



BUILDING SUPPORT

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Henry Lew, psychologist, National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, talks about the importance of taking care of yourself and finding family members to hold your hand on the long, hard journey when dealing with diabetes.

Very often, family members of diabetic patients need to make lifestyle and dietary adjustments to help them deal better with the disease. During this difficult time the other family members may face upsetting changes to their normal routine, making them feel vulnerable, confused and stressed.

Family members must try to manage their own stress effectively so that they are able to provide adequate social support for the patient. Below are some tips to help family members cope.

Knowledge is power

Ignorance breeds fear. Some family members are anxious and uncertain about what they are supposed to do and how they can support the diabetes patient. Seek more information from the library, attend health talks, and ask the attending doctors or nurses for help. The more you know, the better equipped you are to lend your support. If you feel overwhelmed by the amount of information you have to take in, do not be afraid to counter-check.

Pradeep, 37, initially could not accept the fact that his child has diabetes. He says, "To me it is a disease that happens only to the elderly. I was lost. I did not know what to do. It was only after talking to his doctor and nurses that I felt less anxious because I knew how to take care of him and deal with his condition."

Don't be hard on yourself

Care-giving puts considerable stress on family and close relationships. You may find yourself getting temperamental or moody. Remember that you are all under stress and such feelings and certain reactions are normal.

Agnes, 38, shares how the stress of her father's non-compliance affected their relationship: "It was really terrible at first. I kept arguing with my father, who had diabetes, when he did not adhere to his insulin treatment. I felt really bad about my attitude. I realised that I was too stressed and it was making me irritable. I needed to relax myself before I could communicate effectively with my father."

Take care of yourself

You need to recognise that you are in a vulnerable state and so be mindful of your own needs. This can mean putting aside some time just for yourself. Try to continue doing activities that you enjoy. For example, because you need to take care of your diabetes member, you might not be able to take your usual walk in the park for an hour. You can still do so - for 30 minutes.

Understand reactions of other family members

One family member might be very emotional while another family member might appear to be unaffected at all. These are different ways of coping with the same situation. Accepting each other's differences is important in the support system.

Shahnez, 43, was upset when his sister continued to buy hawker food for their mother in spite of her diabetes. "I could not understand how insensitive my sister was," he reveals. "My mum was trying to watch her diet, and yet she continued to buy all kinds of inappropriate food. I realised it was her way of showing concern for my mum. I had to make her understand that she could do so, but reduce the portion and choose healthier options instead."

Find support for yourself

The responsibility of day-to-day diabetes care needs to be shared with a partner or another close person. Sharing the practical tasks means sharing the emotional burden as well. Diabetes is a chronic disease and you would not be able to take it on alone in the long run. From time to time, you might need to consider tapping on to community resources or extended family members for help. Because of the extra care and costs associated with diabetes, you might need to explore avenues for financial assistance.

Diabetes care is a long journey. To take good care of your diabetic family member, you need to first take good care of yourself.