to manage their individual needs.**

**The scope of this initiative** The primary focus is the identification of a usable solution (e.g., tool, process, application) that can be scaled and implemented across broad healthcare environments, so people can be informed and autonomous in managing their depression and depression-related disorders. An essential component involves formulating a strategy to implement and sustain the evidence-based solution, ensuring its viability amid settings with variable external support.

### **Areas of specific interest to impact the treatment of depression in MS**

- Self-management Interventions for depression or depression-related disorders that can be implemented by the Society or other community health organizations
- Studies that evaluate the use of an application or other digital health intervention that could be tailored for people with MS
- Study of virtual interventions to address the constraints of depression in the MS population
- Scalable implementation approaches that are flexible enough to be used with people of diverse backgrounds and situations across broad healthcare environments including the United States and Canada.
- Interventions that may require touch points (or check-ins) from volunteers or other lay persons
- Baseline factors that may predict engagement with the treatment and treatment responsiveness

### **Areas NOT supported**

- Implementation that requires a mental health provider, physician, physician's assistant or nurse practitioner to deliver the treatment
- Implementation that requires ongoing financial support
- Methods focused on drug development, or drug development in combination with other therapies
- Methods not focused on depression or depression-related disorders

### **Submission guidelines and process:**

**Qualified Institutions:** This RFA is open to investigators affiliated with not-for-profit research institutions. Collaborations with commercial organizations are allowed.

**Funding:** Funding will be provided through a 2-year research grant-style mechanism with up to \$200,000 USD total expense.

**Preliminary Data:** Applicants are expected to provide preliminary data in support of their hypothesis and demonstrating the feasibility of the proposed studies.

### **Important dates:**

- Pre-applications will be accepted beginning: **September 5, 2024**
- Final date for acceptance of pre-applications: **October 25, 2024 | 5:00 pm Eastern Time**
- Those invited to submit full applications will be informed on or around **November 1, 2024**
- Final date for receipt of full applications: **December 18, 2024 | 5:00 pm Eastern Time**

The National MS Society's grant application process involves a two-stage review. In Stage 1, applicants must submit a 2-page pre-application through the MS Grants platform, briefly describing their proposed research by responding to the questions. This pre-application is reviewed by Society staff to ensure alignment with the initiative's objectives, and applicants whose projects meet the scope will be invited to proceed to Stage 2. It is strongly recommended that potential applicants consult with Society scientific staff before submission. In Stage 2, invited applicants will submit a full proposal including a detailed narrative (not exceeding 8 pages) and a budget, which will be reviewed by an external peer-review committee. All proposal information and submission instructions can be accessed via the MSGrants portal at <https://nmss.fluxx.io>.

Applicants are encouraged to contact Society scientific staff for clarification of any issues or questions regarding this RFA.

**Society Staff Contacts:**

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