



University College Dublin
Ireland's Global University

Diabetes & emotional wellbeing: A brief Guide for People Living with Diabetes and their Loved Ones

Resources and Support in Ireland





Why was this booklet created?

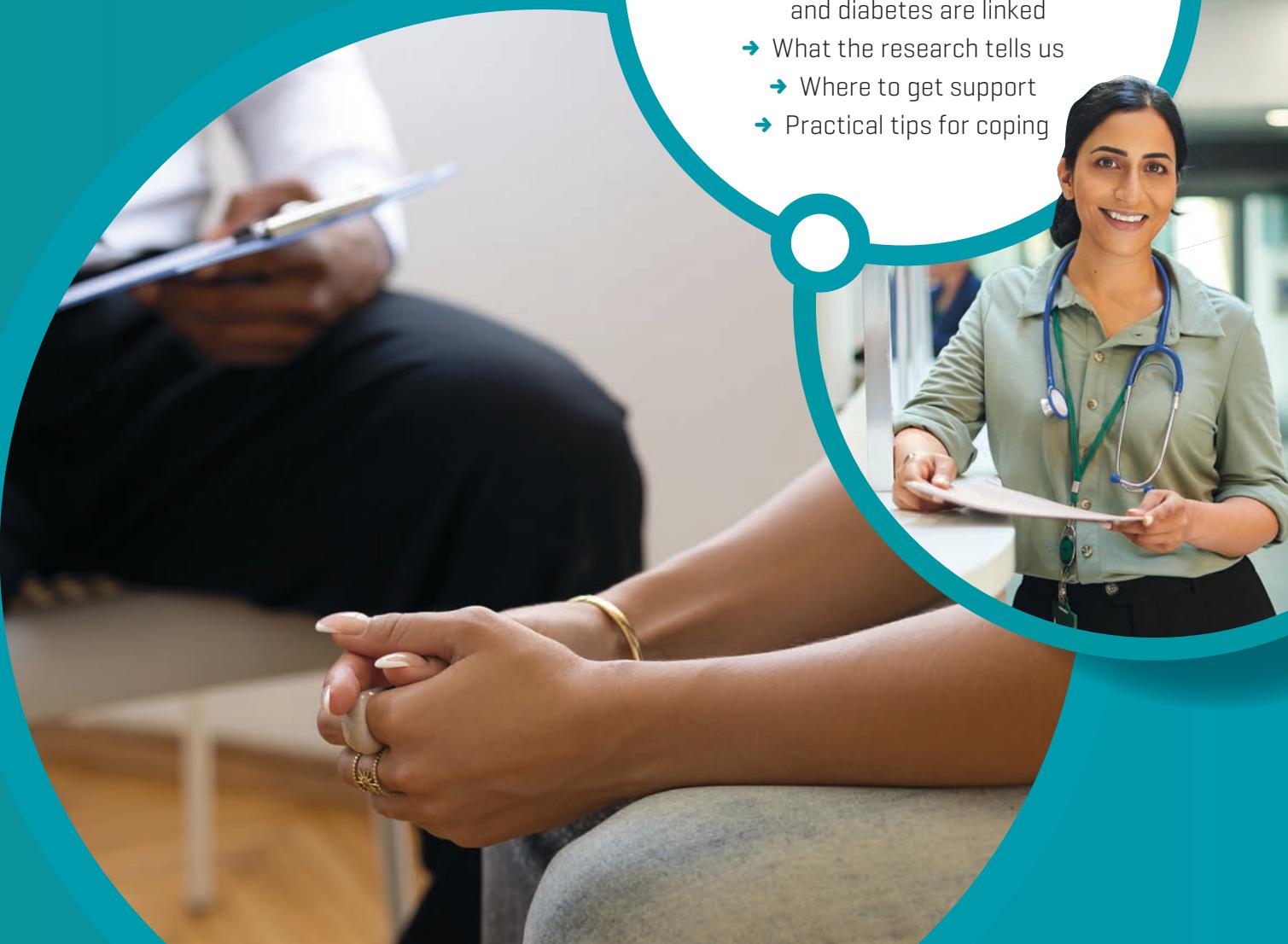
Living with diabetes can affect not only physical health but also emotional wellbeing. While many people with diabetes adapt well emotionally, some people experience emotional challenges like stress, anxiety, or depression.

