

The emotional side of

# diabetes

10 things you need to know



**BEHAVIORAL  
DIABETES**  
INSTITUTE



## The Emotional Side of **diabetes.**

Living well with diabetes takes emotional strength. Why? Because this is a tough disease. Diabetes is more than just a simple matter of eating right and taking your medications. Staying strong emotionally is the key to keeping stress and your blood glucose levels where they belong. Unfortunately, people with diabetes as well as doctors often neglect these “real life” aspects of the disease.

**How can you manage diabetes** while also giving proper attention to your own thoughts and feelings? What follows are the most important things you need to know about the emotional features of diabetes, including:

the **personal** side

the **social** side

the **behavioral** side

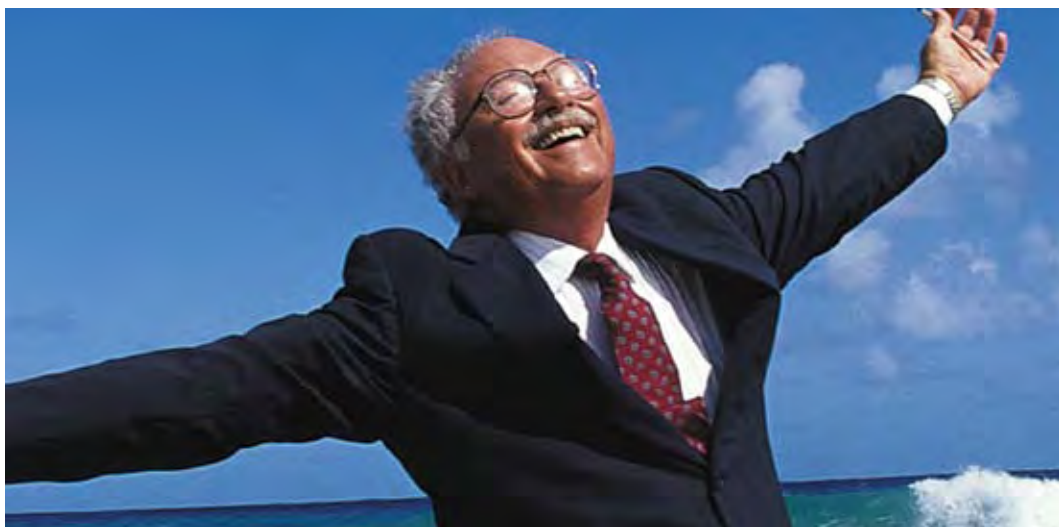


## THE PERSONAL SIDE

# 1 • Harnessing Your Fears

With good care, you can live a long, healthy life with diabetes. Many people think they are doomed to suffer terrible complications, but this is simply not true! Diabetes *is* a serious disease and some people do develop severe long-term complications, but most of these problems are preventable if you have good medical care and take good care of yourself. Feeling a little frightened is not necessarily a bad thing, but when your fears get so big that you feel helpless and hopeless, it's time to take action. You need to harness fear to help you manage diabetes.

- **Fight fear with knowledge.** Learn about the powerful benefits of good diabetes care by talking to your doctor or enrolling in a diabetes education program.
- **Know the real odds.** Ask your doctor about what your real odds for developing complications might be, and what you can do to improve those odds.
- **Stay informed.** Subscribe to any of the popular diabetes magazines to keep informed about how to avoid or slow complications.
- **Don't put up with frequent lows.** If you are anxious about hypoglycemia, talk to your doctor about medication changes that can help. Fear of hypoglycemia is about losing confidence in your body, worrying a serious reaction could happen at any moment. It can lead to chronically high blood sugars, eating problems and an overly restrictive lifestyle. With treatment, these problems can be resolved.
- **Stay in charge.** Remember that your own self-care actions can make a big difference to your health. You are not helpless! After all, it's not diabetes itself that typically causes serious problems, it's *poorly-controlled* diabetes. With good care, you *can* live a long and healthy life.



THE  
PERSONAL  
SIDE

## 2. Overcoming Depression

Depression is a serious problem, and it can be even more serious when you have diabetes. People with diabetes are almost twice as likely to develop depression as other people. If you are depressed, diabetes can become a lot harder to handle and your blood sugars are likely to rise. When your diabetes is out of control, this can make it even harder to escape depression. It becomes a vicious circle. The good news is that there are effective treatments that can help you recover your emotional health. These treatments can also help you improve your blood sugars and feel more in control of diabetes.

