

Depression and diabetes

Feeling down or sad from time to time is a normal part of life. For most people, these feelings don't last long. But for some people, the sadness or low mood becomes so intense and long-lasting that it starts to impact on daily life. This includes work, school, relationships, and diabetes management. If you're feeling this way, you may have depression.

But you're not alone. There are many things you can do to reduce your feelings of depression.

“Having depression when you've got diabetes is even more difficult. You feel completely hopeless yet you still have to take care of yourself. It's like you're in a dark box and you can't get out of it.”

Craig, 48, person with diabetes



What is depression?

Depression is more intense, long-lasting and disruptive to daily life than sadness. Depression varies in severity, and major depression is a serious mental health condition. It affects how you feel about yourself, other people and your life, and can prevent you from fully engaging in daily tasks, social activities, and relationships.

Symptoms of depression include:

- having little interest or pleasure in doing activities you might have previously enjoyed
- feeling down
- feeling hopeless about the future
- having trouble falling or staying asleep – or sleeping too much
- feeling tired or having little energy
- having a poor appetite– or over-eating
- feeling bad about yourself (that you're a failure, or that you've let yourself or your family down)
- having difficulty concentrating
- moving or speaking very slowly – or being fidgety or restless
- loss of sex drive
- having thoughts that you would be better off dead.

If you've had any of these symptoms for at least two weeks, talk to your General Practitioner (GP) in the first instance. They can make an assessment, offer treatment or refer you to a mental health professional.

It's important that you seek help from a qualified healthcare professional.

What has depression got to do with diabetes?

Depression is one of the most common mental health issues experienced by people with diabetes. Some people had depression before being diagnosed with diabetes, while for others, depression is diagnosed later on. The latter could be due to the emotional burden of managing diabetes. The link between depression and diabetes is not yet fully understood and researchers are studying this link.

What is clear is that depression can affect the way a person manages their diabetes and, in turn, their physical health. Some examples include:

- checking blood sugar levels less often or missing medical appointments due to a lack of motivation or energy to take care of diabetes
- not taking insulin or medication due to feelings of hopelessness, not caring or feeling suicidal.

Depression can sometimes co-exist with anxiety, which is also a common mental health problem. Ask your healthcare professional for our leaflet on coping with anxiety, or contact us for more information.

Do you feel this way because of depression or diabetes?

Depression and diabetes share some of the same symptoms (including fatigue, sleep problems or difficulty concentrating). This can sometimes make it difficult to know whether your feelings are caused by your diabetes, or due to depression, or both.

Even if depression is not related to your diabetes, it can have negative effects on your health, life and relationships.

What you can do

If you're concerned about ongoing low mood, it's important that you seek help from your GP or another qualified healthcare professional. They can help you to identify if you're experiencing depression and offer treatment or make a referral to a mental health professional if needed.

People with major depressive symptoms are likely to require anti-depressant medication.

Whether or not you're experiencing depression, it's important to look after your emotional wellbeing.

Some of the following ideas may work for you – others may not, and that's okay. They may give you other ideas to try too.

Reach out

Depression can make you feel like you're alone. You might even feel like there's no point living anymore. If you feel this way, talk to someone immediately. The people who care about you will want to support you.

- Make a point of talking to at least one person every day.
- If you don't feel like you have a friend or a member of your family to talk to, try calling a healthcare professional like your GP. Or you can talk to us on our helpline where trained counsellors are ready to listen or answer questions.

There are also many sources of online support. You don't need to go through this alone.

Move your body

This might feel like the last thing you want to do when feeling down, but physical activity can really help. Physical activity has powerful effects on the brain and can improve the way you think and feel about yourself. Try to be active every day.

- Start small (for example, walk for 10 minutes).
- Try to get out and enjoy nature while you move, as this helps to reduce stress. For example, start with one short walk every second day, then gradually increase the time you spend walking and how often you walk.

Try to be thankful

When it seems like there is no hope, expressing gratitude can be really tough. But being thankful can really lift your mood and have a positive impact on the way you view your world. Think about one thing every day that you can be thankful for, no matter how small.

It might be hard to think of things to feel thankful for but there is always something. A roof over your head, food to eat, or someone who loves you, are all examples of things you might be thankful for.