This booklet was created to help people understand the connection between diabetes and emotional wellbeing. It explains common emotional symptoms that can happen alongside type 1 or type 2 diabetes based on research from Ireland and around the world.

Our goal is to provide clear, helpful information that supports people in recognising and managing emotional wellbeing as part of overall diabetes care. We hope this booklet empowers the reader to feel more confident, seek support when needed, and, should they be experiencing any of these emotional challenges, know that they are not alone.

What you will learn

- Why emotional wellbeing matters in diabetes
- How distress, depression, anxiety, and diabetes are linked
- What the research tells us
 - Where to get support
 - Practical tips for coping



Background

Diabetes is a group of conditions related to the body's impaired ability to manage blood glucose levels. Glucose is essential because it provides the brain and body with the energy it needs to function well.

There are several types of diabetes, each with a mix of unique and shared features. The two most common types of diabetes are type 1 and type 2 diabetes.

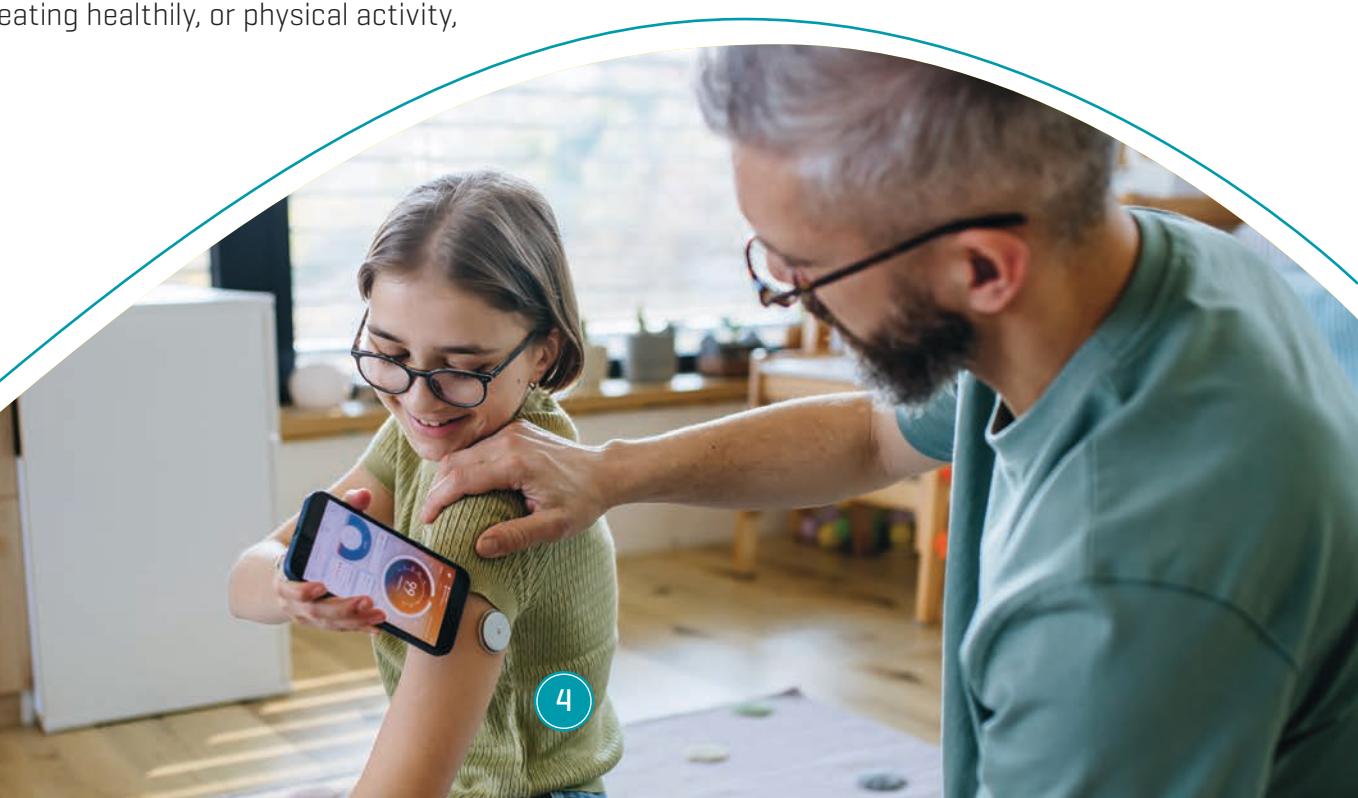
- Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune condition where the immune system attacks the insulin-producing cells in the pancreas, causing little or no insulin to be made.
- Type 2 diabetes occurs when the body becomes resistant to insulin and the cells of the body are not responding effectively to insulin produced by the pancreas^[1].

