

Supporting someone with diabetes

Do you know someone with diabetes? It's a self-managed, life-long condition, so it's important for friends and family to be involved in its management.

Managing a complex condition such as diabetes can be overwhelming and may result in what's known as '**diabetes burnout**': when a person gives up caring for themselves by disregarding their blood sugar levels and neglecting their diet, and that can lead to serious health complications.

If someone is in a state of diabetes burnout, it can be hard to support that person because they may be in denial and not want your help. It's important they are in the right frame of mind and ready to receive your support, otherwise you are going to alienate yourself and they will put up a barrier. Before providing advice try to determine if your friend or relative is ready to receive that information. If they aren't, don't push it but let them know you are there when they are ready.

Here are five tips for supporting someone with diabetes:

1

Listen first

One way to start is by doing lots of listening rather than talking. That way you can gauge whether someone is ready to accept help.

Everyone is at different stages with their diabetes. Ascertain where they are in their journey as this will determine how you can best help them. Don't assume anything. A person may have had diabetes for many years and still have very little understanding. Alternatively just because a person may appear to not be paying attention to their diabetes does not mean they don't know about it.

When you have established a non-judgmental environment with your friend or loved one you can talk about the information you have gathered.

You could suggest going together to an education session, a local exercise programme or cooking classes. They may be ready to tackle one, some or none of these suggestions, just hang in there and let them have control of the situation.

Meet for a coffee and don't talk about diabetes at all. You are still offering support, and it will give them the opportunity to open up to you in the future.

The most important things are to be respectful of people's privacy and feelings, and don't give up.



2

Ask questions

Ask your friend or loved one about how they are coping with diabetes and how you can help. The National Diabetes Education Program in the US suggests asking the following questions:

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- Do you ever feel down or overwhelmed about all you have to do to manage your diabetes?
- Have you set goals to manage your diabetes?
- What things seem to get in the way of reaching your goals?
- What can I do to help?
Are there things I can do to make it easier?
If you want to be more active, would it help if we take walks together?

3

Educate yourself about the condition

It can be difficult to support someone if they are suffering from a condition you know nothing about. Diabetes, like many other diseases, is complex. From the terminology to the medication, it can be difficult to get to grips with.

At the very least, make the effort to find out the difference between type 1 and type 2 diabetes and what HbA1c is all about. Knowing more about diabetes will help take the stress out of the 'what if' scenarios you may be worried about.



4

Go to appointments together

Ask if you can attend your family member or friend's appointments. This will help you get a better sense of what their routine is, the terminology of diabetes, and you can ask their doctor or nurse questions during the visit.

Everyone's diabetes is different and knowing about their illness will make it easier to be usefully supportive.



5

Create a healthy lifestyle together

The state of your loved one's diabetes depends on his or her everyday life - what diabetes routine to follow, what food to eat, which exercise to do, how to deal with stress. If you lead a healthy lifestyle and encourage your loved one to join in you'll be helping them towards well-controlled diabetes.

You can offer to attend an exercise or cooking class with your friend or loved one. Find fun things

you can do together such as walking, dancing or gardening. Walking together daily gives you time to talk and stay active.

Being physically active is a great way to handle stress. Or you could make a goal of cooking new healthy meals once a week. Include foods such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

Diabetes New Zealand is a leading national organisation and registered charity. Our aim is to support all people affected by diabetes to live well through: Providing information and support to help people take charge of their health • Acting as an advocate and representing all people with, or at risk of developing, diabetes • Raising awareness of diabetes, especially around lifestyle factors that can help prevent or delay type 2 and help manage and control type 1 and type 2.