



NEWS... BUT NOT AS YOU KNOW IT

Having Type 1 diabetes affects more than just your body – it can trigger mental health issues too

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Jessica with a vial of insulin (Picture: Alex Crawley for Metro.co.uk)

I was little more than bones when a doctor told me I had an incurable autoimmune disease.

My strongest memory from that day, age seven, was bawling into an oversized hospital gown and deciding I hated myself.

As a newly diagnosed Type 1 diabetic, it was not time to focus on my feelings. It was time to make sure I didn't die and the mental health side of things was ignored.

Like most Type 1s, I was thrust into an inescapable game of life and death before I was able to ride a bike.

Without reason, my immune system chose to target my insulin-producing beta cells as an infection; and without the insulin they produce, my body isn't able to regulate blood sugar.

Unlike Type 2s, my diabetes was incurable, unpredictable, and required much more than a tablet or diet changes to control.

Each day for the rest of my life would consist of insulin injections, blood tests, an exhausting knowledge of carbohydrate counts, and a suffocating feeling I wasn't doing good enough.

The short-term alternative to poor control is high blood sugar. The not-so-long-term alternative (bar increased risks for nerve damage, lost limbs, stroke, kidney disease, and miscarriage) is death.

It is far more than a seven-year-old could prepare for.

Two decades later, times haven't changed. The chronic illness always eclipses the chronic stress that accompanies it.

Like when I was accidentally switched from a mini pill to a combined contraceptive pill, triggering a domino effect of insulin resistance and burst blood vessels that left me permanently blind in one eye, no-one asked how I was coping mentally.

After a chance meeting with two fellow Type 1s developed into a friendship, I realised my daily medical anxieties were a best-case scenario.

Nineteen-year-old Danielle O'Brien, beloved by our needle-wielding trio for taking a bewildered bite out of a £20 note when low, developed an eating disorder after a difficult diabetic spell.

O'Brien explained: 'I got DKA (Diabetic ketoacidosis, a severe high blood sugar complication that can lead to comas, brain swelling, and death within hours) when I was 13 and realised how traumatic diabetes could be.

'It wasn't linear anymore. It wasn't that some things could kill you and some things could keep you alive. The difference between life or death could be a few hours.

'I was vulnerable and felt like my body had decided I wasn't worth it, so I decided to tell it the same. To pretend I wasn't diabetic.'

She stopped taking her insulin or testing her blood sugar, convincing herself it wasn't necessary if she wasn't eating.

‘The hospital spotted it early and made me keep a food diary, but I just lied. They didn’t try to acknowledge the mental health part of it, they just wanted me to eat and take insulin.

‘The [eating] disorder started with diabetes forcing me to track my food intake. With the doctors telling me ‘control’ was good. But I didn’t want to carb count.

‘In the end, my mum sat me down and told me she hated her body, too. Something clicked. I realised most women do and – while that’s terrible – diabetes wasn’t an excuse to hate it more.

‘Self-destruction was not the answer. There was never going to be a point where I woke up without diabetes. We all have one vessel and the best thing I could do was embrace it.’

We have to test our blood sugar before every meal, when we wake up and when we go to bed at a minimum. Any noticeable shifts in emotional or physical feelings would prompt us to test again (Picture: Alex Crawley for Metro.co.uk)

Jessica Cripps, 22, a fiery blonde with a fearsome intellect, has battled the mental health implications of diabetes her entire life.

‘You feel like you’re alone, isolated, and different. You’re not always conscious that you’re on a knife edge but you’re aware something can go wrong.

‘We can go high or low dependent on mood, stress, weather, grief... I really blame myself when things like that happen, even if it’s not my fault. It makes me feel like a failure.

‘When I was going through a horrific patch with my mental health, I genuinely considered using diabetes as a way out. I contemplated how I could use the equipment and machinery I relied on to keep me alive for the opposite purpose.

‘I didn’t do it and I’m glad I didn’t, but suddenly diabetes wasn’t just a burden to live with – it was a danger that could consume me whole. I had to manage my condition and I had to work on my mental health, knowing that diabetes would always be there.’

We manage our insulin levels through an insulin injection. Though the amounts vary by person, we will have a sliding scale of insulin we take dependent on the carbohydrates we consume at each meal. Of course, not all food digests the same, which is why it is so important to continue testing and change things as needed (Picture: Alex Crawley for Metro.co.uk)

For me, it was OCD and orthorexia – obsessively punishing behaviours used to force order in an uncontrollable routine.

Recent studies suggest three in five people with diabetes experience mental health problems.

Individually, we learned to view our emotional wounds as fuel, to not only accept the volatility of daily diabetic life but celebrate it. To take our injections in the middle of a dance

floor. To eat cake for breakfast if we woke up with low blood sugar. To toast new Type 1 friends with a glass of prosecco (or two).

Now a confident adult, Cripps said: 'I've accepted that I will die because I'm human. And that it's OK to be terrified. Because I am a tangible presence in my body.

'That's a blessing of the disease – understanding the relationship between who you are in your mind and your physical presence.

'When my grandmother died, I woke up every morning with the kind of low that makes you feel like you're in a dream. Where you can't talk and everything is confusing.

'I tried to take less insulin and chug sugary drinks before bed but nothing helped. It was a strange gift because it made me acknowledge that I needed to look after my mental health, as well. I started to understand the relationship between stress and my body. That diabetic or not, our bodies will try to prompt emotional self-care.'

Jess' insulin pump is permanently attached to her body to release short and long-term insulin, as needed. It has to be changed every few days (hers lives on her back, currently)

O'Brien, having beaten her eating disorder, said: 'I'm not scared to be big in every way. To take up room in the world, be seen, or have a voice. I'm not scared of anything because I've been through it. I've gone from a flower petal to a bouquet.'

My own obstacles led me to start blogging about food, channelling my obsession through a skill set I never believed would turn into a career. I not only became a brand ambassador alongside Marco Pierre White, but unashamedly injected insulin next to him.

There's still a way to go, of course. If our currently capable trio spent a collective decade in combat with ourselves, are we really the three in 10 diabetics that studies suggest feel in control of their condition?

I hope not. I hope, moving forward, the misinformed stop asking Type 1s why they aren't fat. That people view an insulin pump in the same light as a wheelchair. That the 350,000 Type 1s in the UK start to see their condition represented in mass media.

And that, bit by bit, everyone with a seemingly invisible disease feels acknowledged, supported, and understood both physically and mentally.

Reference

https://metro.co.uk/2018/05/18/having-type-1-diabetes-affects-more-than-just-your-body-it-can-trigger-mental-health-issues-too-7550232/?ico=more_text_links

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