

Diabetes Self-Help Guide

SECTION 1: WHAT IS IT

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section One

If you're a veteran living with diabetes, it's a positive step that you're here.



Whether you've recently been diagnosed or you've been living with diabetes for many years, you'll know that taking care of diabetes involves making a lot of lifestyle changes that can be difficult to adjust to. If this is you, you're not alone. The good news is, with small steps diabetes can be managed, and our hope is that this resource will assist you on your way.

Signs and symptoms of type 2 diabetes

There are several different types of diabetes. Most people living with diabetes that we support at Combat Stress are living with type 2 diabetes, so this will be the focus of this resource.

Type 2 diabetes is a serious condition that causes the level of sugar (glucose) in the blood to become too high.

It can cause signs like:

- Being very thirsty
- Needing to pass water a lot
- Tiredness



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It can also increase your risk of getting serious problems with your eyes, heart and nerves.

Risk factors for developing diabetes

There are several factors that can affect your risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

They can include:

- If you have a parent, brother, sister or child with diabetes
- Your ethnicity (type 2 diabetes is two to four times more likely in people of South Asian, African-Caribbean or Black African descent.)
- Your age
- High blood pressure
- Being above a healthy weight



As a veteran, it's important to understand the potential impact of traumatic experiences on the physical body.

Trauma, whether experienced whilst you were in the military or as adverse experiences that happened earlier in your life, can cause an elevated stress response. This has an impact on the physical body and may also lead to understandable emotional reactions such as eating food for comfort, in a similar way that smoking and drinking can be used to distract and cope.

Eating for comfort may in turn increase your risk of developing diabetes.

SECTION 2: WHY MIGHT A VETERAN STRUGGLE WITH DIABETES?

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Two

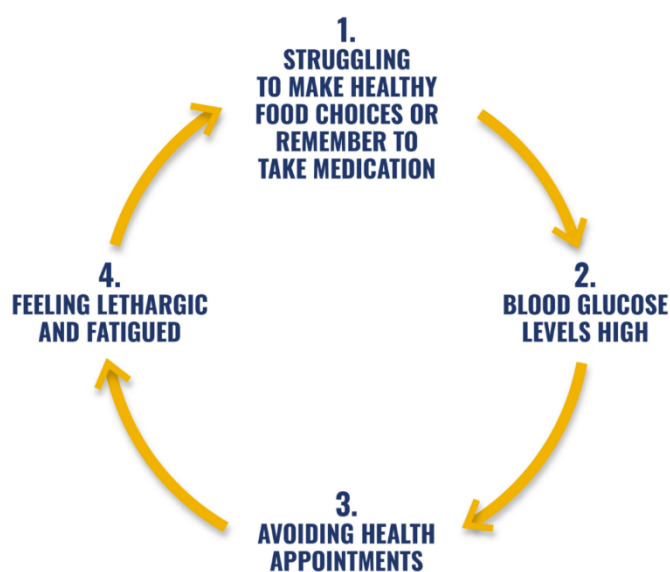
A diagnosis of type 2 diabetes requires you to make significant changes to your lifestyle, including a focus on healthy eating and physical activity.

Throughout your time in service you quite rightly prioritised hearty, energy-fueled meals. A far cry from lighter options that your health professional may be encouraging you to choose now and eating these options may feel at odds with your identity.

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In addition, while physical activity was a routine part of your military life, now you don't have a Sergeant dictating your moves and the camaraderie of your squad, it may be difficult to muster up the enthusiasm to get regular exercise.

Are you experiencing the following cycle?



- Behaviour – struggle to make healthier food choices, or remember to take your medication regularly
- Physiological/body: blood glucose level rises higher than recommended
- Behaviour – avoid going to health appointments or when you do go, feel like you're getting 'told off' by your health professional
- Feeling – lack of motivation to self-care, fatigue, lethargy
- Behaviour – make food choices that are comforting rather than healthy

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. This is a very common pattern and the good news is, you CAN make changes.

A first step is to spend some time asking yourself some questions.

Questions to ask yourself

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- What is important to me in life? (is it your health, or your relationship, family, job, hobbies or something else?)
- How will improving my health benefit what is important to me? (e.g. will improving my health help my partner not to worry about me? Will getting fitter mean you've got enough energy to play in the park with your kids/grandkids? Will keeping healthy minimise the risk of future eye/nerve damage, so you can keep up with hobbies like reading or DIY?)
- What would I like to achieve? (Start small and build up e.g. walk for 20-minutes, twice a week)

There can be specific emotional struggles with managing your diabetes that you may be experiencing:

- If your treatment plan involves injecting a medication or monitoring your blood glucose, you may fear or want to avoid using needles
- You may have developed a fear of hypos. The sensation of low blood glucose levels (often called a 'hypo', short for hypoglycemia) can be unpleasant and some people prefer to deliberately have slightly elevated blood glucose levels to avoid the sensation.
- You may struggle to admit to others that you have diabetes, be worried that people might judge you or feel you're troubling people by asking them to cook you healthier options
- You may struggle to make the lifestyle adjustments required or wrongly believe 'diabetes isn't that serious'
- You may feel apprehensive about going to health appointments where you'll have your weight/health checked, particularly if your health professional doesn't seem understanding

If any of these sound familiar, it's okay. These emotional struggles can be overcome with support.

Take Stock. Take Action.

The diagnosis of diabetes is a big life event.

Here is a creative exercise you can try to help you adjust:

To help to absorb the diagnosis, take a sheet of paper and draw a circle over on the left-hand side. Inside it, draw symbols/write words to express your feelings about the diagnosis at the moment.

Next, on the right-hand side of the paper, draw another circle and add symbols/words to capture your hopes for the future.

