

Adjusting to life with diabetes

A diagnosis of diabetes can come as a shock. First reactions may be disbelief, sadness, anger or self-blame. Usually, these feelings ease after a while and diabetes becomes part of life. However, sometimes these feelings don't go away easily. If you feel this way, you are not alone. There are many things you can do to fit diabetes into your life.



“It was really scary because I didn't know much about it, I just had this whole perception that, ‘Oh, it's really bad, it's a life-long thing’, and I remember asking myself, ‘Why me?’.”

Sandra, 27, person with diabetes

Life with diabetes

It is common for people to go through emotional ‘ups and downs’ after diabetes is diagnosed. People may experience disbelief, grief, guilt, anger, fear, and negative feelings. Others may have a sense of relief that they now have a reason for how they have been feeling, both physically and emotionally.

At first, you may feel down for having concerns about how it is going to change your life. That is natural. It takes time to learn how to manage diabetes and to adapt your lifestyle.

However, when these emotions start to affect your daily life or diabetes management, it can become a serious problem. For example, if you are:

- » avoiding medical appointments because you are having trouble coping with the diagnosis
- » checking glucose levels excessively or not checking them at all due to anxiety or worry
- » blaming yourself (or others) for your diabetes or when things do not go well.

If you are having trouble adjusting to life with diabetes, talk to your health professional. They will assess the problem and help you work out strategies to live well with diabetes.

What you can do

Whether or not you feel distressed about your diabetes diagnosis, it's important to look after your emotional well-being.

Adjustment is an ongoing process, so it's essential for you to take care of yourself through all stages of diabetes.

Some of the following strategies may work for you – others may not, and that's okay. They may give you ideas about other things you could try.

Be informed

Understanding the basics of diabetes is a first and necessary step to managing and living well with diabetes. Take your time and gather information at your own pace.

A good place to start is by talking to your health professionals or by calling the diabetes organisation in your state or territory. If you are unsure about who to contact, call the NDSS Helpline on 1300 136 588 and they can direct you.

Take care when searching the internet for medical advice. Make sure you consult reliable sources (e.g., professional organisations).

Ask questions

At first you may feel overwhelmed with all the information you receive and with learning new skills to manage your diabetes. Sometimes, writing a list of questions and concerns is useful to get a better understanding of diabetes.

- » Bring this list along to your next diabetes appointment so you don't forget the questions or concerns you want to discuss with your health professional.

You may not remember everything that has been said during your previous consultation. If you are unsure, ask again next time. Your health professional will appreciate your questions, as it will help them to offer you the best support possible.

Learn from your peers

Experts are not the only health professionals; other people, like you, who have diabetes are also experts in living with diabetes. Often, the most practical support you can get is from people who understand what it is like to live with diabetes. It can be reassuring to know that others face similar challenges and to share ideas about how to cope with them.

Join a support group or an online community – read on to find out where you can access peer support.

Journal it

You might also like to note down your feelings in a journal. This can be a powerful way of understanding and dealing with some of your emotions.

You might surprise yourself with what you write down. This can be a private journal, or you may choose to share it with a friend or your health professional. It's completely up to you.

Include your family and friends

You don't have to go through this alone. Let your family and friends know how you feel if you are comfortable, so they can support you in your diabetes management. Communicate how much you want them to be involved and invite them to share their feelings too. You might like to say things like:

- » *“I'm still the same person I was before I was diagnosed with diabetes.”*
- » *“I know I don't look sick, but sometimes I may not feel great.”*
- » *“Diabetes is an invisible illness, which means you can't always see my symptoms, but they are very real.”*

Not all your family and friends will know how to respond to your emotions, and they may even be uncomfortable seeing you hurt. Don't let that stop you from opening up.

Some people are better at supporting in more practical ways. For example, you may find that they can help you to make healthy food choices, get more physically active, or be considerate about your need to check your glucose level or inject insulin.

Remember, it is completely up to you who you choose to involve in your diabetes management.

Make a plan

Developing a plan for your health care — including your emotional health — is essential. Start small and work your way up. You might like to include your family or friends in this process too. Here are some tips to help get you started:

- » Make an appointment with your health professional to talk about your diabetes (e.g., to discuss any questions or concerns you have).
- » Get information from the NDSS on various topics (e.g., medication, insulin, nutrition, events, support groups).
- » Connect with other people living with diabetes.
- » Talk to your school or employer about your current issues, if it seems helpful, then work with them to achieve the best results.
- » Plan regular physical activity.
- » Plan social activities – make sure you have fun! Diabetes is just one aspect of your life, so don't let it take over.
- » Remember, don't let it take over your life.



Talk with a professional

The strategies above may give you some ideas about adjusting to life with diabetes, but they can't replace professional help. It's always a good idea to talk about your concerns with your diabetes health care team.

Who can help?

Your diabetes health care team

Your diabetes health care team is there to help you with all aspects of your diabetes, including how you feel about it. Share your feelings with them if you feel comfortable to do so—they will give you non-judgmental support and advice. You may want to talk with your:

- » general practitioner (GP)
- » endocrinologist
- » diabetes educator
- » nurse practitioner
- » dietitian
- » counselor/psychologist.

“I think it's taken a long time to realise what it means to have diabetes and what it means for me to live with it and cope with it effectively, and that will probably be a much longer term learning process for me.”

Mark, 42, person with diabetes

Bring this leaflet to your appointment to help get the conversation started. You will probably be relieved after sharing your feelings, and it will help your health professional to understand.

Together, you can make plans to reduce your concerns. For example, your health professional can refer you to diabetes information sessions or peer support groups.

- » You might like to attend a structured diabetes education session. Learning more about diabetes can help you live well with the condition.
- » There may be group education sessions in your area.
- » Ask your health professional or call the NDSS Helpline for more information.

A psychologist

You might also like to talk to a psychologist. They will help you find ways to adjust to life with diabetes.

Ask your health professional if they know a psychologist in your area who is familiar with diabetes. You can also find a psychologist near you by visiting the Australian Psychological Society website at psychology.org.au/FaP

Your GP can tell you if you are eligible for a Mental Health Treatment Plan to reduce the costs of seeing a psychologist.

More information and support

Diabetes Online Community (#DOC)

Some people with diabetes like to connect with other people with diabetes for online peer support via Twitter. Although the Australian DOC has stopped its weekly chats, many people with diabetes still communicate via Twitter using #DOC or #OzDOC.

Peer support

ndss.com.au

(search for 'Publications & Resources')

To find out what peer support is and how you can access it in your area, refer to the NDSS leaflet, Peer support for diabetes.

Diabetes Australia & NDSS

diabetesaustralia.com.au

ndss.com.au

NDSS Helpline 1300 136 588

Through the NDSS, you can access a free national NDSS Helpline to obtain information about diabetes and learn about education programs, peer support groups, and other events.



The NDSS and you

A wide range of services and support is available through the NDSS to help you manage your diabetes. This includes information on diabetes management through the NDSS Helpline and website. The products, services and education programs available can help you stay on top of your diabetes.

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