

Understanding Emotions and Stress with Diabetes

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Healthful living includes taking care of your body, mind, and spirit. Learning that you have diabetes can be tough. And living with diabetes every day is not simple. This can lead to many different emotions and stresses. On some days you may handle it better than other days. With diabetes education and support you can learn how to balance your life and diabetes care.

What you can learn from this brochure:

- Common emotional responses to diabetes
- Tips for managing lifestyle changes
- Effects of stress on diabetes
- What support systems help you with diabetes

Common Emotional Responses to Diabetes

Everyone has their own story about being diagnosed with diabetes. Each story is important. If you have family members or friends with diabetes you may think your story will be the same as their story. But no two stories are the same. Some people adjust to the diagnosis of diabetes easily while others find it harder. Most people feel some loss, fear, and anger when they are diagnosed. These are normal feelings. Learning how to take care of diabetes often relieves these feelings. Loss, fear, and anger usually improve over the first few months after being diagnosed.

Some people are unable to accept the diagnosis of diabetes. You may have a sense of disbelief that you have an illness.

You may say “I have a touch of diabetes” and do not see the need to change your lifestyle or take your medicine. This is a red flag that you may need help in coping with the diagnosis of diabetes. The sooner you talk about your feelings the better. Once you start to take care of your diabetes you can see how much better you feel in body, mind, and spirit.

One out of 3 people feel very stressed, anxious, or depressed. People with diabetes are more likely to have major depression at some point in their life than people without diabetes. If you have symptoms of major depression or have very intense feelings you may want to talk with a therapist. Ask your diabetes team if they know a therapist who would match your needs.

Signs of Major Depression

1. Feeling sad, blue or depressed for more than two weeks
2. Unable to find joy in things you usually enjoy
3. Becoming easily frustrated
4. Being less patient with others
5. Eating too much or too little
6. Unable to sleep or sleeping too much
7. Low energy
8. Poor attention span
9. Not wanting to be around people
10. Little interest in sex
11. Thoughts about death or hurting yourself

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It is important to know that you can live a full life with diabetes. Many changes in diabetes care have occurred and more are happening all the time. There is reason to keep a hopeful outlook about taking care of your diabetes.

Tips for Managing Lifestyle Changes

Remember that everyone has a different diabetes story. If you know someone who did not take care of their diabetes or who had severe medical problems from diabetes, it does not mean the same thing will happen to you. And if you already have medical problems from diabetes, it does not mean it is too late for you. By making lifestyle changes that help you manage your diabetes, you can improve your health. The following steps may be helpful to you:

1. Learn what you need to do to take care of your diabetes.

Diabetes educators are experts at helping you to learn about diabetes self-care. Some people feel their diabetes team is like a second family and can talk to them about anything. Take your questions to your nurse, diabetes educator, dietitian, therapist, or doctor. Talk about your feelings, and do not be afraid to ask for help.

2. Become aware of what behaviors you want to change.

It may be helpful to keep records of your blood glucose numbers, the food you eat, exercise, and stress levels. By doing this you can learn how certain behaviors affect your blood glucose levels. You and your diabetes team can then set goals.

3. Set up a plan for behavior change.

Start with small changes and then make bigger changes. For example, do not expect to exercise for 30 minutes at a time if you have never exercised before. Start with setting aside 10 minutes a day to be active. When you start a new habit, it works best to follow routines at home and at work. Allow for changes if unexpected things come up. Life is not always the same. Changing old habits can be hard.

4. Be good to yourself.

It is important to be good to yourself when you make changes that improve your health. You are not expected to be perfect.

Try not to say hurtful things to yourself like “I was bad” or “I cheated.” Saying hurtful things to yourself only sets you up to fail the next time you try to make a change. Saying encouraging things to yourself, like “I’m trying my best”, helps you reach your goals.

You may want to set up a plan to reward yourself that includes fun activities with a friend or family member when you reach your goals.

5. Ask for help from friends and family.

People can not read your mind. Tell your family and friends how they can help you. One way friends and family members can help is by making changes with you. They might start exercising with you by joining a dance class or walking with you.

Diabetes Burnout

Diabetes burnout is the feeling that you can have when your level of stress about diabetes is more than you can manage. This can occur when you feel sick and tired of making lifestyle changes or when the emotions about having diabetes are more than you can handle.

Everyone feels some diabetes burnout from time to time. This is because the changes and emotions that happen with diabetes are life long. It helps to know that you do not have to be perfect in managing your diabetes. Keep in mind, perfect is for the moment and diabetes is for a lifetime.

Real-Life Stories from People with Diabetes

I always thought only weak people needed help coping, and I’m not weak. But I can’t seem to do what I know I should to manage my blood glucose. I finally took a chance and decided to see a therapist. My health plan gave me the name of a therapist who didn’t know anything about diabetes. I resented having to spend all my time teaching the therapist about diabetes, and I never went back. My diabetes educator encouraged me to try again and gave me a few names of therapists who knew about diabetes issues. One of them was in my health plan. I was nervous at the first visit but quickly relaxed. This therapist is helping me find my own answers, and I feel like I am making progress. I took a chance, found the right person, and it’s paying off.

Jill M. age 56 • type 2 diabetes

Burnout can lead to depression. If you feel burned out or depressed, you are not going to have the energy to make lifestyle changes or feel good about your life in general. If you feel burned out or depressed talk to someone you trust who can help you to find balance in your life again.