Managing diabetes can mean juggling many different aspects of daily life, such as eating healthily, or physical activity.

monitoring glucose, sleeping well, and taking prescribed medications, all while managing other important daily activities including work, relationships, and caring for others. This can lead to feelings of being overwhelmed.

Research shows that people living with type 1 or type 2 diabetes are at increased risk of emotional challenges such as depression, anxiety, and diabetes distress^[2, 3, 4]. In turn, these emotional difficulties can make it harder to manage diabetes effectively and can reduce quality of life^[5]. Addressing emotional wellbeing is an important part of diabetes care^[6].

In Ireland, support for the emotional impact of diabetes has historically been limited. Unlike in some other countries, psychologists are rarely part of diabetes care teams, particularly in adult services. This means that people may not always be aware of the connection between diabetes and emotional wellbeing.



Diabetes distress

For most of the time, people with diabetes are expected to manage their diabetes largely on their own, outside of clinical care^[9]. This responsibility can contribute to the emotional burdens and concerns people experience while managing diabetes, which together is known as diabetes distress. Distinct from broader emotional wellbeing issues, diabetes distress focuses on the challenges and worries specifically related to living with diabetes such as feeling frustrated if you are having difficulty managing your blood glucose readings, overwhelmed by the demands of diabetes or feeling like a 'failure' when things get a bit off-track.

- Up to 80% of people with diabetes experience elevated levels of diabetes distress in one or more areas of their lives^[10].

Diabetes distress can fluctuate over time, often increasing during challenging times such as after diagnosis, during stressful life events, when complications arise, or when changes are made to treatment plans or healthcare providers.

Left unaddressed, diabetes distress can:

- Decrease motivation
- Disturb self-care routines
- Worsen overall health outcomes^[11]

Fortunately, with the right support, diabetes distress can be reduced [see Finding Support section].



Diabetes and depression

Depression is a common and serious mental health condition that affects mood, thinking, energy, and daily functioning.

Common symptoms of depression include:

- ➔ Persistent low mood, lasting for two weeks or longer, which can interfere with everyday life.
- ➔ Changes in sleep, appetite, energy levels, concentration, and the ability to enjoy activities which were once found pleasurable.
- ➔ Altered perception of self, others, and the world.
- ➔ Thoughts about death or suicide.

While some people may not meet all the criteria for a formal diagnosis of depression, they can still experience one or more of these symptoms and even without a diagnosis, these symptoms can make daily life and managing diabetes more difficult.

Research findings suggest that diabetes and depression are closely connected. People living with diabetes are 2-3 times more likely to experience depression compared to those without diabetes^[11]. Research also shows that this link is consistent across regions in Ireland, UK, and other parts of Europe^[12, 13].

With the right support, whether that's psychological or creative therapies, self-help strategies, medication, social support, or a combination of approaches, many individuals with depression can find relief and reduce the severity of depressive symptoms.



Diabetes and anxiety

Anxiety refers to feelings of worry, tension, and uneasiness that results from the anticipation of danger. While occasional worries are a normal human experience, when these feelings become persistent, overwhelming, or start to interfere with daily life, they may signal that additional support or coping strategies are needed.

Common features of anxiety include:

- ➔ Persistent, excessive fear or worry that can feel difficult to control^[14].
- ➔ Physical symptoms such as racing heart, shortness of breath, sweating, stomach upset, restlessness, and trouble sleeping.
- ➔ Avoidance of situations that cause fear or worry.



About 1 in 6 people with type 1 or type 2 diabetes experience elevated anxiety symptoms^[15]. Living with diabetes often brings worries about blood glucose, complications, hypoglycaemia and daily self-management. While these concerns can be normal, they can build up and result in persistent anxiety, making diabetes more difficult to manage.

