

HEARTWARE

Henry Lew

EMBARRASSED?

Gabrielle, a polytechnic student with Type 1 diabetes, hides in a corner to inject herself with insulin because she does not want her classmates to find out.

MISUNDERSTOOD?

Mr Singh looked at his appointment card filled with various medical appointments. He recall his supervisor's comments about him going for too many medical appointments. and felt really misunderstood. He does not want to have diabetes nor to be absent from work. He bottled up his feelings and continued working.

FRUSTRATED?

Madam Rafiza looked at her blood glucose level; it was still high. She felt frustrated. She had already made some changes to her diet and started exercising, yet there was still no progress. Some of her friends and family would console her; others are just as lost as she is. She knows that she can always check with healthcare professionals and find out what else she can do. Yet she cannot help but feel alone and isolated.



YOU
NEVER
WALK
ALONE

SUPPORT GROUPS

How do they help?

You may have similar experiences to some of these individuals. And even if you have not, you probably have encountered some of the emotions of feeling alone, unsupported, lost and misunderstood.

Most of the time, individuals with diabetes know what they want. If they want to know more about diet, they turn to dietitians. If they want to know about managing diabetes, they turn to doctors. If they wanted to manage their moods, they turn to a mental health professional. But sometimes even though their family and friends are supportive and encouraging, they just want to talk to another individual with diabetes to feel more connected and understood.

Although it is not substitute for psychotherapy or medication, connecting with others with similar conditions has great benefits. Mdm Rafiza was hesitant about joining a support group but after attending, she remarked, "I was surprised at how good I felt after I attended the support group. The sense of camaraderie helped me to keep trying to stay healthy."

"You get to hear the struggles of others and how they overcame it. It gives you hope," said Gabrielle who considered for a long time before she attended a support group. "I was also surprised that what I shared could touch others."

"I saw no point in going at first, but after they tried to persuade me to go many times, I thought I would go and take a look," Mr Singh commented. "What they share are very practical tips and how they have adapted the doctor's recommendations to their own lifestyle. I could relate to their experiences". In fact, the group brainstormed with Mr Singh and came up with some possible solutions to manage his supervisor.

Very often, participants not just learn from other people's sharing. They feel empowered when they find that their own experiences can actually make a difference to others. And they get to air very practical issues, like Mr Singh's, on managing work and medical appointments. They may not solve the "problem" on the spot, but the sense of connection fosters a sense of community that energises them to persevere and keep going, in spite of the challenges. Instead of continuing to feel frustrated and lost, you may start to feel motivated, understood, and less embarrassed.

Support groups for individuals with diabetes are invaluable and they are not just social groups. Research has proven that support groups help individuals with diabetes to cope better with the toils of managing diabetes. What differentiates a support group from a social group is that it has a structure and purpose and the discussions are usually facilitated by someone trained or experienced individuals.

Support groups may not be for everyone, but if you have not been to one, I urge you to go with an open mind. If you have been to one and find that it is not your cup of tea, I still urge you to be open to trying out other groups, as you may eventually find one that fits you. And if you are already a regular member of a support group, congratulations! You have already found the treasure of connection and support. (See page 7 for information on DSS Diabetes Support Group and its activities.)

About the author: Henry Lew works as a psychologist and enjoys coming up with creative ways to engage his patients and readers.