Effects of Stress on Diabetes

With stress, some people see their blood glucose numbers go up and others people see their numbers go down. Stress makes it hard to keep your blood glucose on track for two main reasons:

1. Stress makes it hard to pay attention to your diabetes. You may not be able to focus on taking care of yourself when you are trying to deal with other things. You may either eat too much or not enough. You may avoid physical activity or forget to take your medicines.
2. Everyone makes stress hormones when under stress. Your blood glucose may change because of your body’s stress hormones.

Active Ways to Manage Stress

The following are some active ways that you can use to manage stress:

- Talk to someone you trust about your stress.
- Allow time to pray or meditate.
- Find ways to laugh and spend time with people you enjoy.
- Be physically active.
- Take short breaks throughout the day.
- Get help instead of trying to do everything yourself.
- Set limits on what you will do for others.
- Schedule only those things you can really complete each day. Work on one thing at a time.
- Take up a hobby or activity you enjoy.
- Join a support group or online chat.
- Learn ways to relax such as deep breathing, yoga, dance or massage.
- Think of what you have done to help yourself. Do not put yourself down about the things you have not been able to do yet.

Ask the Diabetes Advisor

Question: How can I relax when I have so much stress in my life?

Mary F., age 47, type 2 diabetes

Answer: Ignoring stress or pretending it does not exist does not help and may actually hurt you. In general, people manage stress better if they find an active way to cope. You may be surprised by what laughing, talking about what bothers you, or exercising can do.

Effects of High and Low Blood Glucose on Emotions

You can have emotional changes with high and low blood glucose. When blood glucose is high, you may feel tired and not have enough energy to get things done. You may also worry about getting a diabetes problem from constant high blood glucose. If your blood glucose is too low you may argue, not be able to think clearly, or need help getting something to eat.

If your blood glucose is out of your target range most of the time, talk with your diabetes team about a change to your diabetes care plan.

Getting Support From Family and Friends Can Help with Diabetes

Your family and friends can be your most important support system because they care about you. But they cannot help you with diabetes unless they understand diabetes and you tell them what you want from them. Try some of these ideas for getting support:

- Ask them to learn about how diabetes affects your body and emotions.
- Ask for help when you need it.
- Invite them to attend your health-related visits or classes.
- Include them in your new healthful lifestyle.

Most people who care about you will want to know how diabetes affects you. They may have many questions or worries. You can teach them what you know about your diabetes so you can avoid misunderstandings. On the other hand you may need to let your friends or family know when you can manage things yourself.

Emotional Eating

Eating when you have diabetes can be tricky. Some people tie emotions to eating. You might eat because you are bored, angry, sad, lonely, frustrated or because you are celebrating, happy, joyful or just trying something new. On the other hand you may keep yourself from eating because you feel guilty eating or want to punish yourself. This could lead to a dangerous cycle of eating too much and then eating too little.

Many people grow up tying emotions to food rather than eating as a way to maintain health. To change this, first you need to identify when you overeat or under eat because of your emotions. Then learn new ways of coping with those emotions. Try some of the tips from page 3 for managing stress.

Issues at Work

You may feel uncomfortable talking about your diabetes at work. You may not feel that it is okay for you to test your blood glucose or eat when you are supposed to. If you do feel this way, you are not alone.

You may be able to find support from your manager and co-workers in taking care of your diabetes. They may have a friend or family member with diabetes and understand your needs.

There are laws that protect people with diabetes from work place discrimination. If you want more information about these laws, you can contact the ADA at 1-800-DIABETES (342-2383).

Get Involved. Be part of the answer.

People often feel better when they are helping others. You can energize yourself by being active:

- Raise money for diabetes research.
- Help someone else who has diabetes.
- Take part in a research study on diabetes.

Real-Life Stories from People with Diabetes

When I was diagnosed with diabetes, my mother started to make “diet foods” for me to eat at the holidays. She also reminded others not to pass the “regular foods “ to me. I felt so embarrassed that I didn’t want to go to her house anymore. My wife listened to my concerns and suggested that I talk to my mother. I decided she was right so I explained to my mother that she didn’t need to make special foods for me. She was actually relieved. By speaking up, now I have the support of my wife, mother and the rest of my family.

Tom L., age 45 • type 1 diabetes

For More Information

To get more information about diabetes, contact the American Diabetes Association:

- Call 1-800-DIABETES (342-2383) or send an email to AskADA@diabetes.org, and ask for free copies of:
 - Diabetes Advisor, Number 1, *Understanding Type 1 Diabetes*
 - Diabetes Advisor, Number 2, *Understanding Type 2 Diabetes*
 - Diabetes Advisor, Number 5, *Checking Blood Glucose: What It Can Do for You*
 - Diabetes Advisor, Number 8, *Making Physical Activity a Part of Your Routine*
 - Diabetes Advisor, Number 9, *Sweets and Desserts for People with Diabetes*
 - Diabetes Advisor, Number 11, *Eating for Health*
 - Diabetes Advisor, Number 14, *Learning About Diabetes Pills*
 - Diabetes Advisor, Number 15, *Insulin for Type 2 Diabetes*
 - Diabetes Advisor, Number 19, *Practical Tips for Healthful Eating*, and other brochures in the Diabetes Advisor series
- Go to www.diabetes.org

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