The good news is that identifying and treating anxiety can help improve both emotional wellbeing and diabetes health.

Distinguishing diabetes distress, depression and anxiety

While diabetes distress, depression, and anxiety are distinct experiences, their symptoms often overlap, making it difficult to disentangle one from another. For example, because anxiety and some diabetes-related issues, such as low blood glucose levels, share similar



physical symptoms, it can be hard to tell whether certain feelings or sensations are caused by anxiety or by diabetes, adding to the complexity of management and overall distress. This overlap means that identifying the most appropriate type of care can be complex and may take time.

Additional challenges

If you are living with diabetes, much of what is written here may already feel very familiar. Many people with diabetes know first-hand that managing the condition goes far beyond simply “watching blood glucose levels”. It is a complex, ongoing part of daily life that can affect more than just physical health. The following are among the additional challenges those with diabetes often face daily.

Social life

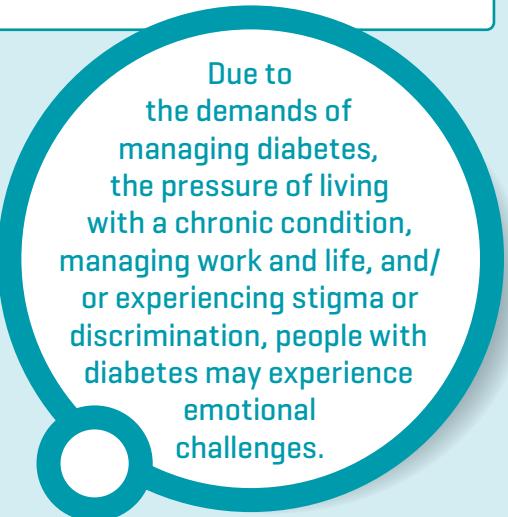
Eating out, exercising, experiencing hypoglycaemia in public or managing diabetes equipment in public can sometimes feel uncomfortable. Four in five people with diabetes have reported facing stigma, misunderstanding, or unhelpful assumptions from others, which can take a toll on emotional wellbeing and make diabetes management even harder^[7].

Finance

People with diabetes often face higher premiums for health, life, and travel insurance, as well as additional out-of-pocket expenses for medicines, private consultations, and technologies such as self-funded CGM. Although not unique to diabetes, the cost of maintaining a healthy diet may be challenging for some people, especially when healthier options are usually priced higher than their less nutritious alternatives. Similarly, some methods of keeping active involve financial costs such as pool or gym memberships and fitness or dance classes while access to safe outdoor spaces often depends on an individual’s home location. These extra costs can make managing diabetes more stressful.

Employment and education

Fitting in glucose checks, medications, or recovery time after highs or lows during work or school/ college can be challenging. Explaining diabetes in these settings can be difficult and emotionally draining^[8]. In addition, people with diabetes may experience discrimination in work, including negative assumptions about their abilities and limited opportunities for advancement.



Due to the demands of managing diabetes, the pressure of living with a chronic condition, managing work and life, and/or experiencing stigma or discrimination, people with diabetes may experience emotional challenges.

The impact of diabetes on family and loved ones

Diabetes affects not only the person diagnosed but can also affect their loved ones and friends in various ways^[16].

Loved ones may find it difficult to know the best way to support someone with diabetes, while people with diabetes may feel overwhelmed by loved ones' opinions or emotions about how they manage their condition. Understandably, this emotional weight can affect relationship dynamics and sometimes lead to conflict or uncertainty about how best to support the person with diabetes.

Support from loved ones plays a vital role in diabetes care. Studies have found that when partners and family members are supportive, people with diabetes are more likely to be able to follow their treatment plans and have their blood glucose levels within a recommended range^[17].



It's important to remember that support is available, not just for people living with diabetes, but also for their families. Check out the Diabetes Ireland website for more information: www.diabetes.ie

Perspectives from lived experience: diabetes and emotional wellbeing

To better understand the emotional aspects of living with diabetes in Ireland, a research team held workshops in April 2025 with people living with either type 1 or type 2 diabetes. The workshops had the goal of sharing experiences related to living with diabetes in Ireland and emotional wellbeing. The illustration below highlights the key themes and ideas shared by participants.

