

# Making PEACE with Diabetes



**Henry Lew, psychologist**

Individuals newly diagnosed with diabetes often experience an avalanche of emotions that can be tough to handle. They may experience disbelief, denial, anger, frustration, hopelessness, guilt, shame, depression and fear. These emotional experiences could arise as they try to comprehend and grapple with changes thrown at their face by diabetes. Or the diagnosis of diabetes may exacerbate pre-existing distress in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

## The Need to Manage Psychological Impact

The psychological experiences of being diagnosed with diabetes need to be managed as seriously as the disease itself. In fact, emotions experienced by newly diagnosed diabetes patients have been likened to those of bereavement. The toll of these psychological experiences may lead to a deterioration of self-care. These include not taking medications, missing appointments and not making dietary changes.<sup>2</sup> Some individuals may develop clinical depression or anxiety.<sup>1</sup>

## Illustrative Experience of Newly Diagnosed Patients<sup>3</sup>

Ali, who is in his fifties, was retrenched and unemployed for a year. His financial stress was increasing. Recently, he was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes.

He experienced an episode of hypoglycaemia when alone in his flat, in which he fell and sustained a head injury. Since being discharged from hospital, he is anxious when alone, tests his blood glucose frequently, and allows his blood glucose to stay high in fear of hypoglycaemia. His stress and worries about his finances also worsened.

21-year-old Sujatha had just completed her university studies and started working when she was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. She has been admitted to hospital multiple times with diabetes ketoacidosis (DKA), leading to long periods of time away from work.

Sujatha felt helpless and depressed about her situation. She started to miss her medical appointments as she did not want to jeopardise her employment. She also sees no point in seeking treatment as she feels her hopes for her career have been dashed by her illness.

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Fortunately, all is not bleak. We can cope better with diabetes. Here, I have pieced together effective ways to cope based on research literature using an acronym, **PEACE**.

## P = Pick-up

Pick up knowledge about diabetes. Forming our own ideas about diabetes and how to manage hypoglycaemia, like Ali did, may be detrimental to our health. Thoughts of how diabetes will wreck our lives only serve to make us more stressed out. Accurate understanding about the illness, its seriousness and what you can do to manage diabetes, helps you to rein in your stress and anxieties about your health. The most reliable way to pick up knowledge about diabetes is from your doctor, nurses or healthcare professionals. There are diabetes self-management programmes at some of the local polyclinics, where you can learn more about diabetes. Patients who go through such programmes were able to manage their diabetes and the psychological impact better.<sup>4</sup> And these patients maintain the benefits three years after the programmes.<sup>4</sup> Do consult your healthcare professionals.

## E = Engage

Engage diabetes patients who are coping well. Although they may not be able to provide you with medical advice, they can share their 'coping' experiences. Find out how they navigated the newly diagnosed phase. Find out how they adjusted to the lifestyle habits recommended by healthcare professionals. You can meet these people in your social network or support groups for diabetes patients. Patients who engage "experienced" diabetes patients, cope better psychologically.<sup>5</sup>

## A = Allow

Allow yourself to express the pent up emotions inside of you. The multitude of emotions you are going through is extremely hard to suppress. In fact, the more we try to suppress, the stronger the emotions are. Be kind to yourself. It is all right to have and feel these emotions. Manage them well through talking to someone you can trust. Or participate in tasks that help you to regulate your emotions like taking a walk, writing a journal, etc. Allow your emotions to run its natural course. In fact, the "lifespan" of an emotion is not more than a few minutes, according to research by Dr Paul Ekman. We do experience emotions for a longer duration. This is usually because, unintentionally, we feed our emotions by dwelling on them. Recognise that emotions can be like a flowing river. Whenever we catch ourselves dwelling on emotions, take a step back and let it flow.

## C = Cultivate

Cultivate successful coping. The thought of coping and living successfully with diabetes may seem far-fetched. Yet, setting achievable goals of lifestyle changes can help us to move a step closer to coping successfully with diabetes. It also enhances our confidence to cope. Furthermore, a feel-good feeling is generated to motivate us to continue making changes to cope!<sup>6</sup> Cultivate quality of life. Diabetes may have invaded your life. But it need not invade the whole of your life. As much as the medical treatment and lifestyle changes require effort, try to ensure that your quality of life remains. Continue to do things you like or enjoy as best as you can.

## E = Enlist

Enlist your family's support. You do not need to face diabetes alone. Their support would allow you to express your feelings and manage them better. Family can be a good source of encouragement. They tend to see your illness as more serious. But, they are also more positive that there are things that can be done to manage your diabetes well. Hence, they are your ideal coach to spur you on.<sup>7</sup>

## Making PEACE

**P:** Ali took up a self-management programme at the clinic. He learnt that many of his worries were unfounded and the resultant coping behaviours were harmful.

**E, A :** Ali opened up to one of his friends who was coping well with diabetes. From his friend, he learnt where and whom he could seek help for employment.

**C, E:** With the help of a nurse clinician and his wife, Ali made small changes to his meals. This helped to maintain his sugar levels and allay his fears.

**P:** Sujatha became more hopeful when she learnt from her doctors that there are many young persons with type 1 diabetes who continue to pursue their aspirations.

**E:** Sujatha joined a support group. They helped her to strike a balance between work and medical appointments.

**A:** Sujatha also participated in an online forum where she could express her feelings.

**C, E:** Sujatha continued to watch movies to maintain her quality of life. She and her sisters joined yoga classes to help her be more physically active.