

Denial and Being Well with Diabetes

By Ronnie Dixon,
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Photo illustration courtesy of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

SOMETIMES, when I am having difficulty in my life, I wonder how my ancestors were able to survive. They had to be hardy people, healthy of mind, body, and soul to live in this oftentimes harsh land. Surely they had strong beliefs in the Creator. Surely they believed that they had a spiritual purpose here on Earth. I wonder how they would have handled getting diabetes. I wonder if they would have been stopped in their tracks by denial.

There was a time I thought I was in pretty good shape. I was maintaining a walk of sobriety from alcohol. During those 18 sober years, I had dealt with many phases of denial, then acceptance.

Little did I know that another disease was soon to make its way into my body. Even though diabetes runs in my family, I never thought I would get it. I thought that since I had stopped drinking, and was living a good and spiritual life, it would never happen to me. I was smug.

Now I see that the smug feeling was a form of denial. There were signs that I denied: dizziness and vision changes. I denied that I could have diabetes. I rationalized, "You are tired. You've been out in the sun too long. You need to get in better shape. You need to toughen up."

Some of my denial might have been related to childhood teachings. I had been taught that a man doesn't show pain or weakness. He doesn't ask for help unless it is absolutely necessary. Going in to get checked for diabetes seemed like a weak man's thing to do.

Yet, I knew there was something wrong. I knew I needed help. Instead, I chose to keep defining myself as a "rugged individual," as a self-reliant man. I told myself that all the symptoms would pass.

They got worse: frequent urination, cuts and bruises that were slow to heal, cravings for sweets, constant thirst, loss of

appetite, and feeling tired and irritated.

One day I looked in the mirror and was shocked! I was skin and bones. Shortly after that, I was working a horse in my corral, and I became so weak that I didn't dare get on. That was the final piece of sagebrush that broke the packhorse's back. Tears came to my eyes. I felt so sad and helpless.

At the clinic, I was told I had diabetes. I told myself that I accepted it, but was still filled with anger, blame, and self-pity. I pretended it wasn't such a big deal. I pretended I could

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overcome it by myself. When I wasn't feeling so grandiose, I hid out. I isolated myself from others.

I realize now that all of these feelings were related to denial. And all of them were necessary for me to move on to being well with diabetes.

THERE WAS A TURNING point. I recall being at home after a long day, feeling all alone. I thought of all the early deaths in my family that were related to alcohol and diabetes. I was overcome with self-pity.

My little dog, Biscuit, sensed my sadness and despair. She came up to me and laid her head on my knee. She lifted her paw to be shaken.

That simple act got me thinking about the possibility of dying from diabetes, and leaving all that I love, my children, my horses, my dog. Suddenly, tears began to pour from my eyes, and I began to sob uncontrollably. It was as if all of my feelings had turned to water, as if a movement had begun. I looked to the sky and began to pray. I felt the power of a force greater than I. Hope began to return.

When my denial started to fade, I was able to take control of my life. I started managing diabetes. I started sharing my feelings with others. I started relying on others for help.

I BELIEVE THAT THE Creator has restored me to health—emotional, physical, spiritual and mental. I no longer deny that I have diabetes, and must take certain steps to be healthy. I accept that diabetes is a part of my life.

Ronnie Dixon



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To all those who are in recovery, dealing with diabetes and dealing with denial, I hope my story has helped. I believe that we are meant to share our worst moments with others to help them heal. We have been

chosen by the Creator to do this. With the Creator's help, we can go forth every day and walk a sacred circle of life. The walk at times might be hard, but we can do it, one step at a time.

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“Do your daily dips.”

Rocco Clark (Yakama) teaches powwow dancing as a way to stay physically fit. “Dipping” is the basic powwow dance movement of bending at the knees and bouncing lightly to the drum beat. Says Rocco, “Dip to at least one song a day. Dipping is a way to get physical exercise and prevent diabetes.”