During the workshops, participants were asked:

"On a scale of 1 to 10, how strongly do you think diabetes impacts mental health and wellbeing?"

65% of people rated the impact as 8 or above, showing that mental health is a significant part of living with diabetes. Also,

70% of participants thought it was very important for people with diabetes to have access to psychological support.

When asked why emotional wellbeing support was important in diabetes care, participants spoke about how it helps them:

- ➔ Cope with the emotional burden of diabetes
- ➔ Avoid burnout
- ➔ Stay motivated
- ➔ Manage the daily burden of the condition

The poster below displays these common themes that emerged from the workshops, demonstrating that emotional wellbeing is a key part of living well with diabetes.

What do national guidelines say about mental health and diabetes care?

The national guidelines in Ireland recognise that living with diabetes can impact emotional health, and that healthcare professionals should be aware of this.

Knowing what national guidelines say about emotional wellbeing in diabetes care can help people speak up, ask questions, and feel more informed and confident in their care.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) National Clinical Guidelines^[18, 19] highlights that diabetes healthcare teams should:

- Be on the lookout for signs of emotional distress, depression, or anxiety, especially if someone is finding diabetes self-care difficult.
- Have the right skills to notice and offer basic support for common mental health difficulties, and be able to work with people from different cultural backgrounds.
- Know when to refer people to mental health specialists, such as psychologists, if emotional challenges are seriously affecting wellbeing or diabetes management.
- Work closely with mental health services to make sure people with diabetes can get quick access to psychological support when needed.

If someone is showing signs of emotional distress (for example, low mood, anxiety, difficulty adjusting to a new diagnosis, or concerns around eating), healthcare professionals should take the time to talk about these issues in an open, sensitive way. However, some professionals may not be fully equipped to address any concerns so it is important to know there are options such as seeking a second opinion or reaching out to organisations such as Diabetes Ireland or Thriveabetes for advice. A list of support services are provided below.



Finding support from others

Emotional struggles can come and go and what helps one person might not work for another. The good news is that support comes in many different forms, and there's no single "right" way to look after your mental wellbeing. What matters is knowing you don't have to do this alone.

Below are some ideas for how you might find support that works for you:

Talking to someone close

Sometimes just sharing how you feel with a trusted friend, family member, or another person who has diabetes can make a big difference. Having someone who understands your experience can provide comfort and encouragement when things get tough. During the diabetes and emotional wellbeing workshops with people with type 1 and type 2 diabetes, mentioned before, participants said talking to people with similar experiences made things feel "easier" and more "relatable".



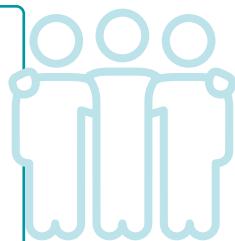
Professional mental health support



If you find you need more specialised help, your GP or diabetes nurse is a great place to start. They can listen, offer advice, or connect you with mental health professionals who can provide support. These services may be available both face-to-face and online, making it easier to find the right fit for your needs.

Community and peer support

Many people find joining support groups or online communities helpful. Connecting with others who share similar experiences can reduce feelings of isolation and provide practical tips for managing both diabetes and emotional challenges. There are a range of local diabetes support groups in Ireland who meet on a regular basis. Contact Diabetes Ireland and Thriveabetes to find out if there are any support groups near you.



For a list of available support services, please refer to the list provided at the end of this booklet.

Personal coping strategies

In addition to external support, using or developing new personal coping strategies can help improve your wellbeing. This section shares information about self-compassion and how simple strategies such as mindfulness, relaxation, and goal setting, can help you cope and build resilience.

Self-compassion

Self-compassion involves being aware of one's own struggles, acknowledging that they are challenging, and recognising that these difficulties are a normal part of being human. It means being kind to oneself and focusing attention on how one might respond with care during tough times. Practicing self-compassion is particularly important for people with diabetes as its management can sometimes become overwhelming. When self-care goals don't go to plan, self-compassion can help ease the feelings of guilt and failure that are often reported by people with diabetes. The following exercises can be helpful in practising self-compassion and taking care of one's emotional health.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves staying focused on the present moment while keeping a non-judgmental state of complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. Practicing mindfulness can help reduce stress, enhance focus, and increase self-awareness. Examples of practicing mindfulness include:



→ **The 5-4-3-2-1 method.** This involves naming 5 things you can see around you, four things that you can feel, three things that you can hear, two things that you can smell, and one thing that you can taste. This is a great way to ground yourself in overwhelming situations.

