



Diabetes and depression: a two-way street

What is it?

We all know what it's like to feel sad, blue, flat, lousy or down. For most of us, these feelings don't last long. For some people, however, sadness becomes so strong, and goes on for so long, that they find it hard to do normal everyday things at home, work and school. When this happens, a person may have depression – a serious mental health problem that is common in the community, and even more common in people with diabetes.

The two-way street



Some studies show that people with diabetes are more likely to get depression. There are also studies showing that people with depression are more likely to develop diabetes. Depression interferes with diabetes self-care and makes diabetes symptoms worse. At the same time, the daily demands of diabetes and the effects of the disease on the brain may worsen symptoms of depression. So the link between diabetes and depression really is a two-way street. Essentially, each condition increases the burden of the other.

What are the signs and symptoms?

If you are depressed, then you may have on-going problems with some or all of the following:

- Always feeling low or down
- Difficulty finding pleasure in activities and routines that you once enjoyed
- Low levels of motivation and always feeling tired
- Not wanting to socialise with family and friends
- Problems getting to and staying asleep
- Little interest in diabetes self-care
- Not wanting to eat or eating too much
- Weight loss or gain
- Worry and negative thinking about yourself, the world and your future

Research shows that people with diabetes and depression are more likely to be hospitalised for treatment of severe hypoglycaemia than people with diabetes alone¹

Depression is also linked with a range of physical problems in diabetes, including: loss of libido, stomach problems, increased sensitivity to pain, and more frequent and severe hypoglycaemia.

What can you do?

Only a trained health professional can diagnose depression. So if your symptoms are a problem, talk to your general practitioner (GP), who can refer you to a mental health professional.

Diabetes and depression

Treatment will depend on the type of depression you have. There are three main types of treatment for depression:

1. psychological treatments: A psychologist will teach you skills and strategies to deal with the problem thoughts and behaviours that are maintaining your depression.
2. antidepressant medication: This is designed to help restore the balance of brain chemicals that affect your mood.
3. combination treatment: You might need medication to lift your mood before you are able to benefit from psychological treatment.

Provided you have a referral from your GP, some psychological services are Medicare refundable. For more information, go to the Australian Psychological Society website www.psychology.org.au

Tips on managing symptoms

There are a number of things that you can do to take care of yourself and improve your mood. Here are just a few ideas:

Monitor your mood. It helps to know the things that trigger changes in your mood. So keep a mood diary and learn the things that you are doing and thinking when your mood is positive. You will begin to see patterns after a week or so (for a sample mood diary go to www.blackdoginstitute.org.au then enter into the search field 'mood chart' and select the link that appears)

Get activated. Write a list of things that you once enjoyed (eg. walking the dog, trying a new recipe), and plan to do one of these things each day. Even though your motivation may be low at first, stay focussed on the positives. As you continue to do the things that make you feel good, your mood will improve.

Get some sleep. A good night's sleep is essential for good mental and physical health. If you are having trouble sleeping, try the Sleeping Tips to the right. They will be hard at first, but stick with them. You will see the benefits.

Exercise. Physical exercise (eg. walking, going for a swim, playing golf and dancing), has been shown to improve mood. So try doing some regular exercise each day (try to get at least 30 minutes, but remember, every little bit helps). Exercise will help your diabetes, distract you from your worries, improve your fitness, and lift your mood.

Stop going around in circles. Depression is often linked with thinking styles that are unhelpful. For example, when people are depressed, they can go round-and-round asking themselves questions about things that have happened in the past, for which there are no clear answers ("why did this happen to me?" or "what is wrong with me that I let this happen?"). If you notice yourself thinking in this way, ask yourself, "Is this helpful?". Chances are, it isn't. Instead, focus on what you need right now. It is better to spend your mental energy on something helpful that will move you forward.

Sleeping Tips

1. Have a sleep routine. Go to bed and get up at the same time each day
2. Don't toss and turn. If you can't sleep, get up and do something else for a while.
3. Bed is for sleeping, not watching movies, eating meals etc.
4. No napping during the day
5. No clocks in the bedroom
6. No stimulants (eg. coffee) after 4pm

For depression information and support go to:
www.diabetescounselling.com.au
www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
www.beyondblue.org.au

References:

- ¹ Katon W, Young B, Russo J, et al. (2013). Association of depression with increased risk of severe hypoglycemic episodes in patients with diabetes. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 11, 245-250