

“EAT THIS CAKE NOW!”

What Happens When
You Come Out of the
Diabetes Closet

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Have you ever seen the TV program *The Sopranos*, about a Mafia family? When I first saw it, I thought, “Oh my gosh! Someone has been spying on my family!” Like the characters in the TV program, my family is very close, very complex, very dramatic. My family is never boring. We are funny, tragic and entertaining.

There are definite, carved-in-stone family rules. First and foremost, we keep things to ourselves. To us, there are two kinds of people: family and outsiders. If something bad happens

within the family, you keep it to yourself. You do not share your dirty laundry with outsiders. At all costs, you protect the family.

At first, having diabetes was like having a huge, dirty piece of laundry. If I didn't tell anyone, my family would not be shamed. My family would not have to answer questions, overhear comments, try to interpret quick glances. It was hard for me to start telling people I had diabetes, mainly because I felt like I was betraying my family.



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THE NEW RULES OF STEPPING OUT

To start my life with diabetes, I had to look at how to relate to my family and how to relate to outsiders. I was like a butterfly who had busted out of my cocoon, but I had wobbly wings. I had to learn how to relate to people as a person with diabetes.

I started to go to gatherings. It took so much energy. The thought, "I have diabetes," never left my mind. When someone looked at me, I thought, "Do they know I have diabetes?"

I was super self-conscious. Should I take my medicine in the bathroom, or should I just quickly take the pills while I stand next to the buffet table? What if someone asks me about the medicine?

To test my blood sugar, should I excuse myself? Would that be rude? Do I have to tell people that I'm going to test my blood sugar? If I don't tell them, is that dishonest? If I do tell them, am I calling attention to myself?

And how do I answer the simple question, "How are you?" Do I say, "I'm okay. I have diabetes"? No, that would never work! Immediately I felt guilty about betraying my family. Then I thought, "No one wants to hear those downer words."

I felt I was standing on shaky ground. I was fragile, self-conscious and lacking confidence. I so much wanted to wear a happy face. I thought if I said the words, "I have diabetes," my lips would tremble, and my eyes would start filling up. I thought: *If I say those words, people will scatter like flies. What a way to end a party. What a way to clear a room.*

MY MOTHER KEPT QUIET

I know what my mother did. She stayed loyal to the family. She protected our family secret of her having diabetes. She never "inconvenienced" outsiders or made them uncomfortable by letting them know she had diabetes. She never called attention to herself. Her behavior was the old Paiute way.

It has been over ten years that I have had diabetes, and I have purposely chosen a different path than my mother. Denial and covering up diabetes looked so tempting. In some ways, it looked like a courageous or selfless path. But everything I was learning in the support group, by going on walks, by talking to my husband, by connecting to Mother Earth, by going to ceremonies, and listening to ancient wise

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voices, was pointing me in a different direction. Honesty and acceptance felt better.

So slowly and on shaky legs, I started saying the words out loud: “I have diabetes.” The reactions were fast and furious. I was not prepared for the hurricane-force winds of opinions that were hurled at me from family, friends and strangers. Who would have thought that my cracking, whisper of a voice would be met with such strong, passionate beliefs about what I should or should not do?

GET READY FOR THE REACTIONS

There were many reactions to my having diabetes. Some were kind, others were not. There were three kinds of reactions that especially confused me. They happened to me ten years ago. They still happen now. Maybe if I share my experiences, you will have an easier time when you start saying, “I have diabetes.”

EAT THIS CAKE NOW!

One of the first reactions to my having diabetes were three simple words: “EAT THIS CAKE!” I’m not kidding. A person found out I had diabetes, then with almost brute force, shoved a piece of chocolate cake at me and demanded, “EAT THIS CAKE!” When I declined, the person had a fit because I was not eating cake.

Another common reaction was, “EAT THIS CAKE! NO, DON’T EAT THIS CAKE!” I was surprised when a person, who knew I had diabetes, approached me with a huge mound of cake and ice cream, started to hand it to me, and just

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before I declined the gooey mass, jerked it back and said, “Oh! You have diabetes. You can’t eat this.”

The third type of reaction was this: I was eating a small piece of cake on a flight to Oregon. A person I hardly knew found out I had diabetes, saw I was eating the cake and grabbed it from me saying, “YOU CAN’T EAT CAKE! YOU HAVE DIABETES!” The grabbing of my food by the food police was especially irritating!