→ **The five finger breathing exercise.** This technique involves holding up one hand with your fingers spread and using the index finger of your other hand to slowly trace the shape of each finger. Inhale as you trace up a finger, and exhale as you trace down. Continue this process along all five fingers, focusing on the movement and your breath. This is a great technique to help bring a sense of calm and reduce stress.

Relaxation

Practicing relaxation techniques involves methods that help calm the mind and body. A good example includes focusing on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group, starting from your toes and ending at your head. When we are in a relaxed state, functions such as decision-making and problem-solving are more effective.

- Well defined and achievable - For example, "After work tomorrow, I will walk 20 minutes in the park" rather than simply saying "I'll exercise more".
- Anchored to an already existing habit - For example "When I brush my teeth in the evening, I will check my blood glucose levels".

Paying attention to feelings

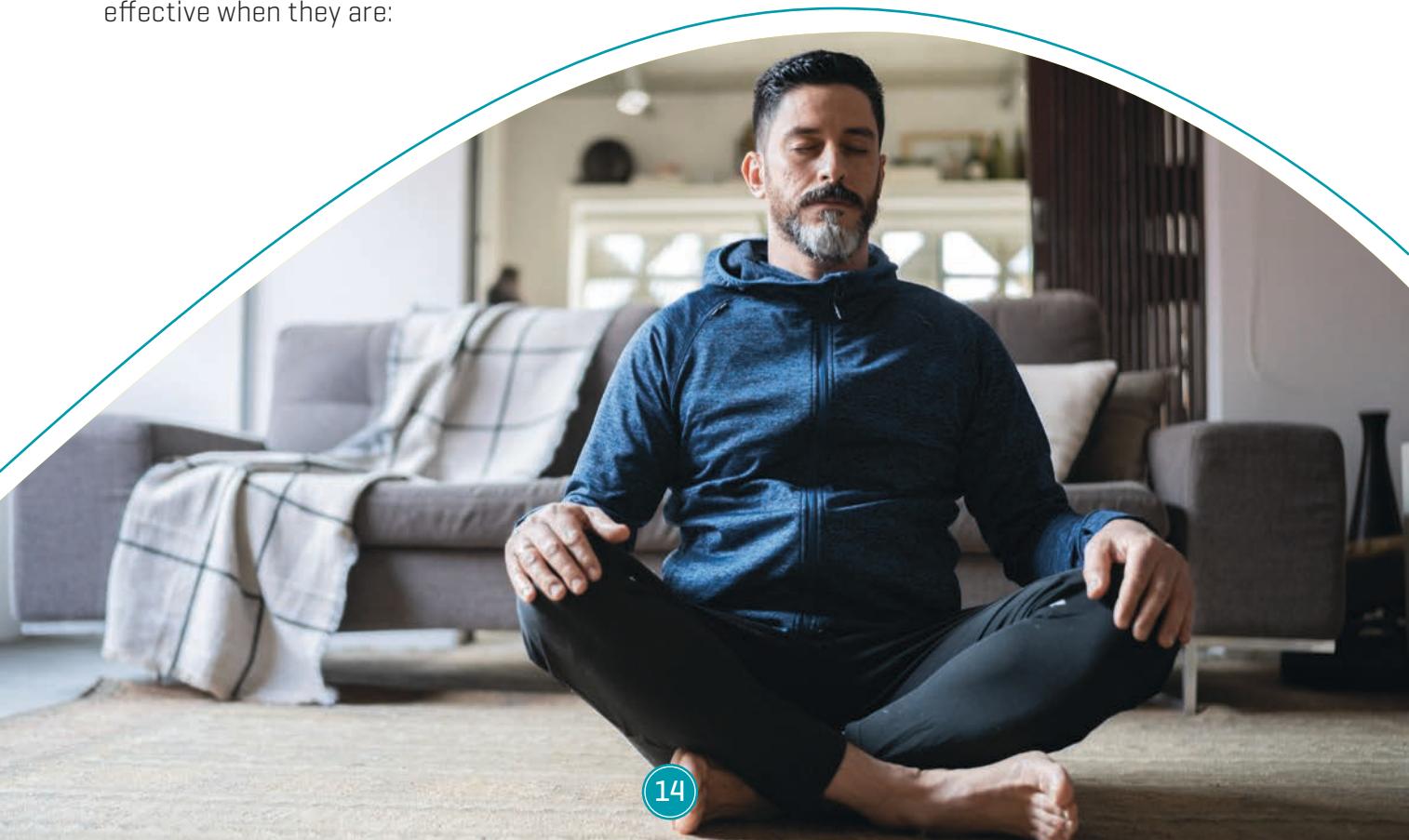
Being aware of your feelings, and naming them - for example, "I feel anxious" or "I feel overwhelmed" - can help you cope with them more effectively. This simple act of bringing attention to and labelling your emotions can ease stress, and help you to respond to situations with intention.

