

managing stress & diabetes

Stress is a word that is used widely but not well understood. At some time we all experience stress and we react in different ways. While a particular situation may cause stress for one person, it may not be stressful for another. To fully understand stress, it is important to know about the direct link between the mind and the body and to know that it's not stress itself that is harmful, but the way we deal with it.

Mind and body

Research has shown that what happens in the body affects the mind and vice versa. It has also shown that how we view our environment affects the way our bodies work. Imagine yourself sitting at home when suddenly a huge animal bounds into the room. How do you feel? Probably terrified! Now imagine yourself in the same room when a dear friend you haven't seen for a very long time walks through the door. How do you feel? Probably surprised and excited!

How do you react?

Your body reacts to each of these situations in the same way. It is an automatic or reflex reaction called the 'fight or flight' response. It is designed to allow you to act quickly to deal with the threat you have detected – or to get out of the situation – ie: fight or flight.

Physical changes that occur in the 'fight or flight' response:

- Your heart starts to beat faster.
- Your blood pressure goes up.
- Your breathing becomes quicker, allowing more oxygen to the brain and muscles.
- Your blood glucose level rises to give your body more energy to do whatever needs to be done.
- Blood moves away from your gut and into the big muscles of your arms and legs so you can act quickly.
- Your blood gets ready to clot quickly should you start to bleed.
- You become very alert so that you can think about how to deal with the threat you have detected.

In both situations, these changes occur without you doing a thing other than feeling fear or surprise ie: reacting to the change in your situation. They occur whether you want them to or not. Your mind has detected a stressful situation and set in train a series of body responses to cope.

Living with a chronic condition such as diabetes, can in itself be a major cause of stress for many people. This information sheet explains what stress actually is, how it can affect your diabetes and offers some helpful hints about how to deal with it.



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What is the difference?

Both events are stressful and both have an effect on your body. However, one is pleasant and one is not.

Getting your body's responses back to normal after the frightening event may take a long time and have lasting effects on your overall health, depending on how frightening or threatening you felt that it was. On the other hand, changes in your body created by seeing your friend will quickly fade in the pleasure of their company. Both events could be called stressful, so there is stress related to both positive and negative events.

The severity of your reaction will depend on how significant the event, or trigger to your stress, is FOR YOU. The time that you will take to get 'back to normal' depends on how quickly you are able to deal with the stressful event as well as what else is happening in your life. As we all know, there are times when we have to deal with many stressful situations that occur at the same time or one after another, with little recovery time in between.

How does stress affect diabetes?

Keeping in mind the link between mind and body, the effect stress is likely to have on your diabetes is caused by the way you deal with it, rather than the stress itself.

An example:

Ben and Paul both have diabetes and are overweight. Both men are having trouble at work and are worried they may lose their jobs. However, they respond to this stressful situation in different ways.

BEN: He has not shared his concerns with anyone. He has a constant headache, diarrhoea and no appetite. As he can't sleep, he sits in front of television every night until well after midnight, drinking beer. His blood glucose levels (when he thinks to test) are all over the place and the rash in his groin has come back.

PAUL: The moment the trouble started at work, Paul told his wife. Together they re-arranged the family budget and Paul started looking at 'Jobs Vacant'. Noticing his blood glucose levels were not as well controlled as before, he spoke to his diabetes educator who explained that this happens in times of worry. He decided to play some extra games of golf to help get his diabetes back on track.

Managing the stress

Both men are stressed. Both are suffering from their responses to stress. However, Paul is having more success in managing his stress. Learning how your body reacts to stress, identifying what is causing the stress and then taking steps to deal with the cause of the stress are all part of the process known as stress management.

Ben is ready to fight or run away but has not acknowledged that he has a problem. All he knows is that he has a headache (perhaps because of his increased blood glucose levels or blood pressure), his stomach is upset (because the blood has been shunted to his arms and legs) and he can't sleep (because his body is aroused and not relaxed). Paul on the other hand has identified the cause of his stress and is taking positive steps to manage the situation.

How to manage stress		How NOT to manage stress
Do... identify and face the problem.	Accept that you are stressed and decide what (and whether) you can do something about it.	Don't... ignore the signs and pretend nothing is wrong.
Do... think positively.	Remind yourself that you have managed to get through bad times before and will again.	
Do... seek help.	Talk to your family and friends about how you feel. Your doctor, diabetes educator or counsellor can also help.	Don't... think that you have to handle it all on your own or bottle it up inside.
Do... keep active.	Make good use of the energy created by your body's 'fight or flight' response. Add some extra physical activity to your routine and maybe try some additional relaxation methods such as yoga or Tai Chi. Simple deep breathing can really help break a pattern of building up stress.	Don't... sit around, using alcohol or other drugs to make yourself feel better.
Do... enjoy life.	Spend time having fun, doing things that you enjoy and help you to relax in the company of family and friends. Try to eat well and make healthy food choices, and take time to enjoy your meals.	Don't... hide away from people. Don't... rely on fast, convenience foods – they actually increase stress levels.
Do... test.	Monitor your blood glucose levels often.	Don't... ignore your health.
Do... talk to your doctor.	Have your blood pressure checked and discuss whether your medication needs adjusting during this time of stress.	Don't... think your doctor isn't interested.

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When is it more than stress?

Stress is normal. Whether pleasant or unpleasant, many stressful events are short-lived and life usually returns to normal.

However, if your symptoms don't go away, you may be developing anxiety or depression. Anxiety and depression are not normal. They are medical problems with proven treatments. Both will affect your diabetes and make it more difficult to manage. Refer to the *Depression and Diabetes* information sheet.

If you find your stressful symptoms last for more than a few weeks, be sure to discuss it with your doctor.

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