

The emotional health and well-being of life with diabetes

Opinion

Living with diabetes can be devastating to the body and the overall health of an individual. Diabetes affects the entire body, not simply the pancreas and endocrine system. Although diabetes begins as a malfunction of the pancreas and endocrine system, it also impacts almost every aspect of the patient's life. Most physicians are rightly concerned with the physical body and complications that develop if left in poor control. It is equally or more important to consider the emotional impact of living with a chronic disease and the importance of incorporating some assistance in maintaining emotional and physical well-being. Coordinating your physical and emotional care can be challenging.

Insulin is a vital hormone in the body that properly regulates glucose levels. If insulin does not correctly maintain glucose levels, problems can result in all major bodily systems such as the eyes, nervous system, cardiovascular system, liver, kidneys and skin. It is important to realize that diabetes can affect the ability for the body to heal from cuts, wounds or infections. Adjusting hormone levels can be difficult and it can be challenging to balance with the everyday stresses of life. Although we now see many cases of individuals living long and healthy lives due to tight blood glucose control and management of their overall health and lifestyle, it is difficult and tedious to say the least. It is over whelming for most.

If a patient lives with any of the several type of diabetes, he or she is usually instructed to have a team to help address all the areas of his or her health and lifestyle. I seldom see clients who are not struggling to define the members of their team. There are many questions to face as you think about assembling a health team. How do you find a team? Who should comprise your team? Do you need team members if you are not currently facing a medical condition, but feel that a specialist should be monitoring your health to prevent future complications? Unless the patient is lucky enough to have a team that is part of one hospital or program, it is often difficult to coordinate many different areas of need.

Having lived with type 1 diabetes for over 28years, I have seen my share of specialists. I am happy to say that, I have no complications from poor control of blood glucose at this time. It is never far from my thoughts and concerns however. I too struggled with how to draft a team of medical professionals to help me live my best life possible. Over time, I have acquired an endocrinologist, ophthalmologist, optometrist, dermatologist, podiatrist, gynecologist, naturopath, therapist and a well-rounded group of other diabetics for a support system. These all seem to be essential in maintaining my health.

As a relatively healthy and active person, it is hard to accept that I need all of these specialists. But it is good to know that I have them if the need arises. It is hard to live life knowing that I have a chronic illness that could be debilitating. No one can see that I have diabetes. That is both a good and bad thing. I know that my most important team members are my therapist and the other people in my support system who help me relax and maintain a positive outlook.

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Maintaining my emotional stability and mental outlook is crucial to my overall diabetes control. It is nearly impossible to live with this disease that takes up 24hours a day of my thoughts without having a healthy dose of laughter, empathy and support on the other end of the scale. My mind must think all day long in terms of carbohydrate counting, insulin dosages, correction factors, basal rates, the number of hours since I last injected insulin, which activities are upcoming in my day and what my previous activity levels have been through the day. That is just plain overwhelming at times. I am a serious type a personality. I am sure that some of that is natural and the other has been chiseled into my being out of necessity of living with diabetes.

Technology has eased this lifestyle. By using an insulin pump with on board computer, a continuous glucose monitor and endless apps and websites that can help me count carbohydrates keep records; it is easier than it could be. However, it is mentally exhausting and overwhelming, no matter what wonderful gadget I have hooked up to my body. I am running around with two to three things inserted and plugged into my body. I must be sure that they are charged up, have back-up batteries and are calibrated regularly. I must be conscious of when I eat, what I eat, when I am active, when I am sedentary and how much exercise I am getting in each day. I also need to be sure that I have all of my testing equipment with me at all times. I need to remember not to leave the house without my emergency supplies for a low blood glucose reaction. I need to safeguard my supplies by not exposing them to extreme temperatures. I need to be wear my medical ID. I need to keep up with my insurance forms, co-pays and explanation of benefits. I need to remain aware of my warranty dates for all of my new gadgets. If one works beyond that date (like it should) I might have to go through an entire re-enrollment process to get the next. If it fails before the date, then I must line up my annual prescriptions with my annual appointments and deductibles. These are just some of the tasks I manage every day as I live with diabetes.

By trying to juggle all of this for optimal control, I still want to be a regular person. I am a mother, a wife, a daughter and a sister. This is why it is so important to me to have a person our group of people in my life who understand what it is like to have diabetes. I need to have others who can identify with these daily challenges. I know they will understand that although I look like a healthy person, I must take extreme measures to maintain that. I value the empathy

I receive from others who identify with the feelings of failure when I am unable to maintain all of these parameters. I'm grateful for the support of people who understand the toll diabetes takes. They know what it feels like to have fluctuating blood glucose levels and go through the entire routine of my day without ever mentioning that I have diabetes. I am stronger with others by my side who may also face the fear of future complications, the need to persevere and the need to break down every once in a while. They help me elongate my spine, strengthen my backbone and take comfort in the fact that it could be worse. With their support, I put a smile on my face and put one foot in front of the other.

I need my team. I need my blood work checked regularly and my eyes checked annually. I need an endocrinologist who can sympathize with living a real life and having fluctuating numbers. I need someone to be proactive in watching for possible complications that seem to

arise out of now here. I need an emotional support system to manage all of this. It helps so much to know that I am not alone and that I am not crazy when I feel overwhelmed. My emotional well-being enables me to put my best efforts into what I need to do to take the best physical care of my body. I wish that I had first been told to see an endocrinologist and a diabetes coach or therapist immediately following my diagnosis! Remember that it is important to maintain both your physical and emotional health to live a healthy life with diabetes. It can be done with the right team and support system!

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Conflict of interest

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