

It's Worth It!

By Saffiyya Makda

For the first 24 years of my life, I never once thought how eating without abandon may affect my health, although my grandparents had all experienced type 2 diabetes.

It is common in the Indian community, for the elderly to develop type 2 diabetes - so common in fact, that it's surprising when you hear of a member of the older generation that does not have diabetes...

In the weeks preceding my diagnosis, I displayed clear symptoms of having diabetes - excessive thirst, lethargy and a listlessness which I quickly attributed to the stress which accompanied being a wife, mother and full-time student. I had never been overweight and was relatively active. The thought of diabetes did not cross my mind. After persistent nagging from my family, I eventually tested my blood sugar levels using my father's blood glucose meter. The shock of the result immediately led me to question the working condition of the device. Surely, a blood glucose reading of 28mmol/L was an error...

The days that followed were a daze, filled with mixed emotions and a plethora of information, most of which went over my head. I was hospitalised to 'stabilise' my blood glucose levels and after being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, I was referred to the Centre for Diabetes and Endocrinology (CDE) in Houghton by Dr Faizel Nanabhay. He assured me that CDE would provide the best all-round regimen for my condition.

The quality and level of care provided at CDE was simply outstanding. I received the best, in terms of medical treatment and perhaps more importantly, the emotional support and inspirational advice. My blood glucose control in the early stages was problematic as would be expected. As I recall, after a few weeks of intense therapy and treatment,

I just needed a holiday, which I duly took. Surprisingly, I returned pregnant. This was unplanned, as I had just been diagnosed a few months earlier. The outrage I had expected to face from my doctor, Dr Landau, at my next appointment did not materialise. Instead, I was shown resolute, unwavering support throughout my pregnancy.

My HbA1c levels during my pregnancy, being the best ever in my ten years with diabetes, attest to that fact. Dr Landau visited baby Maseehah, and I in hospital on the very day that she was born.

The extra weight gain and stresses of being a new mum again set my blood glucose levels into a spin. The laziness led to complacency. I also began working not too long after the birth, which further encroached on the time and dedication I needed to control my diabetes. Now that I look back and reflect on this, I have to admit that it was inexcusable to have slipped into such a rut.

I began efforts to lose weight and be more active by signing up at the gym. This is how I came to realise that the traditional elliptical training is not one I could endure. To be honest, even though it kick-started my journey, I lacked motivation to perform these mundane, tedious exercises.

My impatience and the absence of immediate results also led to further discouragement. But, I knew that some form of exercise was the key to my wellbeing. I had read up enough about type 1 diabetes to understand that the fears associated with exercise were unfounded.

Post exercise hypoglycaemic episodes could certainly be overcome. I then joined a group class in the hopes that the interaction with others might spur that much-needed incentive. I was wrong, again. The repetitive motions and drills of those exercises just couldn't cut it for me. Despondent, deflated and agonised, I decided to quit that class...

While juggling all my exercise options, my brother had encouraged my husband and myself to take a crack at cycling with him and his wife. Initially it was merely a casual form of fun exercise, which I partook in occasionally. It offered an alternative to the banal activities of the gym. Now I'm completely hooked. My husband got me a top-end carbon-framed bike, which led me to cycle frequently and participate in many of the wonderful races across the country. The most recent of my achievements was



participating in a particularly special 2015 Cape Town Cycle Tour (Argus). This year's route was shorter due to the devastating fires in the Cape Peninsula, but the sense of solidarity in the race was immense and heart-warming.

A few months after I started cycling, I came across a friend who had suggested I join her in a boxing class as it would complement my cycling. The very next day, a Mr Brendon Katz messaged me to ask if I would be interested in a boxing class. I duly agreed to try out a free class. Voila!!!

I had finally found the ingredient missing in the journey to controlling my condition. Every minute of my full contact boxing classes are thrilling, exciting, heart-racing... pure joy!

Brendon took a personal interest in my health and diet, researching, consulting specialists and problem solving any of my unique issues. His keen pursuit to have me performing optimally, led to a disappearance of my night-time lows and a drastic reduction in the amount of insulin I require daily. I found in cycling and boxing, coupled with an avid, supportive coach, the answer to all my exercise woes.

To excel in these sports, which are now very much a part of my life, I needed to tackle another major issue - my eating habits. I don't call it a 'diet' because I am not dieting; I am simply making healthy choices. I was deeply accustomed to eating in a traditional manner. That meant many curries with roti, exquisite rice dishes, accompanied by deep fried potatoes and mouth-watering, rich, creamy sweetmeats and desserts.



Learning to accept more wholesome and healthy meals was not a simple task. It is one I continue to battle with, given the fact that all aspects of my life included a feast. I had to learn to include healthier options and healthier cooking methods for our traditional meals. I must confess, the support from my family was paramount to this change in eating habits.

One of the toughest aspects I have great difficulty dealing with is our Ramadhan customs. Ramadhan is a month in the Islamic calendar dedicated to abstinence. The abstinence of food during the daytime alongside controlling one's desires is a form of moral discipline, which encourages deep reflection and channelling that same sense of joy, unity, love, high spirituality, and compassion throughout the year. Having been brought up with unwavering emphasis on these practices, I had observed the Ramadhan fasts since the age of six, even though it was only obligatory after puberty. It was an act that I thoroughly enjoyed and anticipated. Learning that I was unable to observe the fast as a person with type 1 diabetes was a massive blow. I resigned myself to the fact that I would not be able to observe the fast and instead directed my energies to ensure, among my family and friends, the smooth practice of the rituals in this blessed month.

Having diabetes for ten years, without any deterioration in my health, has led me to a few conclusions. 'Lifestyle Change' for the person with diabetes is not merely a catch phrase. It is undeniably a matter of 'life and death' and 'happy and sad'.



Abandon self-pity and take control of what life has to offer. Find a fun exercise programme and go with it. Eat healthy, wholesome, real foods. Be grateful for all the support from family; they are truly your lifeline. My experience has shown that an increase in physical activity and a change to more wholesome foods has resulted in improved HbA1c readings and better health. I cannot picture myself without cycling, attending boxing classes or eating healthily. I end with only one piece of advice: Take the first step to making that change, "IT'S WORTH IT".

I pray every day that Allah gives me strength to keep steadfast in this path and I request everyone to keep me in his or her prayers.

