

It only takes one or two difficult diabetes-related interactions to ruin a perfectly nice day. Sadly, this is a subject that is familiar to most people with diabetes: What can be done about well-meaning people who just say the most aggravating things about diabetes?

Perhaps we could make wallet-sized “diabetes etiquette” cards. They could provide a heads-up to friends, family, and acquaintances about what a person with diabetes does *not* want to hear. Here are a few “don’ts” that we might slap on those cards (and the reasoning behind them, from the perspective of the person with diabetes):

**1. Please don’t make comments about my eating.** I may not be eating as well as I could, but it isn’t helpful when other people make comments about the choices I make. “Should you be eating that?” “You know, chocolate really isn’t a good choice for someone with diabetes.” Wouldn’t such comments bother you? Besides, you may not be as knowledgeable about eating well with diabetes as you think.

**2. No stories about your grandmother, please.** You may think I will be fascinated to hear about your relative who also had diabetes and lost his or her legs, eyes, and kidneys before dying a slow death. I am

sorry about your loved one, but this disease is already scary enough to me. Besides, we now know that with good care, odds are good you can live a long, healthy life with diabetes.

**3. Please don’t offer unsolicited advice.**

Maybe you think my diabetes will go away if I start thinking more positively or stop eating sugar. The truth is, many popularly held beliefs about diabetes are out of date or just plain wrong. You may mean well, but giving unsolicited advice about someone’s personal habits can be disrespectful and even insulting.

**4. Don’t make me feel different.**

I am still the same person I was before I developed diabetes, and you and I are just not that different. Please be considerate before saying things like, “Eew! I could never poke my fingers like that every day!” Don’t make a big deal out of diabetes. Treat me like you would anyone else.

**5. Don’t feel like you need to reassure me.**

When you first learn about my diabetes, you may want to make me (and perhaps yourself) feel better. Your first instinct might be to say something like, “Hey, don’t worry about it. It could be worse; you could have cancer!” I know you mean well, but that doesn’t help. What it really says

is that you don’t understand what I am thinking and feeling. While I may not talk much about it, I know that diabetes can be very serious, and I *do* worry about it. What I really need is for you to listen if I need to talk. *Ask me* how you can help.



## Diabetes Etiquette: Uncharted Territory

By William H. Polonsky, PhD, CDE

It would be wonderful if *all* your loved ones joined you in making healthy lifestyle changes, offered their love and support in a way that worked for you,

and were respectful of the requirements for good diabetes care.

The good news is that many loved ones are doing all of these things. Still, some aren’t. And while we don’t issue “diabetes etiquette cards,” perhaps it’s time to strike up friendly conversations with some of those people who rub you the wrong way with some of their remarks. Remember, they almost always mean well. But if they aren’t living with diabetes, they just may not understand what you’re going through and how they can lend a hand. Maybe it’s time to help them see.