TALKING ABOUT THE HIGHS & LOWS

It’s Not Just About Sugar Level
I only have one brain. It belongs only to me, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t read minds. Also, I can’t think for everyone else – brains just aren’t wired to do that.

My boys don’t believe it.

They like to think that I know their blood sugar trends on a visceral level, like they are somehow just a part of who I am. They like to believe that I have all the answers without knowing all the questions, and they also like to believe that they don’t have to remember anything, because I’ll remember for them.

I have four boys. That’s a lot of remembering to keep up with.

On top of that, three of my boys have type 1 diabetes, so you can imagine why my swollen brain is full. Without effective communication, I am completely overwhelmed, and lost. I don’t have a crystal ball; hence, “I do not magically know what your blood sugars have been at lunch for the past few weeks.”

Encouraging teenage boys to communicate is just as much fun as poking a finger in one’s eye. Some boys like to share, especially young ones, but generally, once they hit puberty it’s all over. Boys who were once self-reliant and the endocrinologist’s superstar, suddenly revert back to their helpless younger years.

Take this for example: “What? I was supposed to give myself insulin for that pizza? Don’t you usually tell me to first!”

My solution to all of this is dialogue.

Talking to the boys consistently about their routine and their day gets the juices flowing and helps quell issues that have been rising to the surface. When diabetes is concerned, ignorance is not bliss. Ignoring diabetes, or giving diabetes limited attention, will lead to complacency. Good habits easily slip through the cracks when no one is interested in you.

So, how does one balance the diabetes talk with the everyday talk? I don’t want my boys to think that all I care about is making sure that they test their blood sugars, but at the same time I don’t want them to think they aren’t held accountable either. Conversations need to happen. Most of the time they are short and to the point; other times they are longer and deeper in nature. Regardless, they need to be approached delicately and with their best interest in mind.

I like to lie on my boys’ beds when they are eyeball deep in their computer screen. It annoys them to no end, but I don’t leave. “Tell me about you,” I say. They roll their eyes and say they’re in the middle of a game, (which by the way, they are always in the middle of a game). I stay anyway. “I’ll watch. I miss you; I just want to catch up.”

I ask about their friends. I ask about the best part of their day and the worst part of their day – one high, one low. Then, I ask about their blood sugars: “How have your lunchtime numbers been?” They know. If they’ve been high lately, they will tell me, but the information is never offered up without me initiating the conversation; that’s why my reaching out is so important.

With teenagers I suppose it’s just that way. Well, with boys anyway. I’m no authority on the teenage girl.

But isn’t this something that we can all relate to? Often people in our lives struggle with everyday problems, and it’s rare for someone to take a moment to say, “Hey. How has it been going? I heard your grandmother was ill, how is she doing? Do you like your new pump? Have you noticed changes in your numbers since the weather changed?” Simple opening statements can open up a waterfall of information – information that the person may have even internalized yet. “Now that you mention it, my numbers have been low since the heat wave started.”

The more something isn’t discussed, the more it becomes like lint under the bed; completely forgotten about, and definitely nothing considered important. A lot of people don’t like to volunteer information unless they’re approached. It’s important to remember that opening those lines of communication is up to us, the people that want to help. Who are we? Friends. Family. Classmates. Doctors. Volunteers.

So many people bottle up information and emotions. Releasing those thoughts and feelings is the best therapy there is. In this day and age we think it’s meddling to ask personal questions. But it’s ok to ask a question if it’s sincere, and it’s certainly ok to put a hand on someone’s shoulder and say, “Really, how ARE you doing?”

Sincerity and a willingness to help can lead to the best conversations.

Blame, and discouragement just lead to closing off. If you don’t care about me, or don’t think highly of me, I’m not
going to be honest with you, and I’m certainly not going to be vulnerable with you.

An example of this would be, “You’re numbers have been high every night for the past three weeks. Why are they high? What are you eating? You’re obviously not giving enough insulin. Why aren’t you trying harder?” The person being questioned only hears, “Blame. Your fault. You are a loser. If you cared you’d work harder.”

If I were a parent or a medical professional, a better way to discuss this might be, “I see your numbers have been high in the evening, let’s work together to find a solution. I know you’ll feel better, and sleep better if we can get your numbers lower before bed. Where do you think we should start?”

If I were a friend, I might say, “What can I do to learn more about diabetes? I can see it is a lot of work. Is there a way I can support you?” The problem lies in the fact that friends will often say, “Whoa! Whenever I see you test your numbers, I’ve noticed that they have been awful! Isn’t that really bad?”

Effective communication is thoughtful and caring, not blaming.

I’m no communication guru, but I am a mom and someone who has been floating around the diabetes community long enough to see too much ineffective communication. I know that people care, but delivery is everything. An easy rule of thumb is asking yourself, “How would I feel if someone said this to me?”

Because the bottom line is, if someone feels judged, they won’t communicate. It’s a good thing for all of us to take a step back and evaluate how we’ve been trying to help. If we haven’t been authentic in our desire to help, it’s a good bet our outstretched hands have been batted away.

Everyone needs a friend. I don’t think we can go wrong if we try hard to be one.