

When Michael Albertson was diagnosed with diabetes, his wife, Ellen, found creative ways to offer support.





RELATIONSHIPS

DIABETES

IN THE

FAMILY

How do you lead your spouse toward healthy habits without hurting your marriage?
Answer: Very carefully.

BY PAULA DERROW
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNABEL CLARK

NOVEMBER 2016 • PREVENTION.COM



RELATIONSHIPS

IT WAS DINNERTIME IN THE SHAPIRO-EPSTEIN HOUSEHOLD, AND MICHELE SHAPIRO WAS ANGRY.

Once again, her husband, Eric Epstein, had helped himself to seconds, finished everything on his plate, and then eaten what was left in the pan on the stove—food that Michele had planned to take to work for lunch the next day. While she didn't like forfeiting her lunch, it was Eric's eating habits that really irked her. He was seriously overweight and, like 86 million other Americans, struggling with prediabetes, a condition that meant his blood sugar levels were higher than normal. Now Michele was standing in her kitchen fuming about lost leftovers and worrying that Eric wasn't taking better care of himself.

Twenty-six years ago, when the couple married, Michele never imagined that Eric's health would become a source of tension. Then trim and fit, Eric introduced her to road biking. On the weekends, they'd ride 50 to 75 miles together, burning so many calories that it didn't matter if they ended the evening with a nice dinner and a bottle of wine. As it does for many couples, though, life got busier over time, and they exercised less and put on extra pounds. But they were happy, and Michele rarely gave their waistlines much thought until 2003, when Eric's doctor discovered his out-

of-control blood sugar. At first, the news shocked the couple into action, and they began to move a little more and eat a little less. They both slimmed down, but within a few months Eric was back to parking himself in front of the TV and using entire sticks of butter when it was his turn to cook. His weight crept back up, and his blood sugar levels soared.

Michele felt resentful. Why was she the only one concerned about Eric's health? Both of them knew that lack of exercise, weight gain, and eating too much of the wrong foods inched his blood sugar ever higher. Michele worried that if he didn't change his behavior, he'd wind up with full-blown type 2 diabetes and possibly heart disease or a stroke as well. She also worried that his condition, if left unchecked, would make her a widow too soon: More than 70,000 adults die from complications of diabetes every year, and thousands more endure digestive problems, blindness, kidney failure, neuropathy, or limb amputation after years of high blood sugar.

Michele Shapiro is far from the only spouse who feels the strain of diabetes on her relationship. More than half of the partners of people living with diabetes or prediabetes say the disease makes

This summer, Michele Shapiro and Eric Epstein renewed their commitment to health with another trip to the mountain lodge that was the site of their relationship's "turning point."



RELATIONSHIPS

life more difficult for them, according to a new survey by Accu-Chek Connect, makers of a glucose monitoring system. Considering that close to half of US adults currently have diabetes or prediabetes, that's a lot of frustrated couples.

The biggest hurdle a wife or husband faces isn't just what to buy at the grocery store. It's fear. "After a spouse's diagnosis, people worry that they won't get to grow old with their partner," says Samantha Markovitz, a Mayo Clinic-certified wellness coach and diabetes educator. Though well intentioned, the worry can create a rift between couples, especially if the partner without diabetes feels ignored or unheard. Many anxious spouses turn into what some experts refer to as the "diabetes police," pleading, yelling, acting out, or simply simmering in resentment. While that approach can sometimes work to nudge a partner toward healthy changes, it's hardly healthy for the relationship. "We had the same fight almost every night after dinner," Michele admits. "Eric just learned to ignore me."

That behavior is in keeping with what John Zrebiec, director of behavioral health at Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston, has observed while working with families affected by this disease. "When you blame or criticize someone with diabetes, the person will get defensive, and the conversation won't go anywhere."

