

# Caring for someone with diabetes

## (for family and friends)

Caring for a family member or friend who has diabetes can be rewarding but also challenging. You may feel worried, frustrated or confused about how to best support the person in managing their diabetes. It's very common to feel this way. You may also be balancing this care with other demands, such as work, study or family. Taking care of your own health and well-being is important. This factsheet will give you some tips about what you can do to support your relative or friend with diabetes, and how you can take care of yourself.



“It’s important to remember that the person with diabetes isn’t the only person going through a tough time and not the only person who has frustrations. I think that’s important. A lot of people forget that and a lot of people forget that they need to look after themselves as well.”

Josh, 38, husband of person with type 1 diabetes

Family and friends play an important role in helping a person to manage their diabetes. Often, they offer practical support (e.g., helping with meal planning and preparation, reminding the person to take medications or monitoring glucose levels). They also offer emotional support (e.g., listening to the person’s frustrations and concerns).

Supporting someone during times of need can be a positive experience. However, diabetes is a lifelong ‘24/7’ condition. So, there are likely to be times when the ongoing caring role affects your own well-being. You’re not alone. It’s common to feel:

- » worried that the person may develop other health problems because of diabetes
- » helpless, i.e., not knowing how to best help the person with their diabetes
- » guilty that you’re not doing enough
- » confused or uncertain about what support is expected from you
- » anxious about the person with diabetes having severe hypos (very low blood glucose) when you are not around
- » frustrated that well-intended help is not appreciated by the person with diabetes or that your needs are not considered.

These feelings are a natural reaction to the demands of caring for someone with diabetes.

When you spend most of your time looking after other people's needs, it can be easy to forget about taking care of yourself. This may lead to stress in your relationships or difficulty in keeping up at work or school. So it's important that you look after yourself – you can't pour from an empty cup!

## What you can do

Here are some tips that may help you maintain your own emotional well-being while still supporting the person you care for. Some strategies may work for you – others may not, and that's okay. They may give you ideas about other things you could try.

### Talk about your own needs and concerns

Talking things through with others can be a big help. You may like to talk to the person with diabetes about how you feel (see box).

Other things you could say are:

- » *“Sometimes, it might seem like I am nagging you (to take your tablets/insulin) but I only remind you because I worry that you might forget. Do you understand that I am worried about you?”*
- » *“I worry about you having a hypo because I am scared something terrible could happen to you. Can you explain to me how you manage your hypos so that I feel more at ease?”*

The person with diabetes may not feel comfortable talking about their diabetes with you, and that's alright. Perhaps you are also unsure whether it's a good idea to talk to them about your feelings. Either way, this doesn't mean you should ignore the way you feel.



## Tips on starting a 'safe' conversation

Often, family and friends mean well but find themselves acting like or being seen as the 'diabetes police'. This can put pressure on your relationship. Try starting a 'safe' conversation, where each of you can talk about your feelings and needs.

1. Ask the person with diabetes if it's okay to have a chat about their diabetes.
2. Ask what they do and don't find helpful.
3. Explain how you feel (e.g., worried, helpless, frustrated) and why you feel that way.
4. Agree on things you can do that the person with diabetes will appreciate.
5. Agree on things they will do (or not do) without your help or comment.
6. Check in on each other and change your plans if needed.



*“Yes, you might feel like the 'diabetes police'... Sometimes you need to know as much as the person with diabetes does. If you don't care about keeping their glucose fairly stable then it's not going to help the person you are caring for...you don't want to freak them out but you just need to be aware.”*

Susan, 53, daughter of person with type 2 diabetes

## Ask questions

To support someone, you need to understand *their* diabetes, and they need to understand how much and what you can do to support them. A good place to start is by talking to the person. You may like to ask about the practical aspects, such as how they look after their diabetes, as well as the emotional aspects, such as what it is like for them to live with diabetes. For example:

- » “What works best **for you** in managing your diabetes?”
- » “What’s the most difficult part of living with diabetes **for you**?”

If the person with diabetes is willing to talk about their diabetes, lend an ear. They will probably feel pleased that you are interested. Understanding how they feel about their diabetes may reduce some of your concerns too.

“Carers need to know that they are not alone, they are not going mad, not losing it... it’s totally normal. Most people who are caring for someone with diabetes go through that... It’s important to have someone to talk to who could say to you ‘me too’.”

Kim, 48, mother of young adult with type 1 diabetes



## Take care of yourself

When you feel distressed, you might like to imagine what you would say to a close friend facing the same problems. Compare this to how you usually respond to yourself in these situations. Are you being harder on yourself than you would be on a friend? It’s okay to feel distressed, and it’s okay to feel that you need to take care of yourself. Be kind to yourself, and follow the advice you’d give to a close friend.

