



How I found out that I had diabetes...



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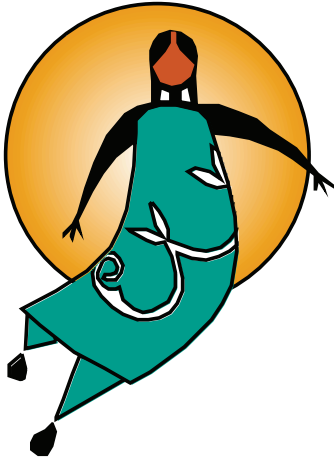


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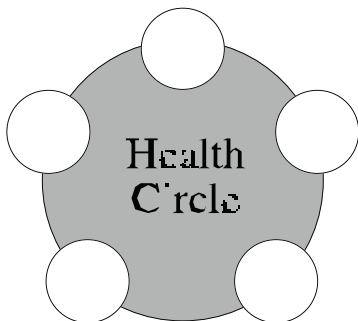
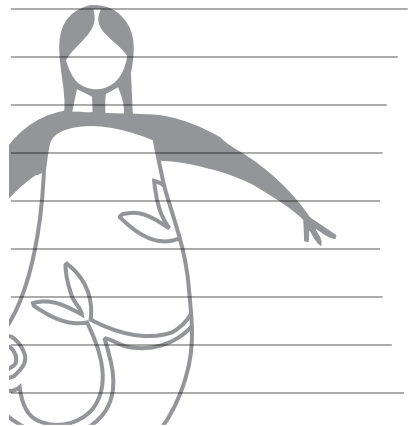
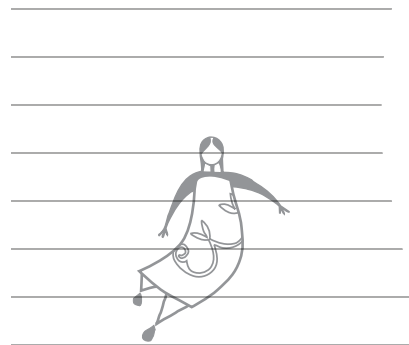
Theme 1: How I found out that I had diabetes...



Although she was not poor when she was young, Martha was never able to eat the food she liked, and which she associated with pleasure and well-being, such as soft drinks and chocolate. These were quite simply forbidden. When she moved into her own house, as a new bride, she was able to have all the soft drinks she wanted, and so she indulged herself and would drink as much as 2 litres a day. And there were also chips and meals in restaurants... She took full advantage of her new independence. One day her body gave her signs that it wasn't working. At the time, she was the mother of several small children, and she was busy being happy with them and was very active, so she never saw it coming. As she turned forty, she realized that she no longer had the same strength, and that she would even start to shake as she went about her daily activities, which had never been a problem for her, despite the fact that she was stout. However, she was not the type to complain or to consult a doctor without a serious reason. She had just barely got to see a doctor when she was pregnant. But she was beginning to feel new discomforts which she couldn't hide. She knew that something was wrong. Learning that she was diabetic was tough to swallow, especially seeing that she had been so dynamic and had a very full life, which was quite a happy one at that. Moreover it took several years of consultation with the nutritionist and visits to the diabetes clinics before she even began to accept the idea that she was diabetic.



1. What does it mean to be in good health?



Being healthy means much more than being free from illness. According to several specialists, health refers to a state of well-being, which is reflected in all areas of daily life. For many, the heart of this well-being is the family.

