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Diabetes lends itself to a holistic approach

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I strongly encourage individuals to discover areas in their lives in which taking more responsibility for choice supports well-being.

A case in point was a recent story shared with me of 'Sandler,' a woman who claimed to have healed herself from the ravaging results of diabetes mainly by changing her lifestyle and attitude. When I first heard Ms Sandler's story, I was intrigued.

Diabetes lends itself to a holistic approach. In fact, I would go so far as to say that a holistic approach is essential in its adequate treatment because it is a whole body, life-altering illness. Although purportedly it is a pancreatic or insulin receptor dysfunction, its impact reaches every cell of the body. Lifestyle decisions are changed forever by diabetes. This is no small ticket diagnosis.

The big picture

We should first be clear that not all diabetes is created equal. Type I Diabetes, which usually begins in childhood, is a failure of the pancreas to pump out insulin in adequate quantity for the body's needs. In Type II Diabetes (also known as Adult Onset Diabetes), the receptors that normally take up insulin in every cell of the body are malfunctioning. Because these receptors serve as on/off switches for the utilization of glucose (as well as a number of other cellular functions), the body's capacity to use glucose as fuel is severely compromised. As a result, the liver, in a compensatory gesture (and because its insulin receptors are also disrupted), pumps up the body's level of triglycerides. This is a move that adds further burdens to the heart, which may already be stressed by other conditions such as hypertension

What is a body to do? There are natural approaches for ameliorating some of this. Although the whole-life suggestions that follow will more likely influence Type II than Type I diabetes, the changes suggested would stand anyone in good stead and may increase the utility of insulin for any body.

1. *Lots of exercise*.
Although not a forte for many of us in middle age, engaging in a minimum of 30 minutes of aerobic exercise a day lowers glucose levels, increases the efficiency of the insulin

receptors, helps with weight loss, reduces blood pressure, and makes for a healthier heart. Sounds pretty good! The only caveat? You must do it.

Make it as easy (and likely) as possible by choosing two or three things you really like to do and alternating between them. Find a buddy to share the fun (or misery) if that helps keep you at it.

2. *Nutrition*

A good diet serves every–body well; but is particularly important for one with diabetes. The rigid American Diabetes Association (ADA) diet has been relaxed somewhat – but there are basics that do matter.

a. Get your weight under control. This is a big deal. Central obesity, especially, is associated with 'Syndrome X' – a malady of insulin resistance that has been identified by some researchers to be a significant cause of heart attacks, among other problems. Choose your calories wisely.

b. Dump the 'bad' fats in your diet and increase the fiber. Whole grains, non-tropical fruits and vegetables are always a safe bet. A recent article in *Diabetes Care* (Van Dam et al, 2002) reports that men who consume processed meat at least five times per week have a 46% greater risk of developing Type II diabetes, compared with men who consume processed meat less than once a month. Increase your consumption of omega-3's- (found in only cold-water fish like salmon, sardines and mackerel, walnuts and flax seeds) and make it your fat of choice. Lay off the high glycemic foods which are quickly converted to sugars, like white rice and corn flakes. These high glycemic foods are a waste of precious calories.

From what I gathered, Sandler had done more than the basics. I decided to dig deeper into her story. In her words:

> I was diagnosed with diabetes by my Naturopath, Dr. Audrey Bergsma. She suggested a low carb diet (20 carbs a day) and went through the current supplements I was taking and eliminated all of the nutritional products I was using. (This is interesting because later I used them to drop my Blood Sugar significantly into the normal range.) At this time, I began checking my blood sugar and blood pressure. I was able to get everything down – but not 'normal' yet. However, my old nutritional pattern of being on a diet or off a diet – came into play and I pretty much stopped paying attention. I gained weight, stopped watching carbs, and let go of my exercise routine.

