

# Adjusting to life with diabetes

The 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. 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 sadness. Others may have a sense of relief that they now have an explanation for how they have been feeling, both physically and emotionally.

At first you may feel down about having diabetes and uncertain or fearful 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, it becomes a serious problem when these emotions start to impact on daily life or diabetes management, for example, if you are:

- » avoiding medical appointments because you can't cope with the diagnosis
- » checking blood glucose levels excessively (or not checking) due to worries
- » blaming yourself (or others) for your diabetes or when things don't go well.

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

**Helpline 1300 136 588**

**ndss.com.au**

## 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 throughout 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 with your health professionals or by contacting the diabetes organisation in your state/territory. If you are unsure about who to contact, call the Diabetes Australia 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 (eg 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, people find that writing a list of questions and concerns is a useful way of getting a better understanding of diabetes.

- » Bring this list along to your next diabetes appointment, so that you don't forget the questions or concerns you want to talk over with your health professional.
- » You may not remember everything that has been said during the 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.

## Learn from the 'experts'

Experts are not *only* health professionals; other people, like you, who have diabetes are also experts – in living with diabetes. Often, the most practical support you will get is from people who understand what it is like to live with diabetes. It can be reassuring to know that other people 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. If you feel comfortable, let your family and friends know how you feel so they can support you. Communicate how much you want them to be involved in your diabetes management and invite them to share their feelings too. You might like to say things like:

- » *"I'm still the same person I was before the 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 of 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 blood glucose level or inject insulin.

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

### 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/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 (eg any questions or concerns you have).
- » Get information from Diabetes Australia on various topics (eg medication, insulin, nutrition, events, support groups).
- » Talk to trusted family and friends about your diabetes.
- » 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.

### Talk with a professional

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



### Who can help?

#### Your diabetes health professionals

Your diabetes health professionals are there to help you with all aspects of your diabetes, including how you feel about it. If you feel comfortable, share your feelings with them – they will give you non-judgemental support and advice. You may want to talk with your:

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

*“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 along to your consultation to help get the conversation started. You will probably feel relieved after sharing your feelings, and it will help your health professional to understand how you are feeling.

Together, you can make plans to reduce your distress or 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 contact the diabetes organisation in your state/territory for more information.

## A psychologist

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

Ask your diabetes health professional if they know a psychologist in your area who is familiar with diabetes. You can also find a psychologist near you by going to the Australian Psychological Society website at [www.psychology.org.au/FaP](http://www.psychology.org.au/FaP)

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

## More information and support

**Australian Diabetes Online Community (OzDOC): weekly TweetChat**  
[www.twitter.com/ozdiabetesoc](http://www.twitter.com/ozdiabetesoc)

To connect with other people with diabetes for online peer support. The community chats online, once a week, using Twitter. Search for @OzDiabetesOC and #OzDOC.

### Peer support

[www.ndss.com.au](http://www.ndss.com.au)  
 (search for 'Publications & Resources')

To find out about what peer support is and how you can access it in your area, refer to the National Diabetes Services Scheme (NDSS) leaflet, *Peer support for diabetes*.

### Diabetes Australia & NDSS

[www.diabetesaustralia.com.au](http://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au)  
[www.ndss.com.au](http://www.ndss.com.au)  
 Helpline 1300 136 588

Diabetes Australia offers a free national NDSS Helpline, through which people with diabetes and their carers can access diabetes information, education programs, peer support groups, and other events.



## The NDSS and you

The NDSS provides a range of services to help you manage your diabetes. These include our Helpline and website for advice on diabetes management, NDSS products and a range of support programs to help you learn more about managing your diabetes.

Developed in collaboration with The Australian Centre for Behavioural Research in Diabetes, a partnership for better health between Diabetes Victoria and Deakin University.