



# *Listen to your Heart*

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**Self-management of diabetes requires some level of ability to manage our emotions. Every now and then, each of us goes through an emotional rollercoaster ride of sorts that may derail us from our diabetes management.**

**Experiencing negative emotions contributes to poorer adherence to medications and less blood glucose monitoring\*. We need to manage our feelings, so that we can also focus our thoughts and behaviours on healthy lifestyle habits.**

## **Emotions “Management”**

Fortunately, there are ways where we can manage our emotions better even when they run wild. Most of us tend to think that managing emotions means “getting a hold on it”. Translated into action, this would probably mean suppressing our emotions. For example, trying to “be positive” or “think positive”, or ignoring our emotions, or distracting ourselves with tasks in the hope that the emotion will “go away”.

“Getting a hold of our emotions” may or may not work. Remember those times when you tried to occupy yourself with “other things” and the emotions just kept coming back? Well, that’s really because there are other more effective ways to manage our emotions which you could try.

## Benefits of Emotional Awareness

Surprisingly, one of the other ways of managing our emotions is simply being aware of and understanding what we feel. Research has indicated that a greater awareness and understanding of our emotions contributes to better management of negative emotions, self-management of diabetes and HbA1c outcomes.\*\*

In addition, learning how to be more aware of our emotions actually helps individuals to experience significant reductions in negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, anger and distress. Individuals also report decrease in sleeplessness and fatigue, while experiencing a better quality of life. The frequency that an individual practises being aware of his emotions was associated with better self management of diabetes and reductions in HbA1c as well.

## Importance of Emotional Awareness

So, why is it important to pay attention to our emotions? When we experience pain in our body, it is trying to tell us that there is possibly injury in that area or we could have strained that part too much due to our activities, etc. Similarly, when we “react”, and feel emotions, they are trying to tell us something. And knowing what each emotion is trying to tell us helps us to direct our behaviours rather than let our emotions direct us.

To illustrate, when we experience anger, we know that we need to cool off. We may also know what or who is making us angry. But to add on to our bag of tools to effectively manage our anger, it may be helpful to acknowledge that the anger is possibly trying to tell us that our rights, beliefs and/or needs may have been violated. The surge of anger could possibly help us to have the drive to stand up for our rights.

Recognising this, we can try to regulate our anger by cooling off or engaging in another activity that we normally do to manage our anger. Then when it reaches a certain level we may make use of that drive from anger to negotiate with someone, instead of screaming and shouting.

## Being More Aware of Our Emotions

So, how does one gain more awareness of emotions?

Awareness of our emotions means not just knowing what we feel, but also accepting our emotions and understanding what they are about. Here is what you can do to listen to your feelings:

Notice the feelings when they happen.

Stay with the feelings.

Describe the feelings in how you experience it in your body (e.g., tightness in the chest, lump in your throat, head spinning, feeling heavy all over, etc).

Label the feelings you experience with a ‘feeling’ word, e.g., hurt, sadness, heartbroken, depressed, etc.

Listen to the message of the feelings.

### References:

\*Hughes, A.E., Berg, C.A., & Wiebe, D.J. (2012) Emotional Processing and Self Control in Adolescents with Type 1 Diabetes. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 37(8), 923-934.

\*\*McCraty R, Atkinson M, Conforti K. Heart rate variability, hemoglobin A1c, and psychological health in Type 1 and 2 diabetes following an emotional self-management program. *Proceedings of the Society of Behavioral Medicine 20th Annual Scientific Sessions*, San Diego, California, 1999 [abst].

