

Relieving Stress

Richard R. Rubin, PhD, CDE

If you could check your stress level as easily as you check your blood sugar, where would it be most of the time – nice and low, or sky-high?

How diabetes adds stress to your life – let me count the ways

I have a good friend, Dr. William Polonsky from The University of California in San Diego. Bill and some colleagues developed a questionnaire called the Problem Areas in Diabetes (PAID) questionnaire to see how people felt about living with diabetes. Of the hundreds of people who completed the questionnaire, 99% said they experienced diabetes-related stress. So if you feel stressed about diabetes you have lots of company.

The most common stressors mentioned by people who completed the PAID questionnaire were:

- Worries about getting complications
- Guilt about getting off track with diabetes management, and
- Frustration with unpredictable results

People I talk to sometimes use words like *overwhelmed* and *burned out* to describe how stressed they feel living with diabetes.

Stress is serious

Stress is really awful. That tense, uncomfortable feeling is only one bad consequence of stress. Stress can also push blood sugars up really high, really fast for some people. Many years ago my son checked his sugar just before taking his driver's exam. He was about 130 mg/dL, and that seemed a perfect level for the occasion. Just a few minutes later, after he had failed the exam, he felt so high we tested again. This time he was over 400 mg/dL! Since Stefan hadn't eaten anything for a few hours, his sky-high reading was probably caused by stress.

Even if stress doesn't jolt your sugar level through the roof, it can still affect your diabetes control. Stress can sap your energy, and that could mean less active diabetes care, higher blood sugar levels, and even more stress. Dr. Polonsky and his colleagues documented this pattern: people who reported high levels of diabetes stress on the PAID questionnaire did less to care for their diabetes and had higher A1C levels.

Stress relief

Over the years I've picked up lots of tips for relieving diabetes stress. Here are some of my favorites.

Figure out where it hurts. A man told me he felt he was doing everything wrong when it came to diabetes care, until he realized most of his stress came from one big problem – he “snacked” almost nonstop from dinner to bedtime. Figuring out exactly “where it hurt” was a big relief – he realized that lots of his stress came from one source, so doing something about that stressor would help a lot.

Talk to yourself. If your major source of stress is guilt about self-care or frustration about the results of your efforts, make sure your expectations are realistic. No one, and I do mean no one, manages diabetes perfectly or even close to perfectly. If you are setting your standards too high, lowering them to more realistic levels could lower your stress level as well. So take a clear-eyed but sympathetic view of your self care and see how you are really doing. Don't overlook the things you are doing well.

Talk to your diabetes health care provider. If you aren't sure how realistic your standards are (or you have realistic standards and are not meeting them) you need help from a good diabetes health care professional. Tell your doctor what is stressing you. A caring health care provider understands how challenging it is to have diabetes, and is able to provide the encouragement, advice, and information you need, whether it's a reality check concerning your expectations, or help making diabetes management a little easier. Your doctor should also be able to refer you to other health care professionals for diabetes education, nutritional counseling, foot care, or anything else you need. Knowing how to take the best possible care of yourself and getting the help you need to do it are major stress relievers.

Talk to your family and friends. No one should have to deal with diabetes alone, and I hope you don't have to. Talk to your family and friends about things they do that help make your life with diabetes less stressful, and ask for any additional help you need. People who care about you want you to live healthier and with less stress.

Talk to other people who have diabetes. No matter how much your family and friends love you, there are some things they can't understand unless they have diabetes themselves. That's why many people find spending time in a support group (or a "virtual" support group on the Internet) an effective stress reliever. Hospitals and clinics often sponsor diabetes support groups, and some also offer diabetes education classes, stress management classes, and other healthy services.

If you enjoy computers, go on the Internet for help, including chat rooms and bulletin boards. The website of the Children With Diabetes Foundation (www.childrenwithdiabetes.com) has a list of other good diabetes websites, including sites for adults as well as children. Talk to your health care provider about information you get on the Internet, to be sure it is right for you.

Get active. Exercise is a wonderful stress reliever, and it doesn't take much activity to get big benefits. It can also help you control your weight and your blood sugar levels. So finding activities you enjoy can relieve stress and improve your health at the same time.

Laugh. Humor is the closest thing to magic in the world; it relieves stress better than anything else. Start your daily newspaper with the comics instead of the front page. And don't forget to laugh at yourself, since this is the most healing laughter of all; your daily life with diabetes offers many opportunities to laugh, if you see them from the right perspective.

There is no way to eliminate all the stress in your life. But with help from your family, friends, health care provider, and other people who have diabetes, you can lower your stress quite a bit.