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### ***News Articles to be sent to:***

**[comms@mutual-support.org.uk](mailto:comms@mutual-support.org.uk)**

### **Newsletter Deadline:**

**Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2025**

Please see the link to Mutual Support on the MS Society [website](#).

Mutual Support exists for serving and ex-serving members of the Armed Forces and Reserves, their dependents and carers affected by MS.

## FOREWORD

Dear all,

Well here we are in what feels like the start of Spring. Let's hope so as we could all do with a top up of Vit D. The role of Vitamin D which the body harvests from the sun, has been the focus of a lot of research in recent years. I am not a health professional or an expert in MS, so I wouldn't want to talk about the benefits of Vit D supplements. What I can say is a bit of sun helps people feel happier. Although it might be too early to pack those winter clothes away!

The Coordination team are busy getting ready for what once again promises to be a fantastic Wellbeing weekend on the 16 – 18<sup>th</sup> May 2025 at the [Hayes Christian Conference Centre](#) in Derbyshire. Please email Jill at [eventsmanager@mutual-support.org.uk](mailto:eventsmanager@mutual-support.org.uk) if you still need an application form.

Jill and I attended our first one in 2011, which was almost immediately after her diagnosis. We were apprehensive about attending but saw the range of MS people lived with from those with very few invisible symptoms to those with severe mobility issues. Everyone's MS journey will be different.

Mutual Support weekends are about having fun, sharing information, supporting carers, young people and people with MS.

The Coordinating team places great emphasis on considering the needs of newly diagnosed individuals and their families when organising these weekends. We frequently have young people accompanied by their parents, and we facilitate activities to help them connect with other children whose parents have MS, thereby fostering understanding. The MS Society provides useful publications such as "[Our Dad Makes The Best Boats](#)" or "[Our Mum Makes The Best Cakes](#)", which can aid in explaining the condition. Additionally, we offer a carers session led by a professional carer, where participants are encouraged to express themselves freely. Adherence to 'Chatham House Rules' is essential for this session.

When Jill received her diagnosis we were full of questions, will she die, can our children get it, will she need a wheelchair. So we turned to Google and immediately scared ourselves. Margaret Shepherd, our Support Team Contact, put her arms around us and introduced us to the Mutual Support family, which was the best thing we've ever done. Now after many years we are both part of the Mutual Support Coordination Team, paying it forward.

I would like to welcome our new Mutual Support members that have joined us since January. Steven and Rachel Bircumshaw, Ian and Karen Davies, Molly Hughes and Taylor Murrant, Robin and Aria McDermott.



**Jim Watson – Group Coordinator.**

## September 2024 – Wellbeing Weekend @ Hayes Christian Conference Centre



In September 2024 Mutual Support held their well-being weekend at the Hayes Christian Conference Centre, just one of the few suitable centres that have the number of accessible rooms we need. Members started to arrive from 1500 to 1600 hrs in the afternoon but you can arrive at any time after this, bearing in mind that dinner (all meals provided free of charge) is on from around 1800 hrs. Travel is usually difficult on a Friday so let us know if you're going to be late and the caterers will prepare a packed meal for you.

The format of the weekends follows those of the meeting held in September.

Friday evening, we welcomed members and held a quiz to break the ice and let friends reconnect or make new friends. The fully stocked bar usually helps! On Saturday we have featured speakers and therapy sessions, with frequent breaks to avoid fatigue. The speakers for September included an elite level sportsperson (RAF Veteran), an MS Nurse, Canine Partners, Sportability (seated yoga), Jason providing alternative therapies, free therapies (massages etc), a carers session and activities for the children/young people. Tea, coffee, and biscuits are always available throughout our stay.



On Saturday evening we had a formal Battle of Britain themed dinner to commemorate the few. This involved members either wearing Mess Dress, wearing 1940s clothing or wearing whatever they wanted. We were piped in by Pete and Jan who have become great friends of Mutual Support and often perform for us. There was then a fantastic meal interspersed with the usual vignettes to give members an idea of the timeline and history of the Battle of Britain.

