

Diabetes Police or Diabetes Support: What's the Story in Your Family?

Richard R. Rubin, PhD, CDE

Diabetes runs in my family. My sister Mary Sue was 9 when she got it, and she just turned 50 last December. My son Stefan, now 28, got it when he was 7. Many families are like mine, with more than one person who has diabetes. I met a man last year who told me that he and every one of his siblings had type 2 diabetes – all 22 of them! Now that's one for the books.

Over the years I've learned that diabetes is a family disease in other ways as well. My sister's diabetes, and my son's affect everyone who lives with them and loves them. From the day in March 1959 when my sister was diagnosed, diabetes has changed all of our lives. The biggest changes by far have been for Mary Sue and Stefan. They are the ones who have to test, measure, calculate, adjust, and worry, every single day. And they are the ones who live through the physical and emotional roller coaster ride of blood sugars that go from 40 to 240 and back down again in a matter of hours.

Still, when Mary Sue and Stefan were young, the measuring, calculating, and adjusting were part of my life, too. And the worrying never goes away, not when you really care about someone. So every day for over 40 years I have *lived* with diabetes; every day it affects my life in ways large and small, just as it does the lives of *your* family members.

And it works the other way, too: things your family does, large and small, can affect your diabetes. I do my best to help my sister and son whenever a diabetes problem comes up. Usually this means listening to Stefan tell me about one of those mysterious, frustrating situations that are a continuing and irritating fact of life with diabetes. All he needs is to vent to some one who understands and loves him. And I welcome the opportunity to let him know I do. Other times, if the situation calls for it, we might do a little problem solving. I never feel the need to push anything on either Stefan or Mary Sue, because I have complete confidence in their ability to take good care of themselves. I know that all I need to do is offer help, not push it.

When family members get pushy. Unfortunately, I've learned that many people don't have such confidence in their loved ones who have diabetes. I often hear words like, "It's driving me crazy! He acts like he's trying to kill himself," to describe how a family member is managing (or not managing) his diabetes. All too often diabetes care becomes a battleground, with daily skirmishes over eating, exercise, or blood sugar testing.

This is bad for everyone. When you have diabetes, you need less stress, not more. You might need some help to take the best possible care of yourself, but you don't need to be pushed. And sometimes it might seem your family has joined the "diabetes police," monitoring your every action, and calling you down every time they think you are straying from the straight and narrow.

Why do people join the diabetes police? In most cases, I've found that the *motivation* for this is understandable, even if the *action* isn't. People try to make their loved ones take better care of their diabetes because they are scared and frustrated of what will happen if they don't. They have an idea of the way diabetes care is "supposed to be," and it frightens and upsets them when that's not what they see happening. Maybe they don't know how to support instead of pushing, or maybe they try to be supportive and only start pushing when don't get the results they are looking for. In either case, once diabetes care becomes a "police matter," any hope of working things out fades rapidly.

Pushing back is human nature, but it doesn't help. That's because the natural reaction to being pushed is to dig in your heels and push back; it's simple human nature. Then the original issue - the best way to take care of your diabetes – is quickly lost in the battle for *control*. Since it's your body and your diabetes, the control has to be yours; if someone fights you for it, you have to fight back. Your family member is equally engaged, determined to save you from yourself or take you both down trying.

Not a pretty picture, and it doesn't have to be this way. The saddest part for me is that people with diabetes need support (though they don't need pushing), and family members want to provide that support, though they often don't know how to do it. If you want to get more help - and fewer hassles - from your family when it comes to diabetes care, here are some suggestions I've picked up over the years.

Be honest with yourself. Let's get one thing clear from the start: no one manages diabetes perfectly. Unless you are different from anyone with diabetes I have ever met, there are times you eat things you shouldn't, skip a blood sugar test, or choose to plop down in front of the television instead of heading out the door for a walk. Occasional departures from optimal self-care are one thing; letting lots of things slide and seeing your blood sugars skyrocket (or bounce from high to low and back again) as a result is another matter. You need to be honest with yourself about how well you are meeting your own standards for diabetes care. If you find lots of room for improvement, you are might be seeing some of the things that worry your family and lead to their pushiness.

Think of something you would like to change. Most people have something they would like to change in the way they care for their diabetes. Among the things you aren't doing just right, is there one you really want to change? Maybe you want to eat a little healthier, consuming less fat, for example. Maybe you want to start walking regularly, or test your blood one more time each day, or learn more about a new diabetes medication you just heard about. Whatever you most want to change, identify it as specifically as you can. A specific goal like cutting the amount of fat you eat at dinners is a better goal than a more general one like eating healthier. You will see why in a moment.

Think of what family members can do to help you. Once you know what you would like to change, think of specifically of what family member could do to help. If you want to cut fat at dinner, for instance, could family members help you think of ways to do it, or help by preparing lower fat dishes or by keeping high fat condiments out of the house? The more specific (and realistic) the help you are looking for, the more likely you are to get it. Start with something you are fairly confident you can get, and build from there.

Ask for the help you want. Since it's my theory that pushy family members really want to help but don't know how to, asking for something specific can work miracles. First off, it defuses the old power struggle when you tell them you are looking for ways to take better care of your diabetes. That puts you on the same side of the fence. In addition, you are specifying the precise help you need to make these changes. This approach is likely to turn most family members from pushers into supporters.

Give thanks for the help you get. Once the ball gets rolling and you are getting more help and fewer hassles, be sure to show your appreciation. Not that you don't deserve the support, but the best way to be sure it keeps on coming is to give thanks when you get it. That way family members know they are doing the right thing, and that helps them stay on track. Direct thanks are always good, and any other ways you have of expressing love and appreciation are good as well.

Take the best possible care of yourself. When you feel more support and less pushing you almost automatically take better care of yourself. You aren't wasting energy in diabetes power struggles, so you have more to devote to diabetes care. And the practical and emotional support also makes it a little easier to do the right thing. The results are wonderful: better health day-to-day and in the long run, and closer, stronger connections with some of the most important people in your life.