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Diabetes and Relationships: Tools for Coping This Holiday Season and Beyond

BY ELIOT LEBOW

At six, I was diagnosed with Juvenile (Type 1) Diabetes. Suddenly, my universe went from waiting for the ice cream truck, to asking questions about life, death, and illness.

In 1977, the emotional aspects of chronic diseases were very much under the rug. My doctors encouraged me to “tough it out.” In my teens, I translated that nebulous instruction into a life adrift between blood sugar levels and corresponding emotional extremes.

There are over 27 million people in the U.S. with diabetes. The disease triggers a lifestyle transformation; it requires 24/7 vigilance and monitoring.

When you're stuck in a depressive rut or are just feeling “foggy,” it's not you—it's your body's chemistry. Low blood sugar reduces the glucose in your brain, leading to poor memory and difficulty learning. High blood sugar is no picnic, either; it causes the blood to thicken and oxygen levels to be decreased. This mental fog can create a vicious cycle—sickness leads to depression, which leads to apathy and denial. Without proper management, these symptoms only grow worse.

I've seen people lift their spirits and



gain their energy back, simply by getting a handle on their blood sugar levels. Conversely, I've seen people destroy their lives and relationships by letting things go unchecked. The result? Resentment, denial and low self-worth.

A diabetes diagnosis can place strain on even the happiest relationship, but it doesn't have to end it. While it's natural to not want to burden your loved ones, you must remember to:

- Inform the people in your life when your blood sugar is high or low and tell them that is why your behavior might be off or odd
- Express your limitations, so your part-

ner knows to be patient,

- Discuss the emotional symptoms of diabetes with people you care about
- Take blood tests often, and share the results with your partner
- Wait until blood sugars return to normal before eating.
- Commit to a handful of simple, low-pressure tasks, and follow through even if you're feeling sad or foggy
- Seek professional guidance if your emotions are interfering with your daily life
- Thank people if they come up to you and ask if you are okay and check your blood sugars
- Always have the proper food available

as well as your fast-acting insulin in case your blood sugar is high

• Don't end up in a stressful situation where your friends, family members or you are angry or frustrated.

Mental illness and diabetes tend to be a package deal. But the story doesn't have to end there—mine didn't. I'm thankful every day for my mother's decision to send me to psychotherapy. I can't stress enough the importance of seeking counseling, cognitive behavioral psychotherapy or a certified diabetic educator as part of your diabetes care.

While it may seem that constantly monitoring what you put in your body is more trouble than it's worth, these relatively simple changes make returning to your old life possible.

A diabetes diagnosis brings a slew of emotional issues. When your diabetes is managed well, the emotional issues become manageable, too. That's where I come in. As a veteran Type 1 diabetic, I've dedicated my life to helping other people with diabetes in the New York Metro area. For me, the most important piece of my health care puzzle was emotional health and support. And I've helped hundreds of people with diabetes find the same relief. ●