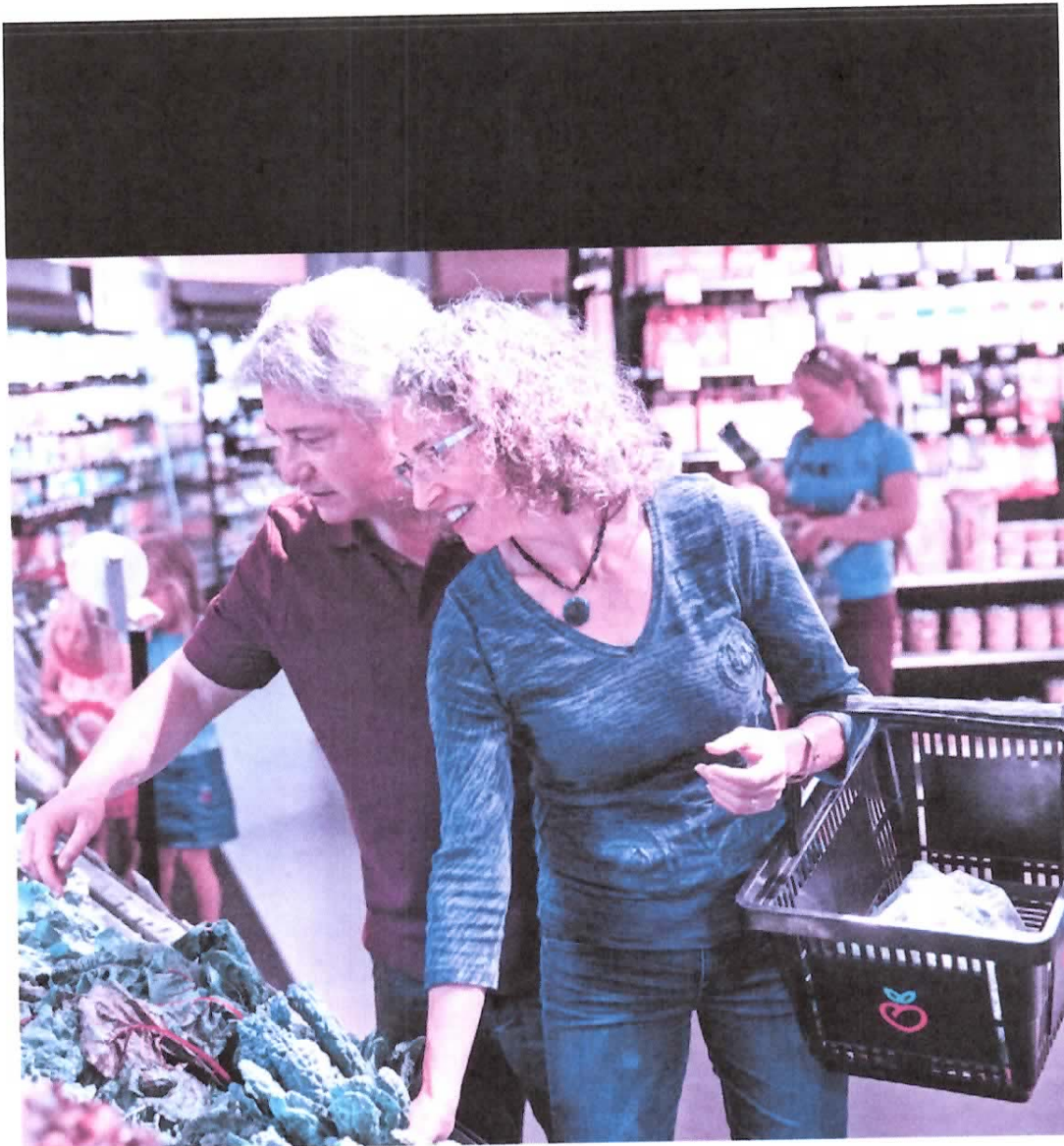
This doesn't mean concerned partners should give up on encouraging their spouses to exercise and eat healthily. But there is an approach that's less judgmental and has a higher chance



Eating healthily has become a priority for the Albertsons, who shop for fresh vegetables at their local market.

of success, experts say. Studies suggest that having a supportive spouse—one who works with you to solve problems or to identify forms of exercise you can do in tandem—makes a difference in a diabetic partner's health. "The more help the patient gets from a partner, the easier it is to manage the disease," says Zrebiec.

This type of gentle assistance has worked well for Ellen and Michael Albertson. When Michael, 60, was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes in 2014,



his initial reaction was disbelief. Once he got past that, he was all for letting Ellen, a dietitian, psychologist, and certified wellness coach, take the lead in modifying his eating habits. "I trusted that she knew what she was talking about," he says. "And she didn't try to change me right away." Instead, Ellen introduced small tweaks to their diet, switching out white rice for brown, for example, and keeping a close eye on portion sizes. Ellen also tried to stay mindful of the fact that no one can be perfect about diet.

"If Michael wanted a second helping, I'd remind myself that it's his decision," she says. "Once I've said something, I'll shut up and take a step back."

Michael appreciated that approach. "She never scolded," he says. "I always felt like I was being treated with respect." The strategy worked: In the 2 years since Michael's diagnosis, he's lost 38 pounds and gotten his blood sugar on track. And the couple has gone on to write a book about their success: *The Diabetic and the Dietitian: How to Help Your Husband*