FORGIVENESS AND UNDERSTANDING

I am still slightly irritated when these three things happen to me. Yes, they still happen. People seem to be trying to manage my cake intake. At first I was confused by these behaviors. Then I was mad. But a medicine man helped me see how I had to forgive people. Harboring anger or resentment is like an acid. It builds up and harms us.



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With the help of the medicine man, I saw how I needed to forgive and understand the cake managers.

THE CAKE PUSHER MIGHT BE AFRAID


I think all three behaviors are inspired by ignorance and fear. The Cake Pusher plunks a piece of cake in front of me and says, “Don’t you know how long it took for me to make this?” Or, “How dare you upset me! How dare you upset this happy gathering! This is a happy birthday party, and you’d better eat cake and be happy!”

They are the same people who try to force an alcoholic to drink by saying, “We’re having a toast here. What’s the matter? Just one drink won’t hurt.”

What the Cake Pusher might be thinking is: *I am scared to death because you have diabetes. You can’t possibly have diabetes. If you have diabetes, then I might get diabetes. You must act like you don’t have diabetes. You having diabetes will ruin my reality. If you care about me, you will pretend you do not have diabetes.*



*They are the same people
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THE CAKE TEASER MIGHT BE MAD AND INSECURE

I think the Cake Teaser can be the meanest. The Cake Teaser plunks cake down and jerks it back while saying in a concerned and surprised voice, “Oh! You have diabetes!”

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When people do this, I feel like a little child. Being teased like this makes me feel that the person is being mean, but I cannot call them on it. Their meanness is disguised as concern for me.

I’m not sure what the Cake Teaser really feels deep inside, but my guess is that they feel insecure. By being mean to me, giving me cake, then jerking it away, they show that they are a little better than me. My having diabetes might make them feel a little stronger. They are the controllers of the cake—they have the power.


THE CAKE POLICE MIGHT HAVE MISPLACED CONCERN

I was a Cake Police for my mother, so I know how our minds work. It is our job to make sure a person with diabetes does not eat a single sweet thing. We have the best intentions. I thought if I monitored everything my mother put in her mouth, I could save her from the hands of death.

I went on candy raids. I went through her bedroom, opening her drawers to scoop up candy bars. I lifted her mattress to remove wrapped candied orange jelly slices. I rifled through her closet until I found her stockpile of pop.



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So when someone gasps and says, “You can’t eat that!” I understand. They are concerned about me. At the same time, they want me to be strong, like I wanted my mother to be strong. They want me to be disciplined, get a grip on my diabetes and survive it. They want my diabetes to be a little thing in the big picture of tribal allotments and the enrollment program. If they saw me with a piece of cake, they might think, *I care about you. But why can’t you be stronger? Just stop eating cake. Why is that so hard?*

One day I realized that policing my mother’s food was disrespectful. I stopped. Years later, when I got diabetes, I regretted how I disrespected my mother by trying to police her food. I didn’t understand how diabetes can bring you to your knees. I wanted her to be strong and could not understand how an orange jelly slice could overpower her. Now I know.

Now I have great compassion for anyone who has diabetes and is struggling with the temptations of food, or anyone who



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has a huge challenge in their life. And every day, I am trying to gain more compassion for all the people who, when they see me coming, don’t really see me, but see a flashing, neon reminder of their insecurities and fears.

FINDING SOLID GROUND

This journey of diabetes has helped me better understand human nature. I see myself reflected in many people, in their reactions to me. But that was a younger self. Before I had diabetes, I felt stronger, more knowledgeable, in control. I had a grip and wanted other people to just get a grip. I wanted people to be strong with diabetes. I wondered, “Why is it such a big deal?” I didn’t understand how having diabetes pulls the rug right out from under you. Now I know. Now I have grown in wisdom and compassion.

*Now my voice is strong and
clear. I stand on solid,
not shaky, legs. I slowly eat my
cake. I savor every bite.*

So when people push cake, tease me with cake, or police my cake, I automatically say, “I can have a small piece of cake. It is part of my meal plan for the day. Thank you for your concern.”

Now my voice is strong and clear. I stand on solid, not shaky, legs. I slowly eat my cake. I savor every bite.



Wit & Wisdom

I asked myself:

Is it okay for me to start saying, “I have diabetes?” Could saying it out loud help myself and others? How?

How might my family react?
How might others react?
Why?

Is there a way I can gracefully handle what they say?

Can I be good to myself, take care of myself, yet have compassion for them?