Being there for someone else sometimes means we end up putting ourselves second. Your own health and emotional well-being should always be a priority. This means:

- » Take care of your physical health (e.g., get enough rest and sleep, eat healthy foods, engage in physical activity you enjoy, practise mindful breathing (see second box)).
- » Give yourself a break and make time for yourself (e.g., have a relaxing bath, go to the cinema, arrange a coffee date with a friend).
- » Accept help from others if you need it (e.g., having someone else step in to your caring role for a few hours). Remember, if it looks like to others that you’re coping fine, they may not realise you actually need some help. They may be waiting for you to ask. Asking for help is not a sign of failure.

## Talk with a professional

The strategies above may give you some ideas about how to prevent or reducedistress, and take better care of your emotional well-being. However, it’s also a good idea to talk about your concerns with a health professional, as they are there to support you too.

## Mindful breathing activity

1. Start by breathing in and out slowly. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body.
2. Let go of your thoughts. Let go of the things you have to do later, or anything that needs your attention.
3. Simply let thoughts come and go. Purposefully watch your breath. Focus your awareness on your chest rising and falling. Then, watch with awareness as the breath works its way up and out of your mouth.

## Who can help?

### General practitioner

Talking to your doctor is a good place to start. They can assist you with understanding the basics of diabetes, while also providing non-judgemental support to help you manage your emotions. Together, you can make a plan to reduce your concerns.

Bring this leaflet along to your consultation to help get the conversation started. You will probably feel relieved after sharing your feelings with them.

Your doctor can provide you with information and also make recommendations for seeking additional professional support (see section: 'Psychologist').

It may also be helpful to meet with the health professionals of the person with diabetes.

“Make sure you are getting enough sleep, socialising with others and physical activity, because if you find yourself getting bogged down, over working and worrying about things all the time it’s going to be a big downward spiral.”

Charlie, 31, husband of person with type 1 diabetes



### Psychologist

- » If you are finding it particularly tough to cope with the demands of your caring role, you might also like to talk with a psychologist. They will be able to support you, offer some strategies to help, and provide relationship and family counselling if needed.
- » Ask your doctor if they know a psychologist in your area. If you are seeking relationship or family counselling, be sure to check that the psychologist offers this service, as not all do. You can also find a psychologist near you by going to the Australian Psychological Society website at [psychology.org.au](https://psychology.org.au)
- » Your doctor can tell you if you are eligible for a Mental Health Treatment Plan to reduce the costs involved in seeing a psychologist.



## More information and support

### Carers Australia

[carersaustralia.com.au](http://carersaustralia.com.au) or **1800 242 636**

Support for unpaid carers through a range of services, including a telephone advisory line for advice and information about practical, financial, and emotional supports available to you as a carer.

### Relationships Australia

[relationships.org.au](http://relationships.org.au) or **1300 364 277**

Relationship information and support service for individuals, families and communities. Counselling services are available face to face, online, and over the telephone (depending on location and special needs).

### beyondblue

[beyondblue.org.au](http://beyondblue.org.au) or **1300 224 636**

Information and support for people with depression or anxiety or who are going through a tough time. Support services are available via telephone, email or chat, including online forums where you can connect with others.

### Diabetes Australia & NDSS

[diabetesaustralia.com.au](http://diabetesaustralia.com.au)

[ndss.com.au](http://ndss.com.au)

NDSS Helpline **1800 637 700**

Diabetes Australia offers a free national NDSS Helpline, through which people with diabetes and their carers can access diabetes information, education programs, peer support groups, and other events.

“I’m a huge supporter for my wife, she can look after herself very, very well and it’s extremely rare that I need to do anything. But I am always there and I’m always curious. We discuss her diabetes and I go to her endocrinologist appointments and eye appointments with her. So I am always very keen to find anything new that I can do that would provide support. The one thing we have probably never done is talk about how I feel, having a conversation about how things affect me about her health. Just reading through this leaflet, I think we will have that discussion now.”

Mike, 51, husband of person with type 1 diabetes



## The NDSS and you

A wide range of services and support is available through the NDSS to help you manage your diabetes. This includes information on diabetes management through the NDSS Helpline and website. The products, services and education programs available can help you stay on top of your diabetes.

Developed in collaboration with The Australian Centre for Behavioural Research in Diabetes, a partnership for better health between Diabetes Victoria and Deakin University.