- **Watch for the warning signs.** If you are feeling down or hopeless about life, have lost your “get up and go”, or are feeling reduced interest or pleasure from the things you used to enjoy, then talk to your doctor as soon as possible.
- **Take action to avoid depression.** Make sure to get a good night’s sleep as often as possible, stay active, and spend time with friends each day. Include activities in your daily life that are personally rewarding and meaningful, like taking an interesting class or volunteering at a local museum. All of these can be powerful antidepressants.
- **If you are depressed, don’t just wait around and hope it will go away.** There are several good medications and different forms of counseling that have been proven to help people recover from depression. Speak with your doctor about getting the help you need.

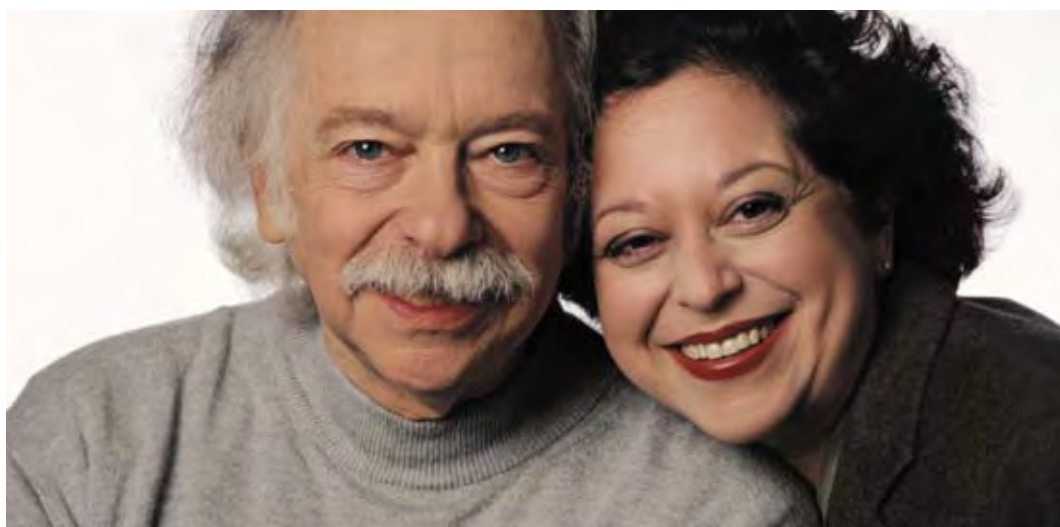


### 3. Defeating Denial

Denial can be a valuable tool. It can be a good way to cope with negative feelings about diabetes, especially when you are first diagnosed or when the disease is feeling out of control.

But denial becomes a problem when it is your *only* way of coping. Instead of a temporary tool, it becomes a permanent way of life. The response to all diabetes aggravations becomes “I will not think about diabetes anymore.” This means trouble. When you turn your back on diabetes, your long-term health will be endangered.

- **Learn the important facts about diabetes.** Attend a diabetes education class or support group in your area. You need to know that:
  - a) diabetes is a serious disease that can harm you when it is not adequately controlled, even if you feel fine.
  - b) ignoring diabetes is likely to cause more serious health problems.
  - c) paying attention to diabetes can help you to live a longer, healthier life.
- **Stay informed about your own health status.** See your doctor regularly and complete all of the recommended medical tests (such as A1C, blood pressure and cholesterol). Know the results of these tests and what the results mean. When you are well informed, you feel more able to manage diabetes and keep it under control.
- **Don't do diabetes alone.** Share your thoughts and feelings about diabetes with a friend. Confiding in someone you trust can help you to gain the support and perspective necessary for making sense out of your own emotions and attitudes.



## 4. Giving Up the Guilt

You are not a bad person because you developed diabetes. It is not your fault. You are not “bad” because you didn’t exercise today or because you ate more than you intended last night. Nobody can manage diabetes perfectly. Guilt is common when you are living with diabetes, and it is hardly ever useful.

