



## Diabetes UK – What is Diabulimia?

It's an invisible condition and yet it's quite a destructive one if you don't look after yourself. There are three key features, the first one is that you have to have Type 1 diabetes so you can't have it if you haven't got diabetes, don't really see it in Type 2. The second is that you omit insulin at varying degrees. You might omit only a few units of insulin or you might omit a whole dose or you might omit it many times, you know. So, that's the second key feature and the third feature is that the reason why you omit insulin is that you have a fear that the insulin will cause weight gain.

### **Why do you use the word fear?**

Because that's what it is. They're frightened that if I inject insulin, I will put on weight again because they will have experienced that.

### **Just how dangerous is diabulimia?**

Well it's really dangerous. I don't feel like I need to tell any anybody with diabetes this or any diabetes clinician this but if you persistently omit the insulin that you should be taking you're going to have constant high blood sugars and they will be, whether you can see or not, be damaging parts of your body inside. At the end of the day you will die earlier. I mean that's the sad bottom line and you know, your family will lose you. You will never find out what you could have done with your life. So it's pretty serious.

### **It might be difficult to even conceive of a reason why someone would do that like a motivation if that makes sense?**

Because it's so obviously wrong?

### **Right yeah right ..**

But people smoke and they know it's wrong. People drink too much, that's wrong. People eating too much. So, we all engage in self-destructive behaviours. It's a sort of a human part of us, some people, part of our human traits. Unless you're getting a signal to tell you that is big enough to make you change your behaviours. If you've got nobody telling you, I think you're not looking after yourself.

So, you're not getting an external signal that I'm really worried about you in a way that is supportive and you're not getting an internal signal ie. pain, then it's very difficult to find that signal inside yourself that you must look after yourself now. So, these people with diabulimia, they're not getting enough of a signal yet they're not in pain.

They're waiting until they're getting their first complication or I'll sort myself out in a few weeks or they've got this idea of what's called optimistic bias, which is, they think it's not going to happen to them. But they're the ones. They understand that people get complications but it's not going to happen to them. The reason why it appears to be more common in younger people is that it's during the adolescent phase when you're becoming more and more independent with looking after your diabetes and by the time you hitting 14-15, you are going through the adolescent phase of your life which is where you are trying to work out what, who are you. You know, what is my personality like? What is it I like, what is it don't like, what do people think of me?



You know, that's a really important part of adolescence is how you think other people perceive you. Do they think I'm a nice person, not a nice person, do they think I'm fat or thin, I'm likable, lovable? You know, all of these questions. You're raging inside you and then on top of that condition that you suddenly think, oh my goodness, I've got this condition that's with me. I really don't like it. It seems to be getting in the way of my life. I can't go out with my friends drinking without me having to worry about my diabetes. I can't fall in love with that boy or girl. What will they think about my diabetes? Will they like me with my diabetes? What will they think about me injecting? If you can drop diabetes, you would and one way of doing is by not injecting insulin and in that process of not injecting insulin you may discover or learn that you've lost a lot of weight.

You've now got a tool. You will find a tool that says well actually I can lose that weight. You and I might think, that's really irrational, pull yourself together. You need insulin to live but from a person's point of view, that anxiety response can be quite disabling and distressing. When you have that fear of weight gain in that mixture of thoughts and feelings is also the loathing that you have that you've got diabetes. Why me? This, sort of, burden that you feel. So, that's all gets activated. So, you can see how it could happen it's like a toxic mix isn't it?

Until we get our head around how important a good healthy mind is to the relationship that you have with your diabetes, you can give a person as much medicine as you want and as much technology as you want until they are happy comfortable about having diabetes from a psychological point of view, you're not going to make much inroads. That's my perspective.

