

# Truly blessed: living well with type 2 diabetes

Carolyn MacDonell has turned her type 2 diabetes diagnosis into an opportunity for a new lease on life.

When I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, I had no idea what having diabetes really meant. My doctor called me in following a blood test and told me that I had an HbA1c reading of 117, which was over three times the normal level, and that it was serious. He explained what type 2 diabetes was, the medication I required, that I needed to lose weight and start to exercise, that I would be attending follow up appointments with his nurse, that they would be registering me for diabetes education, as well as having ongoing and regular blood tests. It was a lot to take in. I had been diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease some 15 years earlier and was having annual blood tests, and now this was another health issue. I went home in tears to tell my husband and children - I was devastated. I was feeling all sorts of emotions and was so embarrassed. I was left with so many questions.

Just four months before the diabetes diagnosis I had a major life transition. I share this with you to give some context to the magnitude of change. I left my senior executive job where for the previous two years I had worked just about 24/7. It had been an amazing two years, very stressful yet hugely satisfying at the same time. Whilst it was a scary prospect as the sole income earner for our family of five to be leaving my job, I recognised that I was absolutely exhausted. As a giver with a strong values base and a person who really cares about others, I recognise now that I gave too much of myself and took everything too personally. I constantly felt tired, thirsty, and I could never get enough sleep. I had noticed that my eye sight was changing; I was drinking too much alcohol, eating too many chocolates, sweets, and junk food. I was constantly hungry, I ate far too much and I did not exercise. I see now that my lifestyle and the stress I put myself under made me a prime candidate for type 2 diabetes.

I took a month. I made lists of what was important to me, re-explored my personal values, what inspired me, what I was passionate about, and what I wanted to do. I decided I needed to exercise, lose the weight I had talked about losing for years and that I needed to look after myself better. I realised that professionally I was unhappy and desired greater flexibility to be able to be myself and create a less stressful lifestyle. I spoke with my husband Pete and gained his support to set up our own business. We established a consulting company where we would utilise my skills and experience gained over the past 25 odd years. I started going to the gym three times a week, then



I booked myself into a boot-camp for 8 weeks; this was to really challenge myself.

I made contact with Comprehensive Care (an education support group) and booked myself into three, two hour sessions. I didn't want to go to the sessions; for some reason I felt angry that I had to give up three evenings to attend these sessions with people I did not know. Much to my surprise the first evening was so informative and my angry emotions turned into a keen interest. What was discussed was so frightening; I didn't want to have my life shortened! It was wonderful to be getting the right information and to realise that I wasn't alone; there were people to help me on my journey. I decided that night to take every opportunity possible.

**"If it's going to be,  
it's up to me."**

Acceptance of the diagnosis was critical. It was not up to anyone else and my mantra of "if it's going to be, it's up to me" rang true. It was up to me to coach myself through another transition of change and be my own best supporter. I see now that my lifestyle contributed to my diabetes and it could have been prevented. It was not until I accepted that I had type 2 diabetes and that it was up to me to do something about it, that I was able to move forward. Once the boot camp was over I challenged myself to do 4-5 gym classes per week.

For the next three months I worked hard at the gym, drank very little alcohol, and felt better than I had felt in years. I borrowed, bought and read many books on self-development. I was becoming more at peace with myself. People were noticing that I was losing weight. I had a renewed energy and vibrancy. I felt great! Four months in, I had a blood test and couldn't believe that my Hb1Ac level was 43!!!

A concern at this stage was – how could I keep this up forever? I spoke with the Psychologist and the Dietitian from Comprehensive Care and they were amazing in helping me to see that I have always pushed myself hard, and had high expectations. It was important to

accept who I am, to take the pressure off myself, set realistic targets, be kind to myself, and take more time out to relax, eat the right portions and have the correct balance of foods. I have worked hard on this since.

I am in a much better space, much more relaxed and at peace with myself and the world. My three monthly HbA1c blood tests in the past six months have shown my HbA1C levels at 39; this is an outstanding result. I am 18kg lighter yet I have not been on a diet! I am at the gym most days doing either group fitness, weights and strength training, boot-camp, and personal training. I was delighted to complete the Auckland Half Marathon. This was a huge milestone for me as I had never been a runner, but I was never a gym person before either!

Accepting that stress was more than likely a key contributor to my diabetes was a true eye opener. I had lived with so much stress for so many years. I do recall my doctor saying on various occasions that I really should consider changing my lifestyle. I never took any notice. I wondered how I could do that when I was the sole income earner for our family. It is easy to put barriers in place; I can't do this or that; it's too hard. When in fact, we can do anything we put our mind to; it is truly about reframing things.

It has not all been a bed of roses. There have been many challenges. I was struck down with an unpleasant kidney infection resulting in me spending several days in hospital! Then not long after I ended up with whooping cough which took six weeks to diagnose and then it lasted for four months. It was so debilitating. I accepted this was another lesson and got back on track with my exercise once I was well again.

I have learned more in the past 21 months than in the past 54 years of my life! I cherish the special people in my life, the opportunities I have had, the places I have been to, the people I have met on the journey and the constant learning, and I embrace the future with great excitement. I feel more relaxed and in control of my life than ever. I envisioned a new future with diabetes, changed my life, transformed myself. I no longer have a diabetic profile and I no longer need medication for diabetes. I feel truly blessed!

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Diabetes New Zealand is a leading national organisation and registered charity. Our aim is to support all people affected by diabetes to live well through: Providing information and support to help people take charge of their health • Acting as an advocate and representing all people with, or at risk of developing, diabetes • Raising awareness of diabetes, especially around lifestyle factors that can help prevent or delay type 2 and help manage and control type 1 and type 2.