

The interconnection of mental health and diabetes

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LET'S FACE it, living with diabetes can be hard. There are physical, financial and mental health considerations. It's not just about managing your blood sugar levels, but instead about having a holistic approach to life. The relationship between diabetes and mental health is bidirectional. Research has shown that managing a chronic illness can lead to mental health struggles, while poor mental health can negatively impact diabetes management. Understanding this connection is essential for individuals living with diabetes and healthcare providers alike.

Stress is a common experience for individuals managing diabetes. The constant monitoring of blood sugar levels, dietary restrictions, and medication management can create overwhelming pressure. Chronic stress triggers the release of cortisol, a hormone that can raise blood sugar levels, further complicating diabetes management.

People with diabetes are two to three times more likely to experience depression, compared to those without diabetes. Yet, only 25 per cent to 50 per cent of individuals with both diabetes and depression receive a diagnosis and treatment. The good news? Treatment – whether through therapy, medication, or a combination of both – can be highly effective. Without proper support, however, depression often intensifies rather than improving on its own (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Diabetes distress is a specific form of emotional distress that arises from the burden of managing diabetes. It is a unique challenge that includes feelings of frustration, fear, and helplessness related to the management of the illness. Unlike clinical depression, diabetes distress is often situational, but it can lead to poor adherence to diabetes treatment regimens and worsen mental health if left unaddressed.

Diabetes and the associated mental health struggles can strain relationships. It's essential to communicate openly with loved ones about the challenges faced and to seek support

when needed. Encouraging partners and family members to learn about diabetes can foster empathy and understanding.

COPING STRATEGIES AND SELF-MANAGEMENT

To effectively manage both diabetes and mental health, individuals can adopt various coping strategies:

Lifestyle changes: Incorporating lifestyle changes, such as prioritising sleep and engaging in stress-reducing activities, can greatly benefit both physical and mental health.

Regular physical activity: Exercise has been shown to improve mood and lower stress levels. It can also help regulate blood sugar.

Healthy eating: A balanced diet is crucial for both physical health and mental well-being. Consider consulting with a nutritionist for personalised meal plans.

Mindfulness and relaxation techniques: Mindfulness practices can enhance awareness of thoughts and feelings, allowing individuals to respond to stressors more effectively. Practices such as meditation, yoga, and deep-breathing exercises can help reduce stress and improve mental clarity.

Building a support network: Connecting with friends, family, or support groups can provide emotional support and reduce feelings of isolation. Encouraging open conversations about feelings, fears, and experiences can strengthen relationships and provide emotional relief.

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Seeking help from healthcare professionals is essential. A multidisciplinary approach that includes both diabetes care teams and mental health specialists can address the complexities of managing both conditions. Regular check-ins with a mental health professional can provide valuable support and coping strategies. While managing both diabetes and mental health can be challenging, it is possible to lead a fulfilling life with the right strategies and support. Empowering individuals with knowledge and resources is key to navigating the complexities of these interconnected issues. By taking a holistic approach to health, one can achieve better outcomes for both diabetes management and mental well-being.