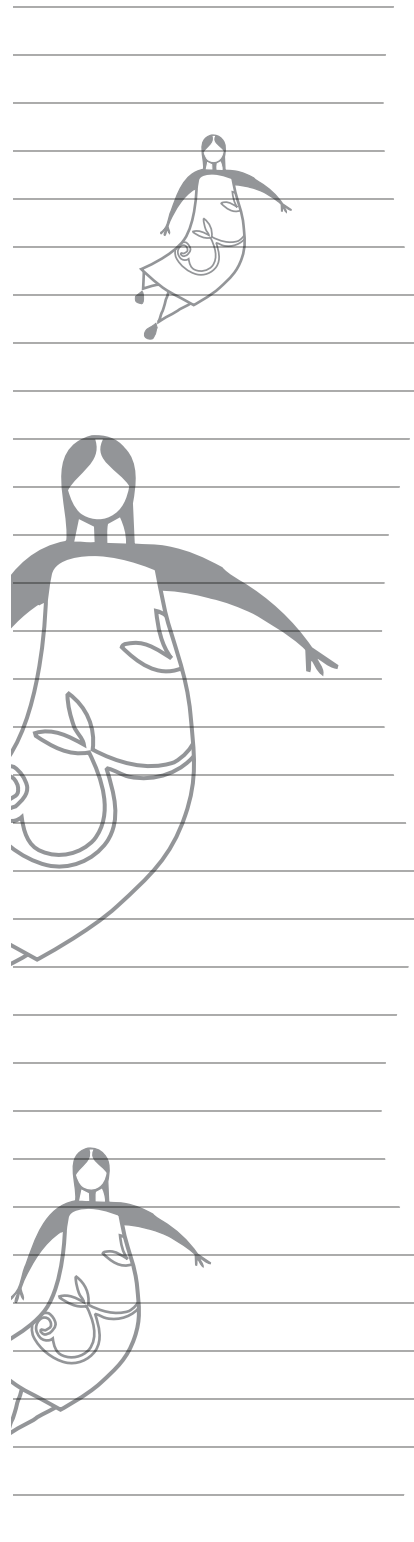
Suggested game: The facilitator makes copies of the following chart for each member in the group. Using the 12 points that are suggested, the members work as a group or individually to choose 5 points that are the most important to develop the circle of health, and enter the corresponding figures into the boxes on the right. If all the members answer individually, the facilitator compiles all the results by counting how many times each point has been chosen and then ranking them in order of importance. The results are then discussed by the group. Why was point x more important than point y? Why do these points contribute more to our health? Are there any points in the list which do not contribute to our health? Etc.

Being comfortable with your family	1
Being comfortable with the community	2
Being comfortable with yourself	3
Acting according to your beliefs	4
Acting according to your culture	5
Eating healthy food	6
Being able to go about your daily business (house work, job or other)	7
Listening to the doctor	8
Listening to the nurse	9
Not being sick	10
Being able to make your own decisions	11
Being able to take care of yourself	12

Note to facilitator: The appendix gives an example of a health circle from a community where several people filled out the questionnaire. You can use it as a basis for analyzing the results obtained by members of your group.



2. What role does the family play regarding health?



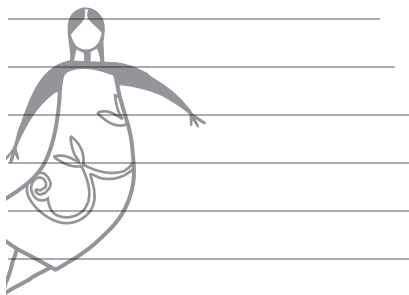
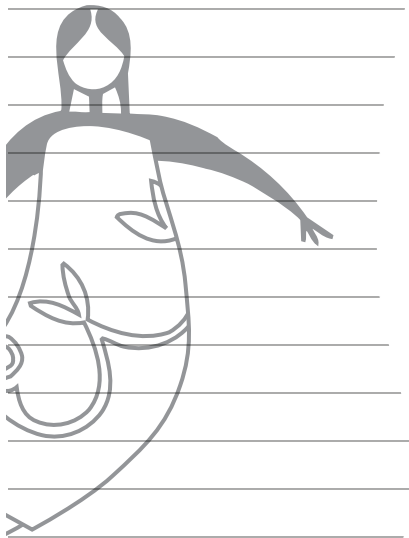
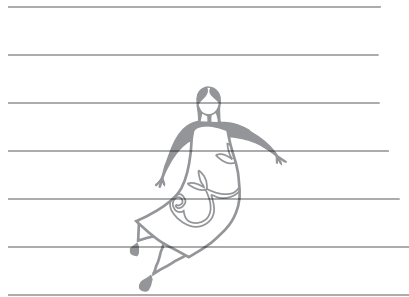
The family can provide a reason for living, be the source of feelings of usefulness and esteem in the eyes of others, be fulfilling through the love and the joy of life that it gives. On the other hand, it can be fraught with conflict and belittlement, or it can cause feelings of sadness and powerlessness. But as a person whose identity and potential are unique, the individual is central to her own well-being. For many, particularly women and the younger generations, health means being comfortable with one's identity. Persons should be able to take care of themselves and to be master of their own life. This means that everyone has the fundamental right to decide their own existence and the direction they wish to follow. Apart from the support and the love that we expect from our family, we are, to a certain extent, responsible for our growth and for our choices. More than a responsibility, the lessons that any man or woman learns from life are a privilege, and are learned either through happiness or suffering.



