Understanding Anxiety and How It Connects to Diabetes

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Diabetes and Anxiety: Tips For Coping

It’s not unusual to feel anxious when a diagnosis of diabetes is first delivered. You may feel worried about how your lifestyle will change, what medications might be necessary and whether those meds will include a big scary needle!

But as the initial shock wears off and you become accustomed to your new way of living, and hopefully start to feel better health-wise, you might wonder why the anxiety remains.

Understanding Anxiety

First of all, let's look at how anxiety can manifest itself. Diabetes UK defines it this way: “Anxiety can be defined as a fear-based mental state, normally felt as a discomforting emotional state accompanied with physical sensations in the body.”

Those physical symptoms can include shaking, weepiness, sweating and even heart palpitations. Anxiety can’t directly hurt you but suffering from it can lead people to avoid social situations, be unable to work, and to hide away from even friends and family members.

According to The American Diabetes Society, people with diabetes are 20 percent more likely to suffer from anxiety than those without diabetes.

The society carried out a study of more than 200,000 people nationwide with and without diabetes and discovered that adults under 30 and those from the Hispanic community with diabetes were more likely to suffer an anxiety-related condition.

Hypoglycemia and Anxiety

There is a physical reason that might explain why some of those people with diabetes suffer more with anxiety: hypoglycemia can actually cause anxiety.

Hypoglycemia means that not enough glucose (sugar) is reaching the brain, and this causes the brain a considerable amount of stress, which leads to nervousness and anxiety.

There is also a type of hypoglycemia known as reactive hypoglycemia, where people experience temporary drops in blood sugar after high-carbohydrate meals.

Reactive hypoglycemia can cause a variety of different symptoms, including panic attacks, dizziness, sleeping problems, and heart palpitations — much like “real” anxiety.

Scientists believe reactive hypoglycemia is caused by too much insulin being produced and released by the pancreas after a large carbohydrate-based meal has been consumed. It can occur in those with diabetes and people who don’t have the condition.

The excess insulin production continues after the glucose from the meal has been digested, causing the amount of glucose in the bloodstream to plummet.

Anxiety and Health Concerns

Of course, some anxiety is related to stress or worry. People may have ongoing worries about their weight if it is implicated in their diagnosis of diabetes.

There might be fears for the future, as diabetes can be a factor in serious health problems, including stroke, heart conditions and complications with eyes, limbs, and organs.

How Can You Tackle Anxiety Related to Worrying About Diabetes?

Well firstly, you can make every effort to manage your blood glucose effectively with the help of your healthcare team. This should prevent hypos, address weight issues and limit the possibility of future complications.

Some people benefit from activities like yoga, Pilates and tai chi, which are great for diabetes for exercise and stress-relief.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a way people can tackle anxiety-related conditions through breathing exercises, meditation and a conscious exploration of thought processes.

Mark Williams from Oxford University’s Mindfulness Centre explains: "Mindfulness allows us to become more aware of the stream of thoughts and feelings that we experience and to see how we can become entangled in that stream in ways that are not helpful.”

"Awareness of this kind also helps us notice signs of stress and anxiety earlier and helps us deal with them better."

There are many ways to access mindfulness techniques. You could find a trained practitioner or you can watch videos demonstrating techniques on YouTube, buy or borrow books or download apps to help you in your daily life.

Research conducted at the psychology department at Stanford University used brain-imaging technologies to examine the effect of mindfulness training on social anxiety. They reported that participants who completed the mindfulness course showed reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression and demonstrated an enhanced self-esteem.

Not sure about mindfulness? You could try traditional counseling (ask your doctor to recommend someone) or even hypnosis — what is clear is that you should not just live with anxiety and hope it goes away on its own.