After the dinner we were royally entertained by the Boogaloo Babes who performed many genres and the eras from 1940 to the current day. Again the bar was open and this year, unlike our first year at the venue, the bar did not run out!



After Sunday breakfast, we regrouped and the coordinating team invited members to provide feedback on what they thought of the weekend and what they would like to see at future weekends. Finally, members could either stay for a hot meal at lunch or collect a packed meal to go.

Judging by the pictures everyone had a fantastic time. The coordination team works hard to ensure that they cater for everybody.

We are unable to confirm the speakers for May 2025, but we look forward to seeing as many of you as possible.



## Coordinating Team Vacancies

**Newsletter Editor** – The Newsletter Editor is responsible to the Group Coordinator for the compilation and dissemination of the newsletter to all members. Duties include: -

- Submit a draft of the newsletter to the Group Coordinator or Deputy for final approval. Once approved, send an email copy for upload to the Website, Facebook, or Audio Newsletter.
- Clearly define whether submitted articles are personal views, experiences, or statements of fact. Verify the accuracy of factual statements.

**Fundraising Manager** – We are seeking a Fundraising Team Manager responsible for planning, organizing, and coordinating all fundraising activities for Mutual Support. Fundraising ensures we can continue providing two wellbeing weekends per year. Duties include: -

- Working with the Finance Volunteer regarding funds/donations raised.
- Managing the charity pots.
- Supporting individuals conducting fundraising activities.
- Recruit volunteers to organise fundraising events.
- Engaging with the Publicity Volunteer to promote future fundraising events.

## Membership Report March 2025

Our membership coordinator Graham 'Hunky Dunk' Duncan has analysed our membership data and produced the following breakdown:

- Presently have 1189 members, of which 535 have MS.
- 56 serving, 373 veterans, 99 dependents with MS & 7 x civilians with MS (Honorary members).
- There are 222 females and 313 males with MS.
- We support 683 children, spouses and partners, without MS.

If you come across anyone either serving or retired or with a dependent with a link to MS, then please tell them about us, that's how we have managed to reach so many of our new members.

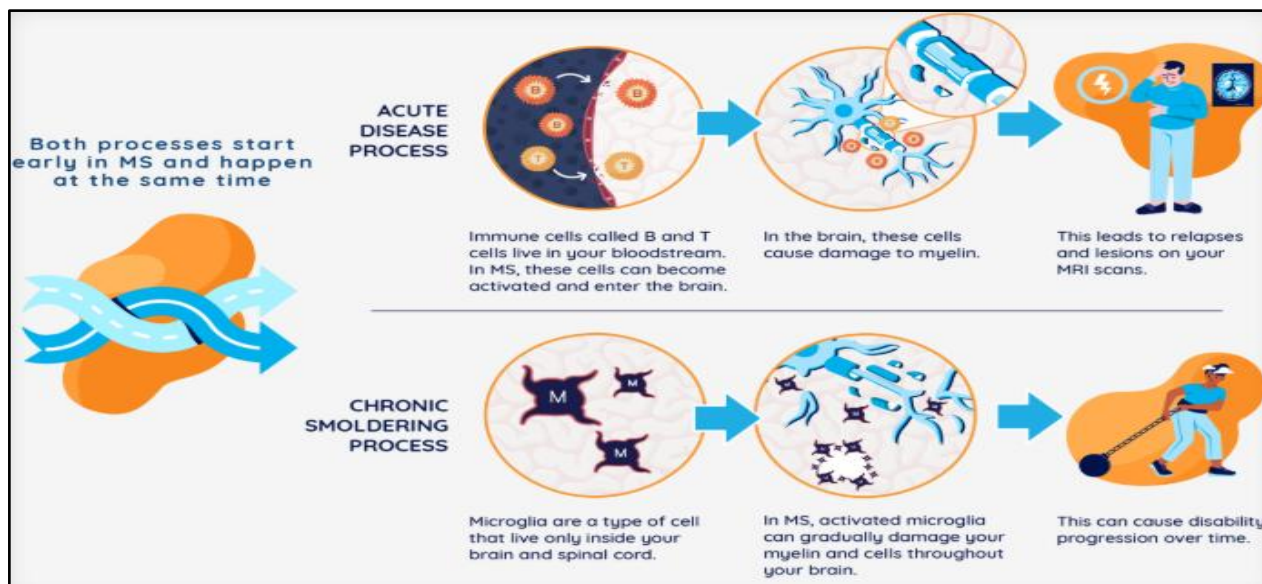
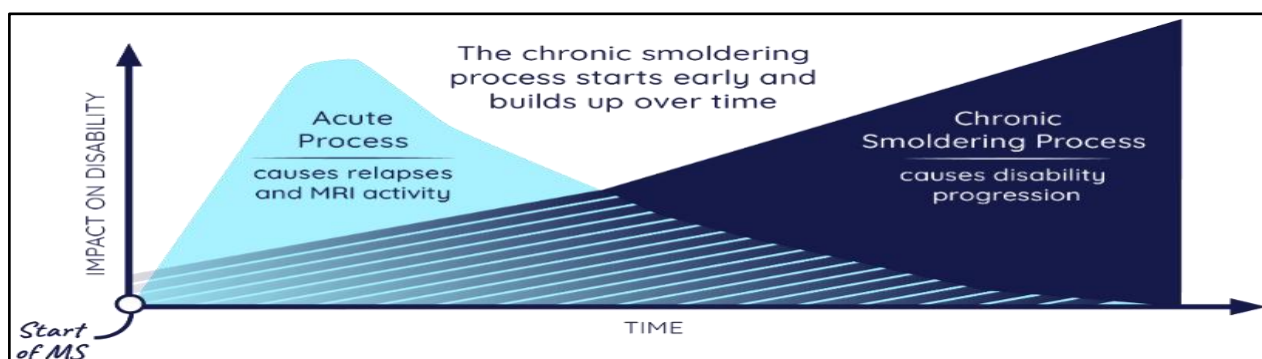