Photo : Claudette Fontaine. coll. M.E.Q.



3. What does it mean to be sick?

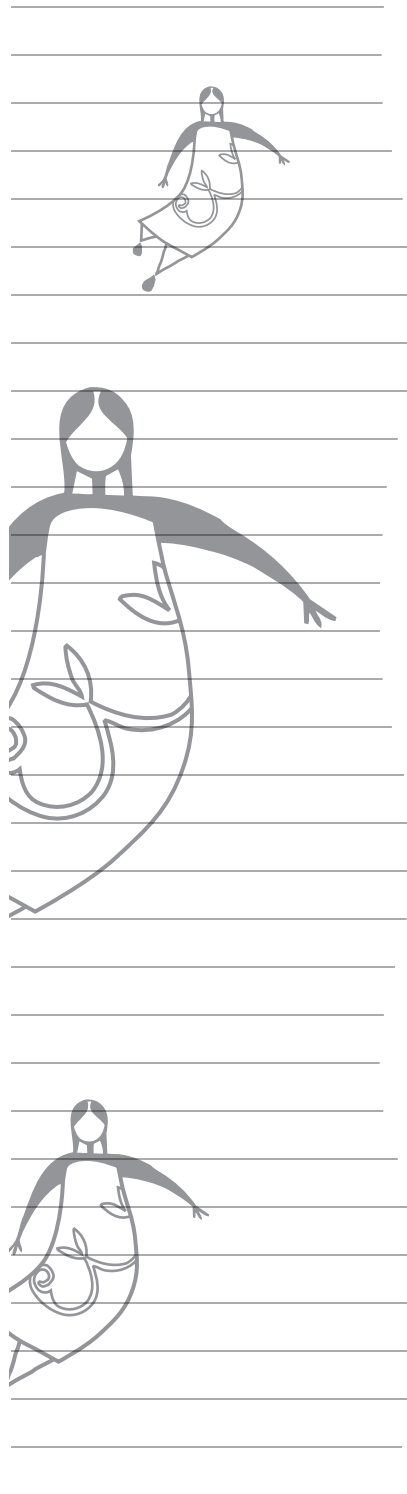


Illness, as described by doctors, strikes at the heart of the joy of living and the well-being that many have succeeded in building and in creating for themselves, based on their “tools” and the circumstances specific to their lives, their family and their community. Most of the time, they live the experience of being diagnosed as diabetic in solitude, and the revelation of their diagnosis will either confirm or surprise an inner intuition. This revelation leads to immediate acceptance or rebellion, as well as to a mass of fears and a feeling of powerlessness, or perhaps a renewed ardour in the desire to take good care of themselves and of others. Whatever our immediate reaction is to the startling announcement that we have diabetes, that it is serious and that it is for life, the way we come to incorporate the news into our personal lives is the determining factor. The diagnosis of diabetes is in some ways a point of no return. But does that mean that one has to really say goodbye to one’s happiness and health? Or rather is it not possible to reconcile health, when it is thought of in terms of the individual’s well-being, anchored in the family, with the new care that must be taken of the body and the new habits that must be adopted, and which might also be a source of happiness?



