



Giving

CINDY HALSTENSON, RD, LD, CDE

Have you worked as a diabetes educator at an American Diabetes Association EXPO? What an experience! This was my tenth year as a volunteer and member of the planning committee, but my first as an RD, CDE “Ask the Expert.” It was an eye-opening experience for a diabetes educator with a professional practice like mine (indirect patient care).

I want to share some of what I learned (or learned again) in the hope that some of you will be more inclined to volunteer and enjoy feeling like you have made a difference to people living with prediabetes or diabetes or to someone who cares about someone with diabetes. I found each of the following stories to be a valuable lesson.

Carol Told Me . . .

People who struggle with their weight complain about how hard it is to lose weight. They struggle with changing their diet, following some calorie level, maybe even spending a lot of money to enroll in some expensive commercial plan. They lose some weight and regain it, and their money has been wasted. They make that all sound so hard. I can tell you, living with type 1 diabetes like I do is a lot harder than losing a little weight!

Diabetes never leaves you, and you can't stop thinking about it. Everything I do in my life revolves around my 12 years with type 1 diabetes. I watch the calories and carbs I eat so I maintain my BMI of 24. I make sure to eat enough of the right foods and drink the right drinks to meet my nutritional needs while managing my 4 chronic conditions. I write down all of my SMBG results and look for the trends, even though I also have a CGM, because then I can analyze my results better. My doctors never want to see my test logs or my meter results, so that information is just for me. I make sure my

A1C is between 6 and 7, but I prefer 6. It's nice that I am retired and can use my time to exercise and manage my health. It is a lot of work and way more than trying to lose weight alone.

This Is Carl's Story . . .

I'm at 59 pounds down and counting! I lost my job after 45 years, and my disability from my COPD and the heart attack I had last year have led me to take pleasure in the little things while I manage my diabetes and my financial stresses. Our granddaughter Lily who lives with us, age 6, is gifted, and I could tell you stories about her all day. She is my inspiration in losing weight and getting on with life. She brings joy and purpose to my life. I need to control my diabetes, even with all of the challenges, so I can be there for her since her parents can't. My A1C is so well controlled because I work at it, every day, every meal, and every tempting snack. It's hard, but Lily is worth it.

Shawna Said . . .

My husband doesn't believe he has diabetes—fool! His mom had it and so did her sisters and brothers, but he won't listen to his doctor or to me. He has to change his ways, but my efforts are lost on him. I see what he eats at home, and I know it has to be worse when I am not watching. He doesn't do anything except watch TV at night, and then he's always snacking. I tell him he has to stop but he won't stop. I know I am going to lose him. What will happen to me and my kids?

The Lessons

These were random conversations with an educator these people didn't know. Most ended with a big thank you, or even a hug. What might have worked?

Volunteering builds time management skills, stronger relationships with colleagues, people and teamwork skills, and professional job skills. All of this is in addition to what volunteers contribute through their gift of giving time. Everyone wins.



1. **Listening:** 80% of time spent is best spent listening. Let them tell their story because the longer they talk, the more you learn. With brief encounters, listening is a valuable investment of your time before trying to offer solutions.
2. **Empathizing:** Realize everyone has a unique experience with diabetes, be it theirs or a loved one's. Our assumptions may be turned on their ear when we really understand each individual's true pain points.
3. **Note to the diabetes police:** It's not up to you. It's often a relief for people trying to serve in this role when they can understand this. They learn to reframe their efforts, putting the onus of control back on the person with diabetes. This is often beneficial for both the "police" person and the person with diabetes that they care about.

A Word About Volunteering

Finding the time to volunteer may be a challenge as we work to achieve life balance, but it may well be worthwhile to make sure volunteering

fits in. A recent study conducted by UnitedHealth Group highlighted some of the many benefits to the people who volunteer. In general, volunteers feel better—physically, mentally, and emotionally. They're more informed as health care consumers, more engaged and involved in taking care of their health, and better connected to their communities and others. Volunteering builds time management skills, stronger relationships with colleagues, people and teamwork skills, and professional job skills. All of this is in addition to what volunteers contribute through their gift of giving time. Everyone wins.

In volunteering, the "reimbursement" isn't financial. It is the reward of knowing we made a difference, one person at a time, in our community or beyond.

Now that counts. ■

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