How to Deal With Diabetes Stigma

by AFRA WILLMORE

How to Fight Against Type 2 Diabetes Stigma

Everyone seems to play the blame game when it comes to type 2 diabetes. I bet if you did a quick survey in the street most people interviewed would say the disease is caused by overeating or overindulging in sugary treats.

Many people believe the condition is self-inflicted, so there is no wonder some people feel resentful towards patients: diabetes and associated conditions cost hundreds of billions of dollars annually in direct medical costs, disease management, and reduced productivity in workers in the U.S. alone.

Of course, some people have ignored warnings from their healthcare provider and failed to take steps to improve their diet and lifestyle, resulting in an almost inevitable diagnosis. But for every obese diabetic chowing down on fast food, there is another who might be only slightly overweight, or even a thinner person with a normal BMI, who exercises and eats healthily and still ends up being diagnosed with type 2.

Afra's Advice for Dealing With Diabetes Stigma

I have type 2 diabetes. I'm the right weight for my height and, despite a slightly guilty weakness for cake, on the whole, eat well. I have been typical diabetes "apple" shape my whole life. I didn't develop gestational diabetes through my pregnancies, so a diagnosis aged 36 when my liver function tests went awry even came as a surprise to my GP.

It has always seemed monumentally unfair to me that I know people of my age who consume an awful lot more sugar than me in the form of full-sugar soda, alcohol, and carbs, and yet have escaped the curse of type 2. If I have to tell people for any reason that I am diabetic, I just say I have diabetes. If people ask which type, of course, I tell them, but I know I will see that slight shift in sympathy, a slight flicker in expression, or change of subject that shows they believe I have brought it upon myself.

I believe this comes down to the way type 2 diabetes is presented in the media. I understand that many cases could be prevented if people adapted their diet and got more exercise, especially those in high-risk groups. It is important to get the message out that living a healthy lifestyle can reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes, but it would be nice there was more awareness that not everyone with the condition could have prevented it.

I believe people think I was fat and lazy and therefore deserve my fate. Almost all news articles about type 2 diabetes I see in the U.K. feature images or video of morbidly obese people stuffing food into their mouths. I'm sure it's the same in the U.S. It's no wonder therefore that people seem to have little sympathy for us.

It Starts With Us

Even I get angry when I look at obese people in the waiting room of my diabetic or retinopathy clinic. I feel life is just unfair — I should not have diabetes, I am not that fat. There was a man there the other day holding a giant

milky coffee in one hand and a chocolate pastry in the other. I judged him in my head and then reminded myself that I had no idea of his situation.

Maybe he was there for some special test and been asked to eat something like that, maybe his sugars had dropped on the way to the hospital and he was trying to bring them back to safe levels. What I am trying to say is that even as fellow diabetics we cannot judge other patients. The obese woman next to you in the clinic might not have a five donut a day habit — she may have another health condition which makes her appear larger.

It is vital this stigma is addressed, as surveys have shown it can affect the management of diabetes and long-term outcomes.

Next page: destroying diabetes stigma, and counselor Eric's tips.

The Importance of Destroying Stigma

Some people say they avoid testing their blood glucose levels or taking/administering vital medications while out in public for fear of being criticized. They might avoid eating food or enjoying drinks they are perfectly fine to have in case people around them judge them. They might fail to tell work colleagues or employers about their diabetes, which could lead to potentially life-threatening situations.

Of more than 5000 diabetic people or families of diabetic patients interviewed by market research company DQ&Q, 72 percent said they believe others felt there had been a failure of personal responsibility, 65 percent said they felt like a burden on the healthcare system, and 52 percent said they felt people believed they had a character fault or flaw.

These results prove there is a continued need for education about all types of diabetes. You might not feel able to explain in-depth about why you developed the condition, but if challenged about eating chocolate or having a glass of wine don’t feel guilty or embarrassed. Just throw out the simple phrase: “diabetes care has changed but thanks for your concern.”

Counselor Eric's Tips for Fighting Diabetes Stigma

You’ve heard people whispering behind your back. You’ve heard what they say to your face. Having diabetes is difficult, but the type 2 diabetes stigma can be as harmful and emotionally draining as the disease itself. Studies show that as many as 84 percent of people with diabetes feel stigmatized by society.

People may think that you’re lazy, that you don’t have any willpower or that you don’t care about your health. The Internet, radio, and TV can also be sources of disapproval.

Hearing this negativity from others can breed negativity within you, changing how you think about and see at yourself. This triggers depression and anxiety, which make your physical concerns more problematic. The stigma of type 2 diabetes creates a harmful cycle that you want to end. Here are ways to end the stigma:

- **Become educated.** Before you can advocate for yourself, you need information. Research diabetes, types 1 and 2, from reputable sources. Ask your doctor for helpful facts about causes, treatment and available statistics. Information is the best way to gain empowerment. You cannot deal with a problem you don’t understand.
- **Know your critics.** Once armed with information, you can attempt to understand the perceptions of those that contribute to the stigma. List popular myths or misconceptions people have about type 2 diabetes and consider responses now, rather than being caught off guard in the moment. The uneducated may believe that you can’t eat any sugar, or that being overweight and unhealthy causes diabetes, or that diabetes can be cured with diet and exercise. You can refute their claims and educate their ignorance once you are prepared.

- **Take care physically.** People that feel stigmatized are more likely to be inconsistent in treating their diabetes. Follow doctors recommendations and treatment plan as well as you can. Push yourself to realize that your health and well being are worthwhile. If your symptoms get out of control, everything in your life becomes more stressful and taxing.
- **Take care mentally.** Stigma is about creating feelings of shame, guilt and doubt within you. If you begin to believe the lies, you begin to stigmatize yourself. Your mood will be more depressed, your anxiety level will rise and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness will gain control. Find activities that you enjoy and people you enjoy doing them with. Protecting your mental health involves prevention. A walking program is really beneficial for people with type 2 diabetes since the moderate exercise provides a great psychological and physical boost. A support group is another possible aid to your mental health, as speaking with others in your situation can help normalize your struggles.
- **Advocate.** If you are able to complete the items listed above, advocating is your next step. Spread the truth about type 2 diabetes. You might create an online presence in social media or provide shoppers with pamphlets at the mall. Advocacy comes in many forms. Find a way that works for you and the sense of accomplishment you feel will further motivate you.

The stereotypes do not represent most people with type 2 diabetes. Do not allow yourself to be a stereotype. Fight to break the mold and end the stigma. You will benefit, as will the people with diabetes in your life, your community, and your world. It’s time you get started!