

Connecting Thread

Building Social Connections in Family and Community Circles

BACKGROUND

Many people have concerns about sharing their health fears and worries with others. They may think that family members and friends won't understand, and that it's better to protect others from their health problems. It can also be hard for some people to ask for or accept help from family, friends, and the larger community. People with diabetes may think that spouses, children, or close friends will not support their lifestyle changes. Or that they won't be willing or able to participate in these changes—such as eating a healthy diet and getting regular physical activity.

Fostering opportunities for open communication and social interaction is important for people with diabetes as it can strengthen their ability to make and sustain positive lifestyle changes. Taking care of your health when you have diabetes requires daily time and attention. Supportive relationships can make it easier to make healthy choices and stick to healthy habits. Support can also come from outside the home.

When people engage with the larger community, it can create a sense of belonging and strengthen resiliency. Family, friends, and community members—anyone in a person’s support circle—can play a role in helping to keep the person with diabetes safe and healthy, both emotionally and physically.

A good way to start is by discussing the different types of support available and finding strategies for identifying and reaching out to those who can help. Efforts can also be made to reach out to community-based organizations to find ways to volunteer and give back.

The more connected we are, the better we feel!

Involving Family and Friends in *New Beginnings*

One way to strengthen communication between people with diabetes and their potential supporters is to invite family members or close friends to join *New Beginnings* sessions. This approach requires planning ahead and understanding that each participant will be on their own journey when it comes to support. Some may have young children, some older children—or some no children at all. They may or may not have a spouse or partner. Some may even lean on elderly parents for support. Others will have friends or neighbors. Some may struggle to identify a support circle at all.

Virtual sessions offer a way to engage with people who are geographically distant or who have other travel or time limitations. See the *Connecting Thread: Facilitating New Beginnings Online* for more information.

☆ KEY POINTS

- 1. Having a strong support circle can help minimize the stress of having diabetes, making needed lifestyle changes easier to take on and maintain.** A lack of support, on the other hand, can worsen diabetes management and increase risk of complications.
- 2. Keeping a diagnosis of diabetes a secret from family and friends can seem like a good idea, but it can do more harm than good.** People will be more likely to take positive actions when they understand what is happening in their loved one's life.
- 3. Family members and friends may be worried about how physically active the person with diabetes can be, or what they can eat.** Talking with family and friends about diet and exercise can be an opportunity for everyone to make healthy lifestyle changes while also supporting the person with diabetes.
- 4. There are many ways that family members can help a person with diabetes.**
For example, families can take it upon themselves to learn more about diabetes and create healthy lifestyle changes at home for the whole family. Families can encourage the person with diabetes to be independent and take care of themselves, help them solve problems, provide encouragement, and celebrate successes. Most importantly, they can take an active role in their loved one's journey by cooking, exercising, and engaging with the wider community together.
- 5. Getting involved with the larger community to create healthy changes and overcome challenges together can help improve mental and physical health for all.** Look for opportunities in the community that encourage health and wellness. For example, walking groups, community gardens, and workplace incentive programs can be great ways to build social connection and stick to healthy behaviors. Community activities that involve volunteering and charity are also a great way to give back and improve the lives of those around us. When we give of our time and our talents, we often also feel better about ourselves.
- 6. When talking with young children about diabetes, it is important to adjust language based on the age of the child.** A 6-year-old may have “magical (unrealistic) thinking,” while a 10-year-old may have a better understanding of the seriousness of a disease like diabetes. Regardless of age, children can feel guilty, angry, scared, or fearful about their own future.
- 7. After telling children about diabetes, it is important to follow up with them and make sure they are emotionally okay with the news they've received.** Depending on the age of the children, questions can be asked later about what they thought of the conversation, what they think caused the diabetes, and what they think is going to happen to themselves or their family members.

