

BLOOD SUGAR TESTING MELTDOWNS

The Truth Behind the Trauma

“ As I put my finger next to the glucometer, I thought, ‘I can’t do this.’
It was like a snake striking me whenever the glucometer pricked my finger—I couldn’t help but jerk my finger away.
‘I really can’t do this!’ ”

If you were to watch me test my blood sugar today, you would be fooled. Every morning I lay my glucometer and test strips on the coffee table, sit up straight and stick my finger. I do this three times a day. I look calm and brave and matter-of-fact. Blood sugar testing? No problem.

But it has not always been “no problem.” When I first found out I had diabetes, the simple act of sticking my finger with a hair-thin finger

Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

stick was a major problem. I sat at the same coffee table with these foreign objects laid out and had “blood sugar testing meltdowns.” My stomach tied up in knots. My breathing became shallow. My heart rate went up. I felt almost unable to control my hands.

As I put my finger next to the glucometer, I thought, “I can’t do this.” Just as the click of the finger stick sprang the stick, I thought of a snake biting me, and I jerked my finger away. “I really can’t do this!” Over and over I tried, jerking my finger away several times before I finally drew the drop of blood. With a shaking hand, I lifted the test strip to the round, red bead. There was some relief after that moment. “Whew, I did it. I got that terrifying thing over with.” Then dread. “I have to do it three more times today, then tomorrow, then the next day, for the rest of my life.” Sometimes that thought was so devastating, I put my head down on the coffee table and cried.



3: Blood Sugar Testing Meltdowns

WHY I HAD MELTDOWNS

I am a Paiute/Dinè woman and consider myself a brave, warrior woman. Just like most Native Americans, I am a survivor. I have survived the death of loved ones, the devastation of alcoholism, the injustice of boarding school, and countless unkind words said by strangers. I have felt my heart break. I have lived through freezing winters without heat. I have experienced ongoing starvation. I am not unaccustomed to spiritual, emotional and physical pain. I am not afraid of these things. I am tough as nails and a survivor. So why did a tiny stick of my finger render me face down sobbing on the coffee table?

Testing blood sugar is like another false promise, like a treaty to be signed. How could I trust it would work?

I think having diabetes is like the “final insult.” My thought pattern was this: After surviving all the injustices, I get diabetes and have to suffer like my mother. Testing my blood sugar is proof that I have diabetes. I think these thoughts were some of the reasons testing my blood sugar was nearly impossible.

But the deep down reason I had “blood sugar testing meltdowns” had to do with the huge bag of emotional and spiritual anguish Native Americans carry around with us. It had to do with the reality of what it is like to be Native in the United States. Testing blood sugar is like another false

promise, like a treaty to be signed. They say testing blood sugar is a first step in avoiding diabetes complications. But what I felt deep down in my soul was that it was another false promise. The simple act of testing my blood sugar was not so simple, really. It was a matter of trust. “They,” the tribal clinic, the non-Indian experts, were asking me to trust them.

In many ways, the almost inaudible click of the finger stick was not the noise of a needle being sprung. It was a huge blasting announcement that Barbara Mora believed in the non-Indian way of healing. Jerking my finger away was a sign that I was conflicted, that I didn’t want to give up my belief in Native miracles. My head down on the coffee table was utter despair. If I believed in the non-Indian way, I would be selling out. And my biggest horror loomed over the whole blood sugar testing scene: What if it didn’t work? What if I signed the blood sugar testing treaty and a few years later I’m on dialysis? What a fool I would be.

Or I could think, “*Hoka hey! It’s a good day to die.*” Every Native person knows this saying. With the glucometer and the test strips staring at me from my coffee table, the “fearless death” path looked more than tempting—it looked glorious. I’ve seen many people choose this path, rather than test blood sugar and “sell out” to the western ways. But thanks to my ancestors and a Dinè clan aunt, I didn’t choose to say, “*Hoka hey.*”

HOW MY ANCESTORS AND ELDERS HELPED ME

All my life, my Native ancestors and elders have been giving me the tools I would need during those first few weeks of testing blood sugar. Little did I know, when my head was

down on the coffee table, that everything I needed was inside me or would be given to me. I had it in me to solve the massive dilemma of whether to choose the western path of blood sugar testing or choose the Native path of fearless death.

Little did I know, when my head was down on the coffee table, that everything I needed was inside me, or would be given to me.

One of the main persons who helped me overcome my blood sugar testing meltdowns was my Dinè clan aunt. My clan aunt has suffered greatly in her life: A newborn child was taken from her and her son almost died in a car accident. She is wise, tough and fearless, just like most Native women. She believes in traditional Native ways, prayer and ceremonies.

