When asked how I manage my diabetes, I respond on autopilot: “Oh, I’m like a droid!” I say, ‘I wear a pump, a continuous glucose monitor (CGM), which I calibrate a couple of times a day with a blood glucose meter, and apps on my phone to track what’s going on with it all. There are beeping, alarming, and vibrating machines attached to me all day long, reminding me to do all the things that my defunct beta cells should be doing for me.”

And while this is all true, it’s actually really only a small part of the picture. The button pushing and noisy alarms are very much the technical side of diabetes, and my perfunctory response doesn’t tell the whole story.

For me to live well with diabetes, or even just get by, it takes a holistic approach. While the machines take care of the clinical side of diabetes, there is a lot more to think about, and a lot more I do, to take care of the rest. We are all far more than one body part (functioning or not!), and considering the whole is important. It’s impossible to look at my overall well-being as separate from my diabetes management.

After nineteen years with type 1 diabetes, there are a few techniques and tricks I know to help me feel happier and less anxious about living with this chronic condition. A lot of it is about finding space and quiet away from the daily noise of the disease.
Diabetes is a noisy condition to live with. Those machines I wear all make noise. Our physical responses to diabetes can be noise; hard and fast heartbeats, thumping in our chest when low; loud tears when things are not going as we hope; deep, loud gasps when we are feeling overwhelmed. This noise becomes deafening, and I have had to learn to quieten it to find peace.

So, I breathe. Of course, we all breathe, but I mean concentrated, meaningful, deep breathing. I use an app on my Apple Watch that coaches me to breathe for a few moments whenever I feel like I need to regroup and block out the background chatter. The base setting on the app is for a minute of focused inhaling and exhaling. Some days, I do this a dozen or more times. The prattle and noise falls away, and my energy is channelled into the here and now.

It took me a while to understand how to manage this, but time out from diabetes is essential. Obviously, I can’t pack up diabetes and put it away in a box when I’ve had enough of it for the day (although that would be wonderful!). But I am able to do things that minimize its intrusion into my life. I disable some alerts on my CGM, leaving only the urgent low alarms to keep me safe. I don’t necessarily do this for long periods of time, but when I am feeling overwhelmed, a little silence goes a long way. Plus, it means that I can actually respond to the alarms I hear, rather than ignoring them all because I’m too overwhelmed by the constant noise.

My friends with diabetes provide me with a lifeline all day, every day. I never feel alone, and that is truly wonderful considering just how isolating diabetes can be. Time zones don’t matter and geographical boundaries cease to exist in the diabetes online community. There is support and help available at any time on the phone, via email, two doors down (if you’re lucky enough to have a neighbour and friend with diabetes), and in 140 characters or fewer on Twitter.

I have had friends from the northern hemisphere talk me down from a hypoglycemic edge in the middle of the night while they are eating their lunch, and kept me company until I’ve felt sure that I’m going to be okay. These people “get” my life, not only what it’s like to actually feel diabetes, but also what it’s like to live it.

Doing something that is a complete and utter diversion from thinking about diabetes does wonders for my perspective. So, three or four times a week, I get into the kitchen and get dirty.

My firetruck red KitchenAid stand mixer is put to use and I whip up a batch of cookies, or a cake, or a slice of some other culinary creation. Baking is cathartic, and it is fun! I bake because I enjoy it, and because it is predictable. I love knowing that when I combine butter and sugar together, add eggs and vanilla, and then slowly stir in some flour, pour it into a prepared tin and pop it in a hot oven, I end up with a perfect cake. Every single time.

It’s the complete opposite of diabetes, where doing the same thing day in and day out doesn’t guarantee the same (or even similar) outcomes.

Living with a condition like diabetes can be all-encompassing. Too easily, we can get lost in the day-to-day practicalities of our diabetes tasks. Our devices need attention, out-of-range glucose levels need to be fixed, medical appointments need to be made and kept, prescriptions need to be filled, and consumables need to be restocked.

But I’ve found that remembering that diabetes is only one part of the puzzle that makes me whole, and giving the other pieces attention, leads to me feeling happier, more rounded, and more at peace.