[Facebook](#) - There are 385 members who belong to our Facebook page, with 298 active members. If you aren't yet a member of our Facebook page, just search for, 'mutual support - the armed forces UK MS charity' and Graham will sort out your application right away.

## A New Understanding of MS progression

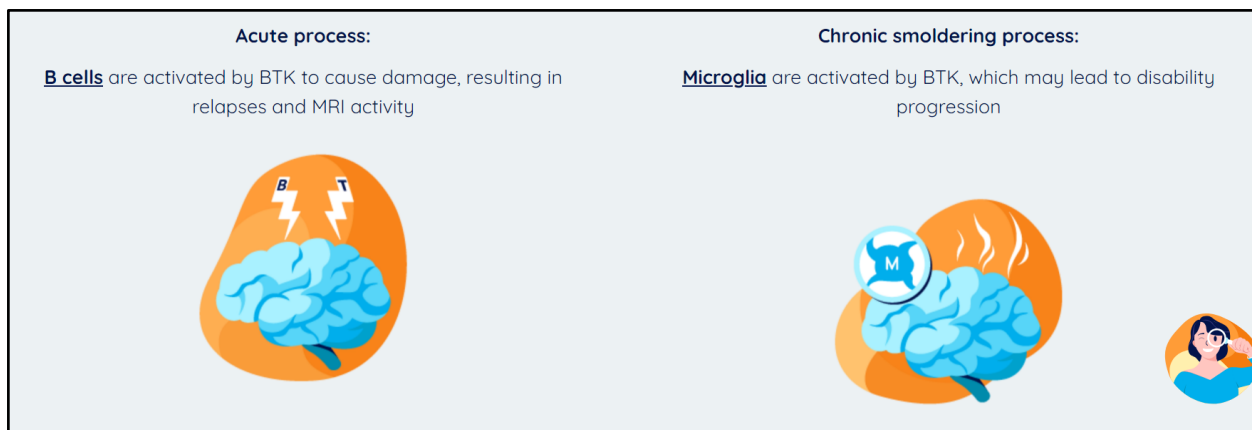
Bill Land was recently advised by his consultant that a new understanding of MS might be a factor in his MS progression. The research shows how and why MS can get worse without evidence of recent relapses or MRI activity. This new understanding of what is known as the 'chronic smouldering process' and how it causes disability progression is inspiring a new era of MS research.