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Then, after digesting the content of this resource, draw a bridge between the two circles: along it, add symbols/words to give yourself direction of what steps to take to reach your desired goal.



SECTION 3: WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Three

It can be challenging to make the shift from military life to civvy street. But you have the skills to do it.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- Do what matters - The doing part
- Get your thinking straight - The thinking part

To begin, read the rest of this section 'Do what matters' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Four: Get your thinking straight

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Do What Matters

Remember your strengths

You have been highly trained in developing the skills of discipline, focus and endurance, and these are skills that will serve you in your life with diabetes too.

It's natural to feel like you have a mountain to climb, but step by step you can and will get there.



Remember your drills

What are your drills and habits around taking care of yourself and your diabetes? Stick to the individual advice provided by your health professional, which usually includes:



Taking your prescribed medication



Making health food choices



Keeping active



Checking your feet daily

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Monitoring your blood glucose (if advised to)

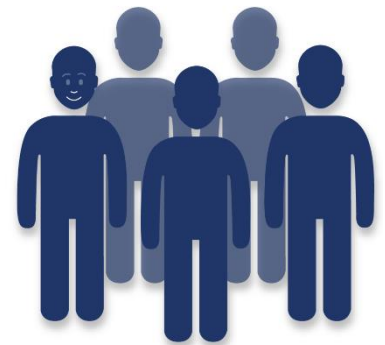


Continuing with anything your health professional has advised you do, such as attend an NHS free Diabetes Education Course

Remember you're not alone

If you feel alone in your life with diabetes, you can find some peer support and buddy up with someone in your area. Diabetes UK is a great organisation that can help you find support groups in your area so you can meet others diagnosed with diabetes and who understand.

https://www.diabetes.org.uk/how_we_help/local_support_groups



Our helpline is also always available if you need someone to talk to or are looking for advice.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

SECTION 4: THE THINKING PART?

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Four

**It can be challenging to make the shift from military life to civvy street
But you have the skills to do it.**

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

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The recommended strategies include:

- Do what matters - The doing part
- Get your thinking straight - The thinking part

To begin, read the rest of this section 'Get your thinking straight' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Five.

Get Your Thinking Straight

Some people living with diabetes find that when they feel stressed, their blood glucose levels increase. It's helpful if you can find ways of managing your stress levels and feel more at ease in day to day life.

You may also want to explore the practice of mindfulness to feel more at ease.

What are the benefits of mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the ability to pay attention to the present moment and without casting judgment.

Physical health benefits can include:

- improved sleep
- reduced anxiety and stress
- improved immune functioning

Mindfulness Exercise

Here is a mindfulness strategy that you might like to try.

By bringing your focus to the environment it can shift your thoughts away from any anxiety, panic or worry and into the present.

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What are 5 things you can see?

Tune into your surroundings and try to notice the small details such as patterns, shapes, texture and colours



What are 4 things you can feel or touch?

This could be the feeling of your clothes, the temperature, the feeling of your feet on the ground. You could pick up nearby objects and pay attention to how they feel. Consider carrying a grounding object with you like beads, a stone or a stress ball.



What are 3 things you can hear?

Focus on the subtle sounds we often don't notice, such as the clock ticking, the wind outside or distant traffic.



What are 2 things you can smell?

Pay attention to any smells in the air or look around for something with a smell, like a flower, food or perfume. Consider carrying a strong smell with you on a tissue or your sleeve.



What is 1 thing you can taste?

It can be handy to carry some gum, strong mints or sweets with you for this one.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

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SECTION 5: HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED FOR YOU?

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Five

Have you noticed any changes?

- Are you noticing any differences?
- Has anything shifted? For instance, have you noticed your diabetes becoming more manageable?
- What helped?



Be Kind To Yourself

Many veterans we support here at Combat Stress tend to be quite hard on themselves, particularly if change takes longer than they'd like. If this sounds like you, be kind to yourself. It is human nature to be a bit self-critical but don't neglect to honour the small steps of progress you are taking along the way. Congratulate yourself for reading this resource, it's an important step.

For further information about managing diabetes, you may want to visit the Diabetes UK website:

<https://www.diabetes.org.uk/Guide-to-diabetes/Life-with-diabetes/Illness>

What to do next

Before moving on to your next resource, it's important you take time to reflect on what you've learnt here and take time to implement your new methods. Give yourself time to adjust to your 'new normal' before moving on.

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Some questions you might have

What to do if I need further advice on diabetes as a veteran?

It might take some time to start reaping the rewards of your efforts. As with any new skill, keep at it and you will find it easier to use these skills when you need them. While these resources aim to give you some tools to manage your difficulties in-the-moment, for many of you this will only be the beginning. With this in mind, Combat Stress also provides specialist treatment programmes to help you tackle the past and take on the future. If you would like to know more, you will find the details of our 24-hour helpline below.

How do I know what resource to do next?

You may remember when you first began these self-help guides, you filled out a questionnaire. This questionnaire enables us to guide you to the resources that will be most helpful to you. You'll find links to other guides in this series at <https://selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk/>.

Is there someone I can contact if I need more help or information?

If you're a veteran and need to talk to someone, or you're a family member/carer worried about the mental health of a loved one who has served, please call our Helpline. The Combat Stress 24-hour Helpline provides free confidential advice and support to veterans and their families. Don't struggle in silence.

Call 0800 138 1619

Are there any other resources that may help me?

- Diabetes UK - <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/>
- Diabetes Research and Wellness Foundation - <https://www.drwf.org.uk/>
- NHS Diabetes Information Page - <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/diabetes/>

Urgent help

If you require more urgent help, either yourself or a member of your family feel unsafe, please contact your GP or telephone 111.

This information was publishing on 30 October 2020.

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