HANDOUTS

- [How to Help a Loved One With Diabetes When You Live Far Apart](#) has helpful tips and resources for how someone can support their friend or family member, even when they cannot be together in person.
- [Being Active as a Family](#) provides ideas and suggestions for how families can start healthy behaviors together.



SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Do you think there are any risks when talking to family members or friends about serious health topics that may affect you?
- What are ways that family members or friends make it harder or easier for you to manage your diabetes?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident do you feel that you could name at least one person who supports you with your diabetes?
- If you don't feel very confident, who can you think of in your home, work, or community circles that you could talk to about helping you with your diabetes?
- Have you participated in events or groups within your community that focus on healthy eating and physical activity? Did you involve your family members? How did you feel after participating in these events or groups?



SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

Think-Pair-Share: Children and Family

The goal of this activity is for participants to identify ways to communicate with children and other family members about the type of support they may need.

Ask participants to think about their concerns around discussing their diabetes with their children or other family members (invite family members to think about discussing their concerns with their loved one with diabetes). Encourage them to write down what concerns them most. Ask participants if they feel comfortable sharing with the group.

Variations

Ask participants to think about their concerns about supporting a loved one with diabetes or receiving support from a child or other family member. Participants can work in pairs to brainstorm ways to overcome their concerns.

Ask participants to think about ways they can help a loved one with diabetes, or the kinds of help they would like to receive. Ask participants to share their ideas with the group.

Ask participants to role-play a conversation of talking about diabetes with a loved one. What words or strategies are used?



SAMPLE ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

How Can I Help?

The goal of this activity is for participants to think about positive, constructive ways they can support a family member with diabetes and set goals for providing support.

Distribute the How Can I Help worksheet. Ask participants to do this activity with their family member(s). Family members should start the discussion by asking “How can I help?” Family members should discuss specific ways they can provide support.

Family members can work together to set three goals:

Support Your Loved One: This goal should be based on the self-management goals that the person with diabetes has set. It can focus on providing moral support. For example: “I will go for a walk with you once a week to help you reach your physical activity goal.”

Take Care of Your Loved One: This goal should be related to creating a supportive and safe environment for the person with diabetes. For example: “I will learn the signs of hypoglycemia and what to do about it.” or “I will bring a healthy snack when I come over to watch the game.”

Take Care of Yourself: This goal should focus on how family members can improve their own health. For example: “I will learn about what I can do to prevent type 2 diabetes.” or “I will go see my doctor for a check-up.”

Ask the group if anyone would like to share their plans. Remind participants to keep track of their progress toward achieving their goals:

- Make notes about how their ideas are working.
- Work with the family member to make changes to any goals that are not working.
- Set new goals when needed.

Ask the entire group to give themselves a round of applause for developing a plan to support their loved one with diabetes.

[Be careful about allowing participants to comment on the plans of others unless the person who shares specifically asks for advice from the group. The goal is to encourage people to identify ways to solve their own problems. Unsolicited advice can make people feel less empowered.]

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

Helping Each Other Be More Active: Using the [Being Active as a Family](#) handout, ask each participant to pick 3 to 5 items from the list of 10 that would work for their family and that they would be willing to try at home. Ask participants to share with the group which tips they will try at home.

Helping Each Other Be More Active in the Community: Ask the group to think about organizations and groups in their community that they could get involved in. Examples include 4-H programs, Cooperative Extension programs, Master Gardener programs, local faith-based organizations, community gardens, and farmers' markets.

Here are some questions to help group members brainstorm ideas:

- Who in your community is making sure that people have access to healthy food?
- Who is growing food in the community? Who is distributing it?
- How can you give back to your community, both as an individual and as a family?
- Can you identify one group in your community that you could reach out to about volunteer opportunities or upcoming events?

RESOURCES

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): [Friends, Family & Diabetes](#)
- American Diabetes Association: [Managing Diabetes is an Uphill Climb](#)
- U.S. Department of Agriculture: [MyPlate for Families](#)

REFERENCES

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