

Ways to Stay Positive When You Have Diabetes

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Come on, get happy! Photo Credit: max-kegfire/iStock/GettyImages

Diabetes may be incredibly common, affecting nearly 10 percent of Americans, but that's little consolation when you're first diagnosed. After making it through the initial adjustment period, you may get the hang of the routine, but the constant vigilance needed to control your blood sugar can grow tiresome. As a result, you might stop taking good care of yourself — a phenomenon known as “diabetes burnout.” Or you might stick to your regimen, but still

find yourself feeling anxious, angry, frustrated or defeated. In fact, recent studies have shown that rates of depression are two to three times greater among people with diabetes.

That said, there are plenty of people with diabetes who lead happy, fulfilling lives. So how can you ensure that you are one of them? Here are seven expert-approved strategies for managing your diabetes while staying positive.

Be kind to yourself. If you're beating yourself up because you think it's your fault that you have diabetes, here is a reality check: Although being overweight and sedentary does raise your risk of Type 2 diabetes, it hardly guarantees it. “There are thin people who get Type 2 as well,” says Wendy Satin Rapaport, LCSW, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist and author of “When Diabetes Hits Home: The Whole Family's Guide to Emotional Health.” “Weight is only part of it. Genetics is a big part of it. Luck is a part of it.”

Rapaport also cautions clients against dwelling on their slip-ups. For example, if you eat more carbs than you should and end up with high blood sugar, don't berate yourself. “Self-talk is important,” she says. “Instead of saying, ‘I am so bad,’ tell yourself, ‘No wonder I'm sleepy; my blood sugar is high. I am so glad I tested.’”

You are not your disease. There is a difference between acknowledging and managing your illness and identifying fully with it. While staying on top of your condition is crucial to your health, other aspects of your life — your job, family, friends, hobbies — are just as important as they were before. “Remember, you're a person with diabetes, not a diabetic,” says Rapaport.

Knowledge is power. Part of the reason a diabetes diagnosis can feel like a blow is that so many myths persist about the condition. Maybe you assume that having diabetes means you can never enjoy a slice of cake again or that you'll have to quit traveling. None of these things is likely to be true, says psychotherapist and diabetes educator Eliot LeBow, LCSW, CDE. “Get as much education as possible,” he says. You will feel more apt to retain a sense of control as well as gain an understanding of how diabetes management can fit into your life without entirely upending it.

The caveat, of course, is that your info needs to come from good sources: Just because someone tells you something in a chat room does not make it true, LeBow warns. When it comes to sorting out facts from fiction, he suggests working closely with your doctor and a certified diabetes educator. Websites that are tied to major organizations like the American Diabetes Association are more likely to be reliable than those without a major affiliation.



Debunk diabetes myths with a little online sleuthing.

Debunk diabetes myths with a little online sleuthing. Photo Credit: @aschmidt0073 via Twenty20

Take control of your highs and lows.

Anyone who has ever gotten “hangry” has some idea about the connection between mood and blood sugar. For people with diabetes, this phenomenon can be more frequent — and more intense. “When your blood sugar is not well controlled, it can make you feel tired, irritable and depressed,” says Rapaport. While blood sugar highs tend to trigger feelings of lethargy and depression,

lows can make you feel anxious.

The best way to prevent blood sugar fluctuations from messing with your disposition is to keep your condition as tightly controlled as possible: Take your medication as prescribed, check your blood sugar regularly and follow your doctor’s advice about lifestyle changes. Meanwhile, pay attention to your body’s signals that your blood sugar may be going in the wrong direction and be prepared to act quickly. For example, you may want to carry some hard candies with you in case your blood sugar drops and you need to raise it quickly.

Educate loved ones — and make new friends. Friends and family members can be a great source of support — or a source of aggravation. In some cases, you may need to educate others about the kind of help you need from them. “Family conflict is very common,” says Rapaport. “Sometimes family members wonder, ‘Am I supposed to control what you eat? Yell at you if your blood sugar is too high?’” While those generally aren’t effective tactics, you might need to speak up and clearly state what is (and isn’t) helpful.

Meanwhile, Rapaport encourages patients to connect with other people who have diabetes. “I almost always match [clients] who are newly diagnosed with others who’ve had the disease for a while,” she says. While you shouldn’t rely on a friend — even one with diabetes — for medical advice, connecting with someone who really gets what you’re going through can help you feel less isolated.

Let it go. Everyone needs an outlet, and people who have diabetes are no different. Exercise is great stress buster, and chances are you can do the same type of activities you enjoyed before you were diagnosed or safely experiment with new ones, says LeBow. (Just check with your doctor to make sure.) Meditation and acupuncture work for many people too. Rapaport is a big fan of writing, even if it’s just keeping a personal journal: “Research shows that people who write about their illness do better,” she says, noting that jotting down your thoughts often helps you process them.

Express yourself — in writing — to feel better. Photo Credit: @bluelily52 via Twenty20



Express yourself — in writing — to feel better.

Accept help. “Many people find themselves grieving about their diagnosis,” says Rapaport. “And it is a loss — a loss of your ‘normal’ self.”

Just as you wouldn’t try to prescribe your own medication, it makes sense to turn to a trained expert for help navigating your feelings. “The moment you get a diagnosis, you should consider adding a social worker, psychologist or psychiatrist to your health care team — along with your endocrinologist and certified diabetes educator,” Rapaport adds.

LeBow agrees, adding that cognitive behavioral therapy provides extra emotional support and can be especially helpful for people who get stuck in a negative pattern of thinking. “If you take care of yourself emotionally, you’ll improve on disease management,” he says. “And if you improve on disease management, you’ll feel better physically as well as emotionally.” It’s a win-win.

What Do YOU Think? Which of these tips resonated with you the most? Anything we missed? Tell us how you keep a positive outlook while managing diabetes or any other chronic condition.

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