Because of guilt, people often establish tough, sometimes impossible rules about how to manage diabetes (“I must NEVER eat even a bite of junk food ever again”). Since you can never be perfect, rules like these can make you feel like you are failing and can promote depression. Enough already!

- **Remember that you didn’t give yourself diabetes.** As people around the world grow heavier and heavier, it almost seems like everyone is trying hard to develop type 2 diabetes. Yet most “fail” to do so. Obesity and a sedentary lifestyle are *contributors* to type 2 diabetes, but if you don’t have the genes for it, you can’t develop it. For type 1 diabetes, your own actions played no role at all. It wasn’t all those sweets you ate as a child, or anything else you did.
- **With your doctor’s help, make sure your diabetes expectations are achievable.** Stop beating yourself up when you eat more than you planned, forget to exercise or skip a blood glucose test. You don’t have to be perfect to reach the level of control that can keep you healthy. Develop a reasonable behavioral plan that can help you achieve those goals, then relax!
- **Get perspective.** Instead of criticizing yourself for the occasional lapse, give yourself credit for all of your positive efforts to manage diabetes. Everyone needs a pat on the back, and you probably deserve one.



THE  
SOCIAL  
SIDE

## 5. Appreciating The Power of Pals

Diabetes is easier to manage when you have people in your life who are rooting for you. When you feel alone with diabetes, it is harder to handle.

Imagine the meaningful ways that loved ones could support you or help you feel less alone: for example, when family members join you in having healthier meals each night, when a good friend shares your anger or disappointment with a high blood sugar reading, when your spouse offers to help you with your next insulin injection, or when your neighbor agrees to join you for a brisk walk each morning. Just having someone in your life who cares can go a long way.

- **Ask for the help you need.** Many of your loved ones want to support your efforts, especially when you are trying to change your habits, but they may not know how to do so in a manner that fits your needs and respects your independence. So think of a small, specific way in which a friend or family member can be helpful, then ask for that help.
- **Be a pal to your pals.** Ask for support in a kind, considerate way. If you are too demanding, your loved ones may be unwilling to cooperate. Thank or acknowledge your loved ones when they offer support. Everybody appreciates positive feedback!
- **Seek out new friends.** Sometimes, friends and family just aren't as supportive as you had hoped. So make some new friends who can understand the hassles of diabetes. Join a diabetes support group in your community. Your doctor or local hospital can help you find one that is right for you. Talking to other people with diabetes can help you feel less alone.



## 6. Arresting The Diabetes Police

Friends and family may sometimes think it is their right to help you manage your diabetes, *whether you like it or not*. Sometimes too much “support”, especially if you didn’t ask for it, can feel like nagging.

When friends and family are bugging you about what to eat or what to do, you may tend to do the opposite of what has been suggested. “Don’t think I should eat that piece of cake? OK, then I’ll have two pieces!” Though they mean well, they have become the Diabetes Police, and you’ve become a Diabetes Criminal.

- **Start a conversation.** Because they care about you, it may be impossible to stop your loved ones from trying to be helpful. So instead of telling them to stop “policing” you, harness their caring in a way that can work for you. Thank them for their concern about your health, explain that their actions are not helping you (if they are not), and let them know *specifically* how they can be of real help. A heartfelt conversation can help you all feel like you’re on the same team, with no police and no criminals.
- **Consider your own role.** Your loved ones may be nagging because they worry you aren’t managing your diabetes well enough. If they are wrong, let them know how well you are doing by inviting them to your next medical appointment, sharing your A1C results, or having them accompany you to a diabetes education class. If they are right, consider how you might improve your diabetes care.



THE  
BEHAVIORAL  
SIDE

## 7 • From Discouraged to Encouraged

Don't let diabetes get you down. Diabetes can be a lot of work and sometimes even your best efforts don't seem to pay off—like when you follow your doctor's recommendations exactly, but still your blood sugars are elevated! That is understandably frustrating. But it is not your fault. There are ways to make diabetes care *encouraging* rather than *discouraging*.