I wasn't expecting it

4. How did each person in the room find out that she was diabetic?



Many women are greatly troubled after been diagnosed as diabetic. Often, they'll come to the dispensary, finding themselves afflicted with an inexplicable fatigue, which prevents them from carrying out their usual activities; they have intense and constant thirst that they do not seem to be able to quench. Then, after a few tests and after long moments of uncertainty, when they get hardly any explanations of what is going on, they must face a verdict that is as harsh as it is surprising. Sometimes they remember with irony that at the time they couldn't believe that they were stricken with diabetes, because it was always something that only happened to others:



He told me, "You're diabetic, you'll have to take a test tomorrow, and we'll have to take a blood sample." I could hardly believe it. Goodness, diabetes... Indeed, at the moment, I thought, "It can't be possible, I can't have diabetes." I always thought that diabetes only happened to other people.



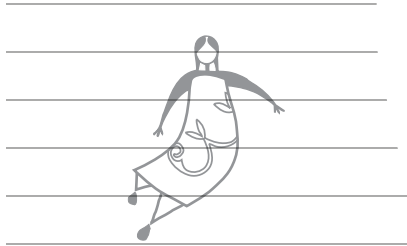
They came in the morning and jabbed me, and said, "Here's your shot." I asked "For what?" I wasn't told I was diabetic. The doctor came in, and he said "Your sugars will have a..." I asked, "Sugars for what? What do you mean?" I didn't know what he meant about diabetes. I didn't know I was diabetic. So three days later, they came in and they gave me this bottle of sweet stuff to drink. Glucose product they call it. They gave me that, and I asked the doctor, "What are you doing to me?" It took two, three days before they told me that I was diabetic, how my sugar levels were and about the diet. And then I said, "Not me."

Persons might also find out they are diabetic through unexpected circumstances, for example when they give a blood sample for a different reason or if they go in for minor surgery.



I was just waiting to be told

5. Did you ever think it would happen to you, that you would get diabetes?

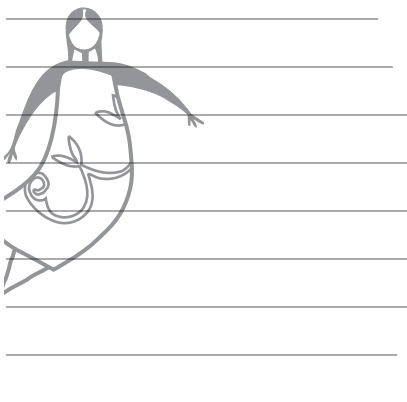


As much as the news might come as an unexpected shock to the natural order of our lives, it may also come as something that was in our mind, that we worried about and feared.

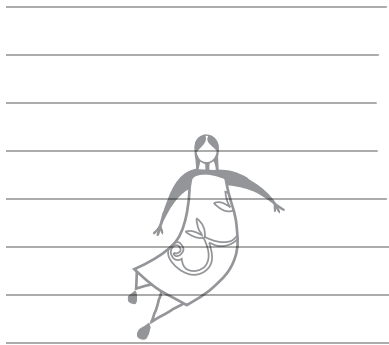
6. Could you have avoided getting diabetes?



Some women, in fact, are wholly convinced that sooner or later they will get diabetes as something which is unavoidable. Or perhaps they experience symptoms which they cannot help but associate with the symptoms experienced by other diabetic persons they know.

