Diabetes and Emotions

Understanding and Coping With the Emotional Aspects of Diabetes
A TRUEinsight™ Guide about understanding and coping with the emotional aspects of diabetes

When a doctor tells a patient “You have diabetes” it’s usually surprising – if not shocking – to hear. Even if the patient thought he or she might have diabetes, it’s natural to be fearful of learning about the diagnosis. When you are diagnosed with diabetes, it can be stressful and seriously affect your emotions.

Most people learning that they have diabetes experience a range of emotions, starting with denial and also including fear, guilt, anger, confusion and depression. These emotions are similar to what a person experiences when they lose a loved one, or lose a pet they have had for a long time.

The goal is to accept your diagnosis and learn to manage it. This won’t happen all at once, but by using proven skills that have worked well for others, you can start on the road to acceptance. By taking the first step and accepting your diabetes, you will feel empowered to do the right things to manage diabetes and improve your health and well-being.

It’s also important to realize that you are not alone when it comes to a diagnosis of diabetes. According to the CDC, in 2011, 25.8 million people in the U.S. were diagnosed with diabetes!

Let’s first take a look at the emotions mentioned above and how you may experience them, then explore practical, proven ways to understand and cope with these emotions.
Emotions you may experience and ways to cope

**Denial**

At first, you may feel numb when diabetes is diagnosed. Some people even talk themselves into believing that the diagnosis is incorrect and can’t possibly be true. This is dangerous, because it can lead to a refusal to take the proper steps to manage the disease.

Denial may also occur later in your management plan. Some individuals make progress with diabetes but then return to a state where all the information and changes in lifestyle become too much to deal with, and they again return to continuing behaviors that they had before being diagnosed.

**Examples:** Thinking that it’s okay to eat a lot of certain foods, delaying a visit to your doctor, or stopping physical activity. It’s even easier to do this if you have few or no symptoms that your blood glucose levels may be high. It’s critical for your health that you understand and believe that diabetes will now be a constant part of your life.

**Coping with denial**

Create and maintain a diabetes care plan that includes your healthcare goals. Be sure you know why each goal is important. Be gentle with yourself, and realize that it will take time to reach these goals. If you find you are denying some parts of your diabetes care, then ask your diabetes educator for help. If you have trouble with your food plan, then speak with a registered dietitian. Together, you can come up with solutions.

Talk to friends and family to see how they can help. Let them know that you are trying to make healthy choices and would appreciate any support they can offer. Talk with them about how you take care of your diabetes. You may even find that they might want to adopt some of your healthy habits.
Coping with fear

The key to overcoming fear is to gain knowledge and understanding of diabetes. The more you know about the disease, the more power you will have to take better care of yourself and successfully handle your self-management plan. Talking with others who have diabetes – through local hospital or community organizations, in person or by joining on-line support groups – can be helpful.

Even if you are afraid, you never want to stop taking care of yourself as this will only make things worse. Take the following healthy steps to deal with the fears you are experiencing:

- Know the facts about the risk of long-term complications from diabetes
- When your fears become frightening, remind yourself of the facts, and that thanks to your diabetes care plan – you have techniques to overcome fears and stop bad things from happening
- Stick to your plan because it can benefit you in powerful ways

Guilt

It’s common for those diagnosed with diabetes to experience conflict about having hurt others. You might blame yourself for developing unhealthy habits that led to this diagnosis. Or you may feel ashamed and embarrassed.

Coping with guilt

One strategy in dealing with guilt is to turn it in to regret. Regret allows you to put unhealthy behaviors behind you so that you can focus on moving forward and making smarter choices. Understand that you did the best you could in a particular situation at a certain time in the past, and that you can and will improve by living a healthy lifestyle from here on out.

Rather than feeling guilty, take charge of your diabetes by empowering yourself. Reward yourself for what you’re doing right now, rather than dwelling on what you may have done wrong. Learn from those mistakes, and try to bring a new perspective to your diabetes care. For example, when reviewing your blood glucose results, don’t think “good” or “bad,” think within or outside of your target. Talk about taking “checks,” not “tests.” If you do have a day where your behavior and lifestyle aren’t ideal, then view it as a learning experience that has given you the information necessary to do the right things the next day.
Anger is a natural emotion, and if positively viewed, can be a motivation to help you accomplish healthier behavior changes. Yes, you are unsure of your health and future, feel that you have lost some control in your life, and are asking, "Why me?!" There can also be anger about having to change your lifestyle and adopt a new set of behaviors. It’s also possible that ongoing anger can affect your blood glucose levels. If you experience anger that interferes with your diabetes management, talk with your healthcare professional.

Coping with anger
Discover what is making you angry and how this anger is affecting your life. Keep a record of when you feel angry, then review it each evening. When and why were you angry? How did you react or cope?