- **Measure your diabetes care success in a realistic manner.** You can never be perfect, nor do you need to be. Blood sugars rise and fall, sometimes for no obvious reason. So learn about the A1C test, a blood test that measures your average blood sugar over the previous 10–12 weeks. Your A1C result is the best way to determine how you are really doing and it can help you handle the frustration of those wacky blood sugar readings. For most people, if their A1C result is in a healthy range, then they are doing fine *overall*, even if their blood sugars are sometimes erratic.
- **Don't let blood sugar readings determine your self-esteem.** Blood sugar results are neither bad nor good; they are just information. To help you remember, place a small piece of masking tape on your meter and write on it, "It is just a number".
- **Set clear, specific, short-term goals for action.** If you just have a vague sense that you should be "eating better" or "checking blood sugars more often", you might believe you are never doing enough. With your doctor's help, determine what your most critical self-care tasks should be, and get specific. For example, exactly how much exercise each week? Or what type of dietary changes at dinnertime over the next month? By clarifying your action plan, you can tell when you are successful.



## 8. Keeping Diabetes in its Place

Diabetes is an important part of your life, but it doesn't have to run your life. For many people, diabetes seems like a prison cell— no more enjoyable foods, no spontaneity, no fun, and constant attention to the clock. Some get so angry they decide to ignore diabetes altogether. If you find yourself thinking this way, it is time for an attitude change.

Diabetes care in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means almost everyone can live their lives fully *and* take care of their diabetes successfully. Sure, some compromises will be necessary, but diabetes shouldn't be allowed to box you in.

- **Feel like you are only allowed to eat birdseed?** Eating well with diabetes doesn't mean you must limit yourself to certain foods or only eat at certain times. There are *no* forbidden foods. Meet with a diabetes-knowledgeable dietitian to develop a personalized meal plan that fits your needs.
- **Is the clock running your life?** Because of your medications or frequent problems with low blood sugars, the clock may be determining when you eat, exercise or check your blood sugars. In most cases, you don't need to live your life like this. Talk with your doctor about switching to alternative medications (or an alternative medication schedule) that can give you back control over your life.
- **Build a realistic plan.** With your health care team, develop an overall plan so that diabetes can fit into your life, rather than your life having to fit into the constraints imposed by diabetes.



## THE BEHAVIORAL SIDE

# 9. Taking Control of Your Environment

Your environment, whether you notice it or not, influences your ability to manage diabetes. Having willpower isn't enough. You need to harness the power of your environment to support, rather than hinder, your diabetes care.

Think about it: how well you eat is affected by the number of tempting foods in your house and the size of the portions on your plate. How faithfully you take your medications is influenced by how many you have and whether you keep them in a convenient, easy-to-remember spot each day.

When you take back control of your environment, it no longer controls you. Diabetes becomes easier to handle.

- **Select a convenient place to exercise.** Pick a gym, park or road that is close to your home or work. If it is too far away, you probably won't go.
- **Keep it ready.** If you have home exercise equipment, make sure it is always set up and ready to go. The more effort required to set it up when you need it, the less likely you will use it.
- **Put it away.** Make sure that tempting, unhealthy snacks are out of the house or put away in cabinets out of sight.
- **Start small.** At meals, start with smaller portion sizes. Don't worry, you can always go back for more later.
- **Keep things close.** Keep your medications, blood glucose meter and supplies in a good spot, like the dining room table, where you are most likely to see them and use them.



## 10. Taking a Diabetes Vacation

You need a vacation. Diabetes can be a lot of work, and it demands your attention every day. It is worth the effort, but it is a tough job. All that effort can wear you down, especially if you never get a break. And you can never take a break from diabetes... or can you?

In reality, everyone takes “vacations” from their diabetes. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. A break from diabetes can be a big relief. But make sure your diabetes vacations are *safe*. And, like any good vacation, this takes some planning.

- **Work with your doctor to arrange for the healthy, regular breaks from diabetes you need.** A safe vacation doesn’t last too long and involves planning ahead so your diabetes control isn’t compromised. This doesn’t mean quitting your diabetes care altogether. You might, for example, decide to take a night off each week from your diabetes-friendly meal plan, while learning how to adjust your medications ahead of time. A good vacation can restore your energy for managing diabetes.
- **Get help if you are taking “unsafe” vacations from diabetes.** An unsafe vacation is rarely planned, can go on for a long time, and may threaten your health. Perhaps you have been ignoring everything about diabetes for years, or you take your medications faithfully but decided you didn’t want to ever check your blood sugars again. Develop a more practical diabetes plan with your doctor that can help you get back on track and still provide you with occasional *safe* vacations from diabetes.
- **Everyone needs a diabetes vacation, so don’t be afraid to take one.** But think ahead, and collaborate with your health care providers to build safe and healthy vacations into your life.