About three months after I found out I had diabetes, my aunt came to visit. I got up to make her coffee, and I noticed a glucometer and test strips set out on the kitchen table. I didn’t know my aunt had diabetes. It was early morning. The sun was just coming up. She was not in the house. I went to the window and saw her facing the east, praying. Then she turned to the south, the west, and the north, and prayed.

She began to head back to the house, and I stepped into the kitchen. Without saying a word, she sat down at the kitchen table, sat up perfectly straight, stuck her finger with the finger stick, set the drop of blood on a test strip, and wrote down the number in a small booklet.

Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

I was shocked! She did it like it was no big deal. I couldn't say anything to her. There was silence as I gave her a cup of coffee.

Later I told her about the trouble I was having testing my blood sugar. She said simply, "Look how small this needle is. Look how big you are. And you are letting this little thing get in your way. It may hurt a little, but some things hurt. You have to figure out a way around the pain. Then test your blood sugar and get on with your day."

The lesson my aunt was teaching me was much greater than her words. I saw a woman praying. I saw a woman asking for help and acknowledging her blessings. I saw a brave warrior woman making a sacrifice by testing her blood sugar. It was a proud portrait of Native beauty and strength that changed me forever.

I had always prayed before meals, but the next day I rose at daybreak to pray to the four directions. My father and other



3: Blood Sugar Testing Meltdowns

elders had told me to pray in this way. On that summer day, standing there facing the east, I know my father was watching from above, thinking, "You finally got it, Daughter Barbara!"

EVERYTHING ABOUT BLOOD SUGAR TESTING CHANGED

From that moment on, everything about blood sugar testing changed. I started viewing it as a sacrifice, like the Sun Dance. I make the sacrifice of my blood on a test strip to have my prayer of good health answered. I suffer the pain, like the piercing of flesh, to sacrifice for myself and for my people. I sit up straight and proud and brave, and I do it for my children and grandchildren, the youngest of whom are my grandsons Mundo and Nathan, and granddaughters Kahlaya and Jade, and for all the rest of them.

All my life, my elders have told me of the importance of prayer. Prayer changes people, things and the course of events. During the weeks following the visit of my aunt, the words of the elders came alive in my spirit. It was as if I had stored them for the time I would really need them.

I realized that if the glucometer was made of abalone, the finger stick made of a porcupine quill, and the test strip

*I make the sacrifice of my blood
on a test strip to have my prayer
of good health answered.
I suffer the pain, like the
piercing of flesh, to sacrifice for
myself and for my people.*

Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

an eagle feather, I would have no problem testing my blood sugar. Then I realized that everything comes from the earth. The glucometer was made from materials from the earth. I prayed over the glucometer, finger sticks and test strips. I asked that these items be blessed. I made them into precious things. I made them into acceptable objects, which could be easily welcomed by me, a Native person.



Geronimo told the young warrior that he would have to live in two worlds and know what to choose from each.



I prayed to come to peace with the trauma I have endured because I am a Native person living in the United States. I knew I needed to trust what the doctors and the clinic staff were telling me. I had a knee-jerk reaction not to trust—so many things start and end on reservations. Grants are awarded. Programs and staff make promises. Then the grant ends, programs and staff vanish and promises are forgotten. No wonder I was having trouble trusting.

I remembered the words of Geronimo. When a young warrior approached him and told him how he wished to grow up to be a strong warrior just like Geronimo, he was corrected. Geronimo told the young warrior that he would have to be a much greater warrior than himself. The young warrior would have to live in two worlds and know what to choose from each world to live well. And he would have a much harder battle.

3: Blood Sugar Testing Meltdowns



MAKING IT SACRED

So I take the technology of blood sugar testing from the non-Indian world. I smudge the glucometer and place it in a special pouch. I set it on my altar of sacred objects, facing the east. The glucometer helps me. It tells me when I have an unseen infection or when I am under stress. It tells me when I need to slow down and take care of myself. It is an amazing tool, like a good friend who will speak up for me.

By honoring the glucometer and the test strips, I cloak them in an abalone shell, a porcupine quill, an eagle feather. Through prayer, I change the non-Indian items to sacred ones that will bless my body. With each drop of my blood, I proudly make my sacrifice, for myself, my grandchildren and my community.



Wit & Wisdom

I asked myself:

What is scary about
blood sugar testing?

If I had to stick my finger
with a porcupine quill
three times a day, would I
have as much trouble?

What can I do to make
testing my blood sugar more
acceptable to me,
a Native person?