I spoke with Dr. Bergsma to get her added perspective:

> For Type II diabetics, the insulin receptors are "insensitive" for a good reason. They have been bombarded with glucose and they are trying to protect the cells which are also bombarded with glucose. Too much glucose is damaging to the cells and so the receptors shut down.
>
> To get to the source of the problem then, it is helpful to increase exercise (a good way to utilize glucose) and eliminate (or at least significantly reduce) certain high carbohydrate foods – including all grains, all fruits, and all starchy vegetables (and of course all junk

> food). Hopefully, this is only temporary (except for the junk food) until the body goes back into balance. This is where the patient's motivation comes into play, big time!
>
> This is step one with the diet. Step two is letting the patient know that the very best indicator of how THEIR body will react to a food is for them to take their blood sugars often so they can see directly which foods do or don't raise their blood sugars. It is the hope that once the body heals and returns to a normal balance, the patient can eventually have a diet that includes the good whole grains, fruits and starchy vegetables.

Sandler goes on to say that she later went blind in one eye with Anterior Ischemic Optic Neuropathy (AION). Although it was not clear whether this was related to her diabetes, the scare she received prompted her to do more research into what she could do to empower herself to make a difference.
She reported she began to:

> Keep a journal, pay attention, and use the blood sugar and blood pressure readings as barometers of what worked and what didn't work. My favorite thing and biggest motivator was turning the readings into charts which clearly showed a cycle and a continual lowering in the numbers. It was very exciting and fun. I'm writing this, and realizing that what resulted, and is probably a big 'healing' factor – is that I was happy through the whole experience. It was fun, I wasn't feeling like it was a burden or self-pity.

Sandler is really onto something here. Janice Post-White (2003) offers the premise that an attitude that fosters optimism enhances the body's capacity to heal. The field of Psychoneuroimmunology, which investigates how emotions trigger immune system responses, has outlined the clear connections between the parts of the brain associated with emotions (the hippocampus and amygdala) and the resultant physical and behavioral responses. Paul Hershberger (2005) cites research that an exercise aimed at increasing gratitude is associated with less depression. Hershberger's "'Three Good Things' intervention requires an individual to write down three positive occurrences that happened during the day every night for 1 week…" At the least, as Sandler alluded to, the behavior changes that come from feeling more optimistic are likely to be more health-promoting.

Sandler also used products not usually offered in the realm of conventional medicine, such as an Aloe based supplement.

> The first time I did the low carb and worked with Dr. Bergsma – we eliminated [an aloe product] I was using because of the carb value. When my blood sugar readings were in a comfortable zone, I chose to add it back in to my diet. Well, the results were amazing. They actually lowered my readings by 15 – 20 points almost immediately.

Research supports her results on this front as well. Minh Ngo, et al (2010) reported that Aloe is used by 8.5 to 13.8% of some US populations and that 5 out of 7 studies show significant reductions in fasting blood glucose after treatment with oral aloe vera in patients with diabetes. Kay Abdullah, et al (2003) concluded that Aloe vera has the ability to stimulate human skin fibroblasts and potentially improve wound healing.

In summary

Sandler's personal story and recent research suggest that there is hope for people with diabetes, and that you can make a huge difference in your glucose control by your life-choices. In Sandler's words:

> I attribute my success to taking my power back from the 'dis-ease,' getting more in touch with my body from the inside out. Being willing to trust my intuition, asking questions and help from my wellness team to work with me in ways that they were able. It didn't take long before I was actually feeling spontaneous gratitude for the occurrence. I could surrender and forgive – after that it was all 'fun.' I totally live my life from the belief that 'we create our own reality' and was well aware during the course of my dis-ease, what I had thought, felt and believed that allowed this experience into my reality. It is this conviction that I found myself in gratitude almost immediately, which allowed my body go from damaged to repaired.

So-what can one do in the face of all this? The answer is: Plenty! Sandler has it right. Her blood sugars went from 163 to 105 and her Hemoglobin A1C (which measures average blood sugars)*, over the course of seven months went from 6.9 to 5.5 – which is well within normal. Amazingly, she also got her sight back.

Follow your physician's advice, but take control of your own health, choices and attitude. This is a prescription for health – in the hands of the one who can really make it count: you.

*Hemoglobin A1C is a form of glycosylated Hemoglobin. The measurements are not to be confused with actual "blood sugar" measurements; the scales of measure are very different. Normal blood sugar is from 80 to 130; normal Hemoglobin A1C is less than 7. Both measurements reflect how the body is handling blood sugar.

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