## A Few Last **words.**

Diabetes can be tough, but you *can* live well with it. You can succeed with diabetes through knowledge, good medical care and emotional strength.



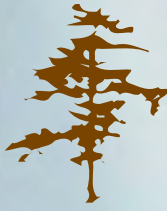
My colleagues and I at the Behavioral Diabetes Institute hope this booklet, which describes some of the most important tips for mastering the emotional side of diabetes, will serve you as a first step towards gaining the strength and skills you need.

When you are ready for the next step, please come and visit us at [www.behavioraldiabetes.org](http://www.behavioraldiabetes.org). The BDI offers group workshops as well as personalized programs and services that can help you strengthen the emotional and behavioral skills necessary for living well with diabetes. Many of these programs are described on the next pages.

We wish you a long, happy and healthy life.

William H. Polonsky, PhD, CDE  
Founder and Director, Behavioral Diabetes Institute

Dr. Polonsky is a licensed clinical psychologist, certified diabetes educator and Associate Clinical Professor in Psychiatry, University of California, San Diego. A nationally-renowned expert in the field of behavioral diabetes, he received his PhD in clinical psychology from Yale University and has served as Chairman of the National Certification Board for Diabetes Educators, Senior Psychologist at Joslin Diabetes Center and a faculty member at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Polonsky is a member of the editorial boards of *Diabetes Forecast*, *Diabetes Self-Management* and *Diabetes Health*. He has authored several books on diabetes, including *Diabetes Burnout: What to Do When You Can't Take it Anymore*, published by the American Diabetes Association.



# BEHAVIORAL DIABETES INSTITUTE

Finally... there are **solutions.**

**The Behavioral Diabetes Institute** (BDI) is the world's first organization to tackle the unmet psychological needs of people with diabetes. It is a non-profit corporation founded in 2004 and headquartered in San Diego, CA. BDI's evidence-based programs are designed to help people overcome the emotional and behavioral obstacles to living well with diabetes. The organization is committed to:

- helping people master the unique challenges of diabetes
- conducting behavioral research in diabetes
- providing health care providers with specialized behavioral training for managing diabetes effectively.

Clinical programs at BDI, which include structured small group workshops as well as individual counseling services, help participants develop a more hopeful outlook on life and greater confidence and control over diabetes.

we help you gain **control.**



## BDI's Group **programs.**

### **Getting on Track**

A one-day workshop to help participants learn about the emotional pitfalls associated with diabetes, determine their own diabetes-specific stresses, and develop personalized strategies for mastering those challenges.

### **Depression and Diabetes**

A six-week group program to address the unique problems of people with diabetes struggling with depression. Depression is more common in people with diabetes, can be tougher to treat, and can make diabetes harder to manage. This program tackles diabetes and depression together.

### **Overcoming the Hassles of Hypoglycemia**

A one-day workshop for people with diabetes having trouble with low blood sugars. Learn new strategies for recognizing and dealing with hypoglycemia, conquering the fear of hypoglycemia, and resolving family tensions linked to hypoglycemia.

### **The "Diabetes Police"**

An evening program for spouses, family members and other loved ones. Learn how to manage your own worries and aggravations about diabetes, how to be helpful without nagging, and discover effective ways to talk about these "undiscussables" with your loved ones.

### **The Parent Program**

An evening program for parents who have teens with diabetes. Learn new strategies for helping teens be more successful with diabetes management while maintaining your own peace of mind.

### **Diabetes Personal Training**

A six-month program focusing on individualized problem solving and developing slow, steady improvements in diabetes care.

**To register for workshops** or to receive more information on BDI, its staff, future programs and upcoming events in San Diego, visit us at: [www.behavioraldiabetes.org](http://www.behavioraldiabetes.org) or call us at 858-336-8693.



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