Writing it down is a good way of getting your feelings out in the open.

Be present

Focusing on the present moment can be a real challenge, but it can also be a source of great happiness and serenity. Try a mindful breathing exercise (see box below). It might take some practice, but once you've tried it a few times you may be surprised by how helpful it's for improving your wellbeing. If this kind of thing isn't for you, that's okay.

Mindful breathing exercise

Practice this any time you feel yourself getting caught up in negative thoughts.

1. With your eyes closed, or fixed on a spot in front of you, take 10 slow, deep breaths. **Breathe out** as slowly as possible until your lungs are completely empty. Then allow them to refill by themselves.
2. **Notice** the sensation of your lungs emptying. **Notice** them refilling. **Notice** your rib-cage rising and falling. **Notice** the gentle rise and fall of your shoulders.
3. See if you can let your thoughts come and go as if they are just cars passing by.
4. Expand your awareness: **notice** your **breathing** and **your body**. Then look around the room and **notice** what you can see, hear, smell, touch, and feel.

Get enough sleep

Being tired makes it difficult to feel calm and relaxed. Here are some tips that might help:

- Try to keep a sleep routine by going to bed and waking at the same times each day. Keep a sleep diary to understand some of your patterns
- Reduce your caffeine intake: limit your coffee, tea, and soft drinks, and don't drink them after 4pm.
- Be as active as possible during the day but don't do strenuous physical activity just before bedtime.
- Avoid napping during the day.
- Remember, bed is for sleeping. Avoid watching TV, checking emails, or using your phone in bed.
- Make sure the room is quiet and dark.

Be close to others

Being in close contact with others helps to reduce stress and improve well-being. Physical contact makes us happier, so hug a loved one or stroke a family pet.

Talk with a professional

The strategies above may give you some ideas about how to prevent or reduce depression. But they can't replace professional help. It's always a good idea to talk about your concerns with your GP or another qualified healthcare professional.

Who can help?

Your diabetes team

Your diabetes team are there to help you with all aspects of your diabetes, including how you feel about it. If you feel comfortable, share your feelings with them – they'll give you non-judgmental support and advice. You may want to talk with your:

- general practitioner (GP)
- diabetologist (consultant)
- diabetes specialist nurse
- practice nurse
- dietitian.

Bring this leaflet along to your consultation to help get the conversation started. You'll probably feel relieved after sharing your feelings, and it'll help your healthcare professional to understand how you're feeling.

Together, you can make plans to manage your depression.

Psychological or psychiatric specialists

You might also like to talk with a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist, who are trained to assess and treat depression. Treatment may involve:

- one-to-one counselling, like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- medication, like anti-depressants
- a combination of psychological therapy and medication.

“Don't be afraid to ask for help. Seeing a psychologist is one of the best things I ever did.”

Rodney, 36, person with diabetes

More information and support

There are lots of different sources of information and support. Talk with your healthcare professional team about which ones might be right for you.

NHS 'Moodzone'

Dedicated pages from the NHS on mental health, including anxiety, depression, self-help and how to get urgent mental health help when necessary.

Website: www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/

NHS self-help guide on depression

A leaflet from the NHS on managing depression.

Website: www.nhs.uk/selfhelp

Mind

A mental health charity offering information about depression, with telephone and online support, including peer discussion forums.

Call: **0300 123 3393**

Email: info@mind.org.uk

Website: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/depression

How we help

Diabetes UK

We're fighting for a world where diabetes can do no harm. And as the UK's leading diabetes charity, it's our job to tackle the diabetes crisis. We provide information, advice and support to people with all types of diabetes so they can learn to live well with their condition. And we bring people together so they can learn from each other and get to grips with diabetes.

Visit our website www.diabetes.org.uk/your-feelings

Our helpline is managed by trained counsellors there to listen, give support and answer questions.

Call **0345 123 2399**

You can meet other people with diabetes at one of our local support groups.

Visit www.diabetes.org.uk/support-groups

Or chat to others online in our support forum at www.diabetes.org.uk/forum

And if you're on social media, join our online community on Facebook or follow us at

@DiabetesUK on Twitter.

www.diabetes.org.uk

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