

## Tips to help you stress less

Stress and distress are normal human emotions that we can feel when we are overwhelmed by work, financial, family and relationship demands. Many people with diabetes also feel distressed by the day-to-day demands of their disease. Facing stigma and feeling alone or judged by others because of diabetes; problems juggling and feeling limited by diet, exercise and medication needs; difficulties talking to health professionals; and worry about diabetes complications, are examples of daily diabetes hassles that, at times, can leave you feeling upset, frustrated, angry, guilty and unmotivated.

### When does it become a problem?

A moderate level of distress, which is short-lived, is not always a problem and may motivate you to achieve your goals. There are also times when it is normal to have strong emotional responses such as fear, anger, denial and sadness; for example, when you find out you have diabetes.

**Too much, too intense and prolonged distress, however, is not healthy.** This may affect your psychological wellbeing (including increased risk of mental health problems such as depression), make it harder to manage your diabetes (stress often causes blood glucose levels to go up), and negatively affect your physical health.

In a recent Australian survey, 28% of people with type 1 diabetes and up to 22% of people with type 2 diabetes reported severe diabetes-related distress<sup>1</sup>

### What are the signs?

High levels of diabetes-related distress are linked with changes in your body, your thinking, your feelings, and your behaviour. Warning signs and symptoms vary from person to person. However, there are some common warning signs.

If you are distressed then you might feel some of the following:

Physical	Thoughts	Feelings/Emotions	Behaviours
Headaches	<i>"I can't cope"</i>	Stress	Staying in bed
Muscle tension	<i>"I can't do this"</i>	Resentment	Avoiding other people
Stomach cramps	<i>"I'm really worried"</i>	Guilt	Poor self-care
Chest pain	<i>"No-one supports me"</i>	Denial	Difficulty sleeping
Diarrhoea	<i>"I'm all alone"</i>	Anger	Impatience
Fluctuating blood glucose	<i>"People don't understand what I'm going through"</i>	Frustration	Over-sensitivity
		Irritability	Irritability
		Loneliness	

# Diabetes-related stress and distress

## What can you do?

Distress does not need to last forever and there are many things you can do to take care of yourself and get back on track. Here are just a few ideas:

**Talk about it.** It helps to talk about your concerns and worries to someone supportive. This may be a family member, a friend, someone with diabetes, or a health professional. If you have a problem to be solved, talking to others is a good way to come up with possible solutions.

**Do things you enjoy.** When you are distressed, you often stop doing the things you like – the ones that make you feel good. Spend some time each day doing something you enjoy, eg. go for a walk, read a book, or do some gardening.

### Focus on the present tips

Take a few minutes to observe the following:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can hear
- 3 things you can touch
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

How does that feel? What do you notice?

**Focus on the here-and-now.** Distress is often caused by concern about something that has happened in the past (eg. eating the wrong food, forgetting medication), or worry about the future (eg. developing complications, impact of diabetes on work and relationships). Try to bring your focus back to the present by following the tips on the left.

**Soothe yourself.** Do something soothing to help you calm and relax eg. take a hot bath, listen to music, get a massage. If what you try first doesn't work, try something else next time.

**Get some exercise.** Physical exercise (eg. walking, going for a swim, playing golf and dancing), will reduce muscle tension and relax you mentally. The hormones that are released in your body when you exercise will also lift your mood.

**Breathe.** You may find that you do not breathe properly when you are very stressed or distressed: that your breathing becomes short, rapid and shallow, which leaves you feeling more tense, exhausted, and unwell. Take some time each day to do the breathing exercise on the right.

**Take care of yourself.** Make sure that you are getting enough rest and that you are eating healthy foods. If you haven't had your diabetes or general health checked, make an appointment to see your doctor.

**Seek professional advice.** If you think that you need help to cope for a short while, speak to your doctor. He/she can help put you in touch with a counsellor or psychologist.

### Breathing exercise

Find somewhere comfortable and shut your eyes. Take ten deep and slow breaths. With each breath, focus on:

- the air moving in and out of your lungs;
- the rise and fall of your chest; and
- the sensation of the air going in and out of your nostrils.

Feel your tummy push out as it fills with air, and then returns as you breathe out. If you get distracted, that's okay, just bring your attention back to your breathing. Aim for ten breaths per minute.

For support and information go to:

[www.diabetescounselling.com.au](http://www.diabetescounselling.com.au)

[www.diabetesnsw.com.au](http://www.diabetesnsw.com.au)

Go to 'Resources' then 'Information Sheets' and find 'Managing Stress and Diabetes'

### References:

<sup>1</sup> Speight J, Browne JL, Holmes-Truscott E, Hendrieckx C, Pouwer F, on behalf of the Diabetes MILES – Australia reference group (2011). Diabetes MILES – Australia 2011 Survey Report. Diabetes Australia – Vic, Melbourne.