

# Diabetes and mental health: Helping your patients connect the dots

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Perhaps you've heard patients express frustration about living with diabetes and its many challenges. Common feelings include worry, anger, and discouragement. These can all contribute to mild or severe stress. Stress can exacerbate a patient's condition by raising blood sugar levels, affecting overall health and the ability to manage self-care. It's important to help patients with diabetes get the help they need to manage and reduce stress.

 [In This Issue](#)

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Reframing one's attitude toward living with diabetes can free up more energy to cope with the condition, face the associated challenges without being overwhelmed, and enjoy other aspects of life. Below are some ways you can support patients in thinking differently about their approach to managing the stress they experience in living with diabetes.

## Ways you can encourage patients to cultivate good mental health

The [American Diabetes Association](#), the [American Psychological Association](#), and a special issue of *American Psychologist* address the connection between diabetes and behavioral health. The following strategies may help your patients move from negative stress toward a healthier and more satisfying response to challenges.

1. **Tap into the power of exercise.** A little exercise can go a long way in helping people cope. Something as simple as taking a brisk walk can help relieve stress and re-energize motivation. Moving more also helps lower blood sugar. That makes physical activity a win-win for someone with diabetes.
2. **Relax and recharge.** Taking a moment for a few deep breaths can help someone do a reset when feeling tense, anxious, or angry. Another effective release technique is doing a quick muscle-relaxation exercise, such as flexing each muscle group and then relaxing it (start with the toes and feet and move up the body).
3. **Retrain the brain.** It takes a little discipline, but it is possible to redirect the mind away from negative thoughts. One way to cultivate this is to memorize an inspiring quote or uplifting phrase and repeat it silently when negative thoughts surface. Another way is for patients to acknowledge the good work they are doing in managing their condition.
4. **Talk about it.** Bottling up feelings can lead to a sense of isolation. Although it might be hard for some people, sharing feelings with trusted friends, family, a therapist, or someone from the patient's diabetes care team can make a big difference. A heart-to-heart talk with a skilled listener can be meaningful and empowering. Patients can also be encouraged to ask for and accept support from loved ones.
5. **Connect with people who've been there.** Many people with diabetes benefit from participating in a support group. The encouragement and insights of people experiencing the same challenges can inspire shifts in thinking and open new pathways to managing a chronic condition.
6. **Tackle challenges head-on.** There are many aspects of diabetes that can create worry and anxiety. Help patients become aware of those things and adopt an "I can do this" attitude rather than sink into overwhelm. Let them know they've got what it takes to gain the skills and support that lead to effective self-care. Setting SMART goals can help patients get traction on the changes they want to make.
7. **Keeping a sense of balance.** While it's important to take diabetes seriously, it doesn't have to define who someone is. Encourage patients to make time for the activities and people they enjoy. Exploring new interests is another way to shift the focus to what's fun and satisfying, despite the challenges of diabetes.

## Help patients recognize symptoms of depression

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According to the CDC, people with diabetes are two to three times more likely to experience depression than those who don't have diabetes. Only 25%-50% of them receive a diagnosis and treatment for depression.<sup>1</sup> If your patient displays or reports symptoms related to depression, be sure to address it with the patient and talk about it. Share the advantages of treatment and offer to help facilitate access to appropriate care through a referral to a mental health professional. The American Diabetes Association maintains a directory of mental health professionals with expertise in diabetes care—be sure to cross reference the

BCBSAZ Provider Directory to ensure the provider is in-network for the member's benefit plan. You may also refer patients to the Blue Cross® Blue Shield® of Arizona (BCBSAZ) Integrated Care Management team at [[email protected](#)] or 602-544-8982 or 1-877-475-8449.

### **Patient resources**

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For more information on managing stress, you can point patients to [CDC resources](#) on Diabetes and Mental Health or this [BCBSAZ blog article on diabetes and mental health](#). The National Institute of Mental Health offers free patient education materials, such as this [webpage about depression](#) and a brochure on [Chronic Illness and Mental Health](#). The CDC offers a [guide for writing SMART goals](#).

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Organizations referenced are separate from and not affiliated with BCBSAZ.

<sup>1</sup> Source: [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Diabetes and Mental Health"](#)

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