The **acute process** has been well understood for years—it primarily causes **relapses** and **MRI activity**. The evolving science of MS is around understanding how the **chronic smoldering process** leads to **disability progression**. Both the chronic smoldering process and the acute process can be happening at the same time but can affect you in different ways:



## How do the two processes work

The chronic smoldering process can gradually cause damage to the brain and spinal cord, which leads to disability progression. This process begins before the first symptoms are noticed and causes disability to slowly build up over time. There's an enzyme called **Bruton's Tyrosine Kinase (BTK)** that plays a role in both processes.



## A new era of MS research is on the horizon

Today's MS therapies have come a long way in how they treat the acute process to control relapses and MRI activity. But many people with MS still experience disability progression. That means there's more to address when it comes to the chronic smoldering process.

Today's therapies are unable to do both of the things that are believed to address the chronic smoldering process:

1. Get inside the brain where the process happens.
2. Make a meaningful impact on microglia, a cell involved in the process.

This important understanding of the chronic smoldering process is inspiring a new era of MS research. The MS Society is just at the start of their understanding and has a lot to learn.

For more information please navigate to this [A new development in MS](#).

## BLACKTHORN RALLY 24 (BR24) - TANZANIA

**25 SEP – 6 OCT 2024**

When it comes to epic adventures, the Blackthorn Rally 2024 (BR24) in Tanzania certainly didn't disappoint! As a third-time rally participant, I thought I'd seen it all in Morocco and Kenya, but

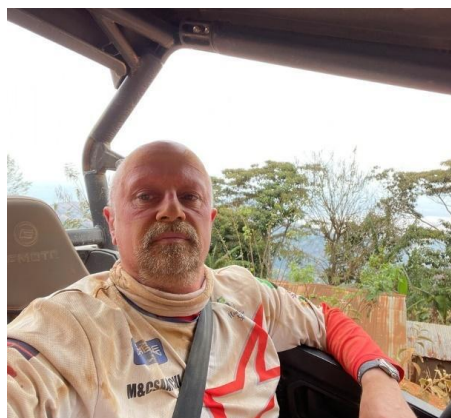


Figure 1- (Author - Chilling in a RZR)

Tanzania brought its own flavour of excitement to the table. Picture this: 26 adventurous souls, including four Blesma members (who, between us, had "no working legs" but plenty of spirit!), taking on the rugged terrain of East Africa. For those wondering about the "Blackthorn" name – it's a nod to our Irish Guards founder, who brought together this band of veteran motor enthusiasts for off-road adventures across Africa.

Our expedition kicked off with what I'll fondly call a "character-building" journey from Heathrow to Dar Es Salaam via Qatar, before finally reaching Arusha. After catching some much-needed shut-eye and refuelling with food, we were raring to go. One quick RZR

modification later (hand controls fitted – check!), and we were off on our ambitious 250-300 km daily adventures.

## Highlights That'll Stay With Me

- The majestic Kilimanjaro standing guard over our routes.
- Dancing through the infamous "fesh fesh" dust clouds.
- The signature "four-man wheelchair lift" manoeuvres (more on that later!).
- Meeting the locals who shared our enthusiasm.
- Close encounters with giraffes and elephants that had us grinning like kids.

Post-rally, we treated ourselves to some R&R at the Bluebay Beach Resort in Zanzibar. Picture this: a fancy dress party featuring two very convincing giraffes, some ambitious souls trying parachuting and kite surfing,

While others (myself included) conducted serious "hydration research" by the pool. All in the name of recovery, of course!

Now, here's where things got interesting. Day-one evening, I'm in my wheelchair, eager to join the gang at the bar/restaurant. A few steps stood in our way – no problem, right? We've done the four-man lift routine before. Well, the universe had other plans, and with one almighty crack, my wheelchair decided it had had enough adventures for one day.

There I was, suddenly transported back to those early diagnosis days, facing a wave of emotions about independence and mobility. But here's the beautiful thing about being surrounded by an incredible support network – what could have been a rally-ending moment turned into just another story to tell. Within 24 hours, I had a replacement chair and was back in action, thanks to my fellow Rally member's experience and our amazing team's support.

