



GOOD GRIEF! I HAVE DIABETES!

What goes on in your head and heart when you find out you have diabetes? Is it the end of the road? Evelyn Boon, Senior Psychologist, Singapore General Hospital, delves into the depths of your emotions to unlock the truth behind your anger, confusion and fear.

After weeks of constantly feeling tired and thirsty, being plagued by mood swings and poor sleep, you muster enough courage to see a doctor and he gives you the bad news - you have diabetes.

You try to make sense of the slew of instructions about medication, diet, blood testing regime and lifestyle changes. Before you can catch your breath, you are due to see the dietitian and diabetes nurse educator.

How did you feel? Lost? Confused? Overwhelmed? Angry? Disbelieving? Guilty? Afraid?

How can else should you feel? After all, you have just been told that you are stuck with an incurable illness for life.

Rest assured, these emotions are natural – it's called "grief".

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is a natural response to loss. We grieve for the loss of a loved one or precious item. We experience grief when we lose our health and even a certain way of life.

You may have felt as if some part of you died when you found out you had diabetes. Your future seems so uncertain. You mourn for the loss of being "normal". With all the changes (insulin, oral medications, home glucose monitoring) needed now, life just isn't the same. You may also resent the food restrictions.

Such negative feelings are all part of the bereavement process. Grief is not necessarily a bad thing. It usually opens our eyes and changes our attitudes.

While grief is normal, incomplete recovery from loss can have a lifelong effect on a person's capacity for happiness.

It is important to work through the different stages of grief. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified the different stages of grieving using an abstract model. The stages are, however, not as neatly experienced as they are described. People seldom move from one stage to another in a straight line. You may find yourself in more than one stage at a time. You may also find yourself moving back and forth between stages or be stuck in one.

Denial – the initial reaction

You may initially refuse to believe what you heard from your doctor. Did you perhaps request more blood tests? Did you seek a second opinion? Perhaps you have chosen to disregard your doctor's advice and refused to take your medicine or make lifestyle changes.

Anger – reality sets in

As the reality of diabetes takes root, feelings of anger, and a sense of unfairness may begin to surface. You resent your loved ones and blame them for this disease. You may be angry with yourself or even God for "giving" you diabetes.

Bargaining – your head takes over

At this point, reason and logic take over. You realise that this disease is not going away. So what do you do now? You try to delay taking medicine by losing weight or becoming more conscientious in controlling your diet.

Depression – the full impact sinks in

When realisation finally sinks, you feel the full force of how serious your condition is and how much change you need to make. You feel very heavy hearted and depressed. It is common for newly diagnosed diabetics to feel depressed, overwhelmed, hopeless and helpless.

Acceptance - at peace with yourself

This is the ultimate stage where we hope to be. It means that you are finally dealing with the reality of diabetes. The condition is now part of your daily living. You have a sense of hope and a positive frame of mind.

HOW TO HANDLE GRIEF

Have a good support network

- Identify some people whom you trust to help you
- Let them know that you may need their moral support
- Surround yourself with people who care and whom you feel comfortable with.

Don't be afraid to ask for help

- To ask for help does not mean that you are incapable or weak
- Let yourself be helped by your friends and loved ones. It is okay to ask for help every now and then

Talk

- Do not keep things bottled up inside
- Stress is bad for you and may worsen your diabetes

Permit yourself to feel

- Let yourself feel sad, angry or even cry
- It will be better to let it out than fight your emotions

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP?

- When your grief is starting to interfere with your daily routine
- When you neglect taking care of yourself and your health.
- If you feel that you are unable to cope with your grief alone anymore

Between 35 and 50 percent of men with diabetes experience ED.