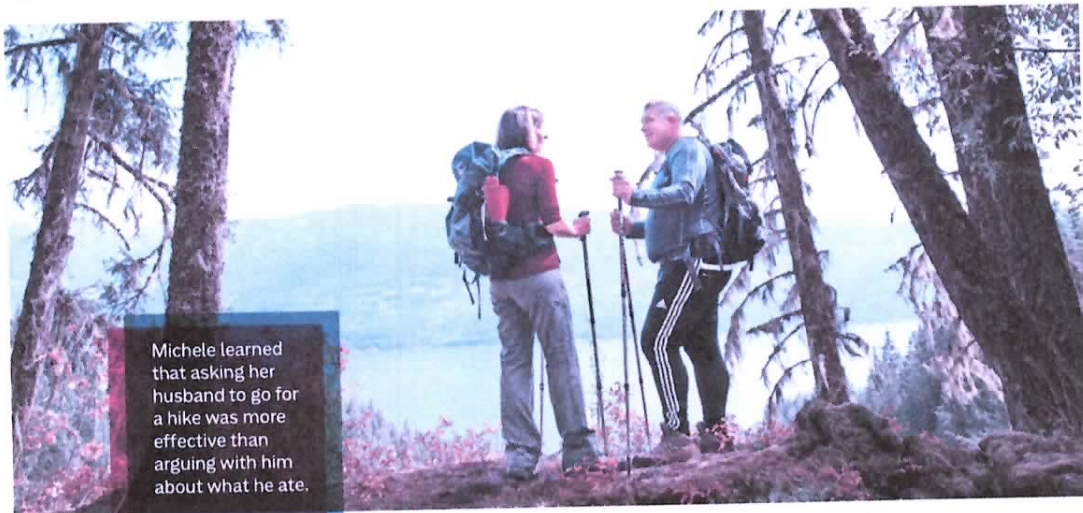
Defeat Diabetes Without Losing Your Mind or Your Marriage.

Not every couple finds it so easy. If you're struggling to figure out the best way to help your partner, set aside a time to talk and ask for advice. "The person with diabetes needs to tell the other person what kind of support is helpful and what isn't," says Zrebiec.

That strategy has been successful for Karen Hill, who was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes (an autoimmune disease that causes the pancreas to stop producing insulin) when she was 8 years old. Now 54, she says that in the early years of her 29-year marriage, she'd sometimes get irritated with her husband, Andrew, when he'd ask about her blood sugar or question her eating habits. "If my blood sugar was high, he'd assume I'd eaten too much or exercised without

monitoring my blood sugar levels," Karen recalls. "It was frustrating, and I felt as though I was being parented by my spouse. Eventually, I told him that I loved him, that I appreciated and needed his support, but that I was a big girl and could take care of myself," she says. After that, Andrew changed his tone. "Instead of pointing a finger, he'll make a gentle suggestion," says Karen.

That kind of empathy is crucial to a strong relationship when one partner is dealing with diabetes. "Above all, people with diabetes want others to understand how tough it can be to live with the disease," says Zrebiec. "They never get a break from thinking about their diet or blood sugar and, in some cases, have to give themselves multiple insulin injections a day. It's not easy."



Michele learned that asking her husband to go for a hike was more effective than arguing with him about what he ate.

RELATIONSHIPS

If talking doesn't work and your partner insists on shouldering the burden of the disease alone, you may need to take a step back. "It's important to remind yourself that whatever happens with your partner's illness, you don't have control over the outcome," says Zrebiec. "All you can do is try your best, but you can't control another person."

Although supporting a partner with diabetes can be challenging, learning to be there in a way that truly helps the other person can bring you closer. Two years ago, Michele was planning to participate in a weeklong hiking program at Mountain Trek Fitness Retreat and Health Spa in British Columbia for a work assignment, so she asked Eric, who then weighed more than 300 pounds, if he'd join her. He said yes—and that was a turning point for the couple.

At the start of the retreat, Eric found the schedule daunting, but by the end he was no longer the last person to finish a hike—and he was 16 pounds lighter. He kept his new mind-set after the couple got home, making a point of checking his blood sugar twice a day and getting to the gym. This past summer, he and Michele resumed the long bike rides of their courtship. "He calls me after work to meet him for a bike ride," Michele says. "It's great sharing that again." She also feels a burden has been lifted now that she's learned that, as clichéd as it sounds, actions speak louder than words. "I try to be healthy and hope that it inspires him to do the same."

Eric says that what inspired him to get his condition under control was even simpler: "Ultimately, the willingness to change had to come from me."

4 WAYS TO OFFER SUPPORT

WITHOUT TICKING OFF YOUR SPOUSE

1. Let your partner take the lead.

Many spouses of people with diabetes never ask what that person wants—they just jump right into helping. But any healthy partnership has to start with listening to the person with the diagnosis. Ask, "How can I offer support effectively?"

2. Go undercover.

If your partner shuns advice and hand-holding but you

still want to help, try some low-key ways to make your life together healthier. You can go with your spouse to the doctor, ban processed carbs from your shopping list, or find a physical activity you both enjoy and suggest doing it together.

3. Take small steps.

Instead of trying to overhaul your spouse's entire way of eating, which is overwhelming, think of small changes

you can make together, like having eggs for breakfast instead of cereal.

4. Live the life you want your partner to live.

If you wish your spouse would exercise, pencil in a gym date for yourself—and keep it. If you worry about a partner's alcohol consumption, limit your own wine intake. You'll end up being a role model for your spouse and the rest of your family.