BR24 wasn't just about the thrills (though there were plenty!). We're proud to have supported the Arusha Giraffe Centre in their vital work protecting Masai giraffes. We even met their newest resident, Lottie, and saw firsthand how our contributions are making a difference.



Figure 2 -(Author - Dressed for action)



Figure 3 - (Lottie)

Word on the street is that 2025 marks the 10-year anniversary of the Blackthorn Rally. Where will we end up next? Stay tuned – this adventurer will keep you posted!!!

The real takeaway? It's not just about the incredible landscapes or the adrenaline rushes – it's about the people who turn challenges into triumphs and strangers into family. Special thanks to Ben, our fearless leader, and to everyone who made BR24 an unforgettable journey of resilience and camaraderie.

A video (19 mins) of the Rally (pictures paint 1000 words!) has been made, but needs to negotiate some copyright issues. When fixed, a link will be put on the Facebook group page. It is highly recommended to watch - of course I would say this, but it does capture much of what we did. For me it was certainly a journey of Resilience and Overcoming Adversity with an amazing team. Although the event was incredible, what made it really special was

the people involved. A strong lesson for us all – the power of a strong support network. Thank you, all members of the Blackthorn Rally. And thank you Mutual Support!!

Onwards! *Spencer Bull, Mutual Support Member.*



Figure 4 - (Kilimanjaro terrain)

## How to donate to Mutual Support

By Bank Transfer:

MSS Mutual Support

Acct No: 40714887

Sort Code: 20-82-94

By cheque: Payable to 'MSS Mutual Support' and posted to:

Jack Russell, 4 Church Green, Formby, Merseyside, L37 2LN

If you are a UK taxpayer, please complete a gift aid declaration so that your donation earns an extra 25% from the taxman.

First name/initial(s)\_\_\_\_\_Surname\_\_\_\_\_Full Home address

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**Boost your donation by 25p of**

**Gift Aid for every £1 you donate!**

In order to Gift Aid your donation you must complete the info below: I want to Gift Aid my donation of £\_\_\_\_\_

to: MUTUAL SUPPORT

I am a UK taxpayer and understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax in the current tax year than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations it is my responsibility to pay any difference

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

Please notify the charity if you: want to cancel this declaration, change your name or home address or no longer pay sufficient tax on your income and/or capital gains. If you pay Income Tax at the higher or additional rate and want to receive the additional tax relief due to you you must include all your Gift Aid donations on your Self-Assessment tax return or ask HM Revenue and Customs to adjust your tax code.



## MUTUAL SUPPORT COORDINATING TEAM & VOLUNTEER LIST

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<b>Jack Russell</b> Finance Volunteer	<b>07855 434 921</b> <a href="mailto:finance@mutual-support.org.uk">finance@mutual-support.org.uk</a>
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<b>Silke Land</b> Events Volunteer (2) Hosting	<b>07746 603 711</b> <a href="mailto:events2@mutual-support.org.uk">events2@mutual-support.org.uk</a>
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<b>Fiona Dangerfield</b> Events Volunteer (4) Speakers	<b>07814 112 437</b> <a href="mailto:speakers@mutual-support.org.uk">speakers@mutual-support.org.uk</a>
<b>Rachel Harris</b> Events Volunteer	<b>07393 854 330</b>
<b>VACANT</b> Comms Volunteer (Newsletter)	<a href="mailto:comms@mutual-support.org.uk">comms@mutual-support.org.uk</a>
<b>Stuart Davey</b> Comms Volunteer (Publicity)	<b>07799 764876</b> <a href="mailto:publicity@mutual-support.org.uk">publicity@mutual-support.org.uk</a>
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<b>Andrew Williams</b> Support Volunteer	<b>07958 524 298</b> <a href="mailto:stc1@mutual-support.org.uk">stc1@mutual-support.org.uk</a>
<b>Helen Spear</b> Support Volunteer	<a href="mailto:stc2@mutual-support.org.uk">stc2@mutual-support.org.uk</a>

**Thank you to all of our benefactors who enable us to continue our good work**