After a few weeks, review your records and look for patterns. You may find that certain things trigger your anger, and you can work with your emotions to avoid those situations. Better yet, understand them and how to effectively accept the anger, work through it, and more successfully deal with it.

Try to change the thoughts, physical responses, and actions that fuel your anger. Look for warning signs that your anger is building. Do you feel tense? Are you talking louder and faster? When you feel anger taking over, calm yourself by:

- Talking slowly
- Slowing your breathing
- Getting a drink of water
- Sitting down
- Remaining quiet

Doing things like this doesn’t mean you will stop feeling angry, but it does show that you are working on taking charge of your anger.
Managing your diabetes can seem overwhelming. Now there are so many changes necessary in your life: diet, exercise, checking your blood glucose levels, medications and more. Diabetes does impact your life, yet it presents a big opportunity for change; a wake-up call. We don’t always like change; yet gradually understanding all the new behaviors required, one step at a time, helps you stay calm and organized.

Coping with confusion
Writing a daily lifestyle plan is a great way to get the confusion of diabetes under control. This should include times to check your blood glucose levels, take medicine, participate in physical activities and eat healthy, nutritious meals. Making a list almost always helps, because you can now see all the elements of what you need to do. It stops diabetes care from seeming overwhelming, because you can now identify and understand the various “parts” of the plan and how they fit together.

Once you have a list of what you need to do, it’s much easier to put it into order and take an organized approach, and achieve greater peace of mind and lessen stress.

Depression
“THERE IS JUST TOO MUCH TO DO AND KEEP TRACK OF.”

It’s normal to have a period of grieving after your diagnosis. If your sadness and “dark” mood continue, then it could be a sign of depression. Depression is two times more likely in people with diabetes than the general population, and is also associated with less-than-ideal blood glucose management, health complications and a decreased quality of life.

Coping with depression
Recognize that complications of diabetes are not always as serious today as they were in previous decades. It is often possible to detect signs of complications much earlier now. This can mean faster treatment and better outcomes.

When your sad moods won’t go away and are affecting your ability to take care of your diabetes, get help. Depression is real and needs treatment. Depression can often be effectively treated with counseling, medication, or a combination of both.

As noted earlier, start taking action to manage your health in ways that are more positive. Feelings of depression are often linked to feeling powerless. Following a healthy meal plan, being more active, and engaging in stress-relieving activities are steps that can help.

Work hard to keep your blood glucose levels as close to normal as possible. When blood glucose levels are high, they can lead to mood changes that can result in depression. If you lose interest in life, experience low energy, have trouble sleeping, lose or gain weight, or experience other chronic signs of depression for more than a couple months, then talk with your healthcare professional.
The four-step path to better acceptance of your diabetes

When you learn about diabetes care it can be overwhelming, but it really comes down to four areas that you need to understand and focus on. Understand and act on these, and you’ll achieve greater peace of mind, and you will feel better.

1. Meal Planning
   For most people, a diabetes meal means eating a variety of foods in moderate amounts and sticking to regular meal times. A diet full of vegetables, fruits and whole grains is usually recommended. Consistency is important, as your body responds to excess carbohydrates and fat by creating an undesirable rise in blood glucose levels. Rather than being a punishment, your meal is really a healthy eating plan that’s naturally rich in nutrients and low in fat and calories. It’s actually an ideal way to eat for everyone.

2. Physical Activity
   Studies demonstrate that people with diabetes who perform regular physical activity and follow a healthy meal plan can improve their blood glucose levels and reduce the need for diabetes medications. Talk with your healthcare professional before starting an exercise program to make sure it’s fun, healthy and safe.

3. Medication
   Medications may be part of your recommended treatment plan. Insulin therapy helps people with type 1 diabetes as their bodies do not produce the insulin required to regulate blood glucose levels. Those with type 2 diabetes taking oral medications may also need insulin to keep blood glucose levels at desired targets. Medications work to lower blood glucose levels and can help prevent potential diabetic complications such as nerve and kidney damage, vision loss, and heart disease.

4. Blood Glucose Control
   Checking your blood glucose levels is an important part of a diabetes management plan. Regular self monitoring provides information about how your daily management plan is working to control blood glucose levels. Regular monitoring, as directed by your doctor, helps you understand your levels and adjust diet and lifestyle choices to keep levels within your target range.
Contact your insurance company or local diabetes association to find out if you qualify to receive diabetes self-management education. Remember, the more you learn about diabetes, the better you will be able to understand and manage your daily self-care program.

Below are some references for additional information about diabetes.

American Association of Diabetes Educators  
800-TEAM-UP-4  
www.aadenet.org

American Diabetes Association  
800-342-2383  
www.diabetes.org

Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International  
1-800-533-2873  
www.jdrf.org

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse  
800-860-8747  
www.niddk.nih.gov

Nipro Diagnostics, Inc.  
www.niprodiagnostics.com

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