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Diabetes and depression often go hand in hand

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It's common knowledge that eating better, exercising more, limiting alcohol intake and not smoking can lead to a healthier, longer life. For many, sustaining healthy behaviors is not easy. For diabetics, maintaining healthy behaviors is even more challenging, although it is critical. If well managed, the disease can be held in check; if not, it can be devastating, leading to kidney failure, blindness, stroke and even death.

It may be a surprise that there is strong association between depression, anxiety and diabetes. Not only can depression and anxiety seriously affect the ability to manage the disease, but there also is evidence that, for some, depression plays a role in actually causing diabetes. Research indicates that depression is unrecognized and untreated in approximately two-thirds of patients with diabetes. Whether cause or effect, the medical profession needs to do more to address the psychological issues associated with the disease.

As a family medicine physician, I see the association on daily basis. Some patients are so overwhelmed by the necessary daily self-care that comes with diabetes that they become highly anxious and depressed. Others who are suffering from complications or are having trouble managing their blood sugar levels may feel a loss of control and get anxious or depressed.

These symptoms are often compounded in people who live in poverty, including the low-income Latinos, African Americans and seniors whom we care for at **Marin Community Clinics**. Diabetes has become an epidemic in these groups. Working three jobs and constantly worrying about making ends meet can trigger depression and anxiety in anyone. Add to that the need to adopt a disciplined healthy lifestyle, and it can be a real struggle.

It's a vicious cycle. Anxiety and depression can lead to unhealthy behaviors. When we feel bad, we often do just the opposite of what we should. We stop eating — or consume junk food — and we stop exercising, all of which make the situation much worse for a diabetic.

“Diabetes distress” also comes into play. When diabetes isn't well-managed, people can have symptoms that look like depression or anxiety. High or low blood sugar can make them feel tired or anxious and low blood sugar can make some eat too much or sleep poorly.

The long and the short of it is that depression and anxiety among diabetics is associated with a lack of self-care, which can lead to a dangerous health situation.

As with many chronic diseases, the solution is multifaceted.

- People who are at high risk should be screened for prediabetes and diabetes, with the goal of early intervention.
- Diabetics, especially those who are having problems with self-care, should be screened for depression and anxiety.
- Diabetics and their families should be educated about the role that depression and anxiety can play.
- Counseling from a mental health professional and perhaps anti-depressant medication is sometimes needed.
- People who are prediabetic or diabetic will benefit from participation in programs that focus on self-care, empowerment and healthy lifestyles.
- For the low-income population, there needs to be increased access to affordable, nutritious food and health care services.
- Participation in peer support groups has proven to be beneficial to those with chronic illness.

The **American Diabetes Association** provide more information about this topic at www.diabetes.org/living-with-diabetes.

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