With the right tools, support, and care for your emotional wellbeing, you can tackle challenges and live a meaningful and happy life.

Diabetes Ireland now offers Emotional Wellbeing programmes that focus on the coping strategies mentioned above. You can learn more via www.diabetes.ie.

Goal setting

Setting clear, realistic goals helps to break down overwhelming tasks into manageable steps. This approach is especially helpful when it comes to diabetes management, making it easier to build healthy routines and stay motivated. Goals are more effective when they are:



List of support services

Diabetes Ireland

Website: www.diabetes.ie



Helpline: Mon-Fri, 9 am – 5 pm

Phone: 01 842 8118

Email: info@diabetes.ie

About: Diabetes Ireland is a national charity in Ireland dedicated to helping all those affected by diabetes. Established in 1967, Diabetes Ireland achieves this by providing support, education, and motivation to everyone affected by diabetes. It also raises public awareness of diabetes and its symptoms, advocates for better diabetes services and care, provides resources and influences health policy. The organisation operates helplines, care centers, and educational and psycho-educational programmes across Ireland.

The Samaritans

Phone: 116 123



Email: jo@samaritans.org

About: The Samaritans are a charity organisation that provides free, confidential emotional support to people who are struggling, especially those experiencing distress, crisis, or suicidal thoughts.

HSE Counselling in Primary Care [CIPC]

About: The CIPC service provides short-term counselling for adults who have a medical card. It is designed to support people experiencing mild to moderate psychological difficulties, including those related to living with diabetes.

Self-referral: Patients can self-refer by completing the CIPC referral form. A GP signature/stamp is required.

HCP referral: With the patient's consent, GPs and other primary care professionals can complete and submit the referral form on the patient's behalf.

More information about this service and the referral form can be found on the HSE website at: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/counsellingpc/cipc-national-evaluation/>

Thriveabetes

Email:

info@thriveabetes.ie



About: Thriveabetes is a volunteer-led community and biennial conference focused on supporting people living with type 1 diabetes in Ireland. Founded in 2014, it offers peer support, education, and inspiration, emphasising the psychological and social aspects of diabetes beyond medical management. Thriveabetes connects individuals through events, online platforms, and local support groups to foster resilience and wellbeing.

Text about it

spunout

Text: 'Hello' to 50808 [text about it](#)

About: Text About It is a free, anonymous, 24/7 messaging service providing everything from a calming chat to immediate support for our mental health and emotional wellbeing.

HSE National Counselling Service



Private support

If you are seeking private mental health support, it's important to make sure that the professional you select has the correct qualifications to provide appropriate care. Membership of a recognised professional association is one way to verify this, as they uphold standards of practice, training, and codes of conduct. Some of the main recognised associations in Ireland include:

- IACP [Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy]: Sets standards for counsellors and psychotherapists, including training, ethics, and continuing professional development.
- PSI [Psychological Society of Ireland]: Professional body for psychologists, providing guidelines for training, ethics, and practice.
- IAHIP [Irish Association for Humanistic & Integrative Psychotherapy]: Supports humanistic and integrative therapists, ensuring members meet professional and ethical standards.
- IAPTP [Irish Association of Play Therapy & Psychotherapy]: Supports play therapy and psychotherapy practitioners, promoting professional standards.
- IACAT [Irish Association of Creative Arts Therapists]: Represents creative arts therapists, ensuring ethical practice and professional training.
- Play Therapy Ireland / Play Therapy UK.

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