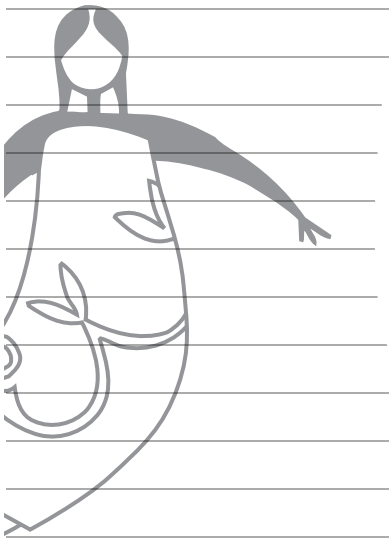


7. How did you react to finding out that you were diabetic?



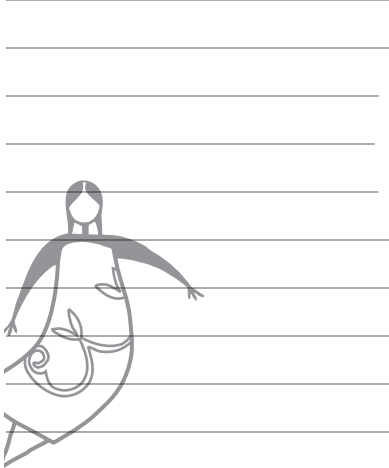
Sometimes it is tempting to delay the moment of the official diagnosis; otherwise they feel their life would be too disrupted:

I didn't react at all, because I think I was expecting to get diabetes. I saw my grandfather suffer from it, and so I thought, "We've all got a pretty good chance of getting it." It was almost as if I was expecting it.



• How did you react, when you were told that you had diabetes?

• I took it pretty well, and it didn't really upset me. I knew I was going to become diabetic. I heard a lot of people say they were diabetic and I knew I would be too. We took the capillary glycemia test at the dispensary. When I was told that I would get diabetes within a few years, I didn't think I would be able to handle it well. I knew that I would never be cured, once I developed diabetes. I read in a book that diabetes cannot be cured. But I did take it pretty well, and it didn't bother me that I had it. I was just waiting to get it.

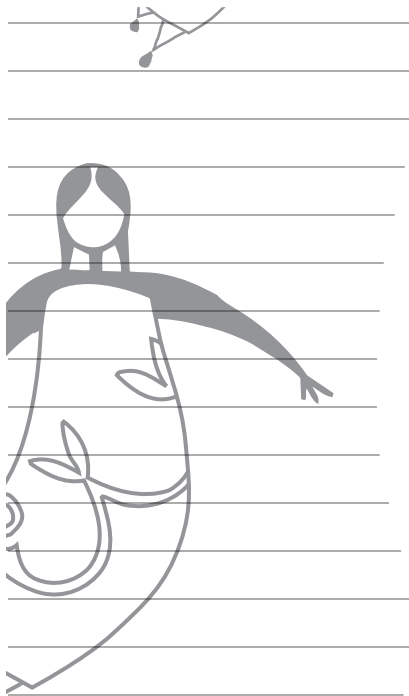


I didn't want to be subjected to any medical tests. But I said to myself that I would have to take them sooner or later. I didn't want to hear the doctor say, "You have a disease, you have a serious disease."



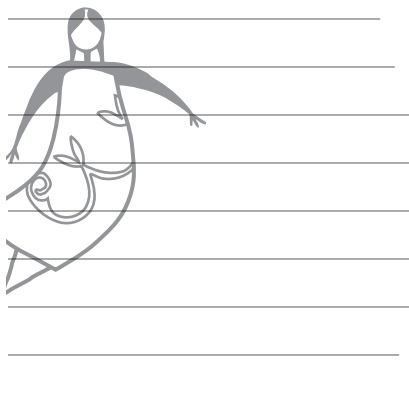
Others have to accept the news too

8. How did you tell your family and friends that you were diabetic?
9. What was their reaction?
10. How did you deal with their reaction?



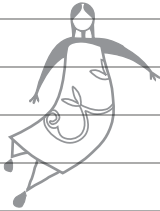
If the announcement of the diagnosis occurs in private, the reality that a woman is suffering from this chronic disease must one day be communicated to her close ones. How will they react to the news? The diabetic, after all, is by no means the only one who will be affected by the diagnosis. Whether her family reacts to the news with understanding and support, or indifference and even hysteria, the diabetic woman will no longer be the same and she will not receive the same level of support as before. For women who have managed to summon up the strength and determination to face their condition, the truth is that they rarely obtain the reaction that they probably hoped to get from their close ones. What they usually get are guilt trips, indifference and trivialization of the disease. Much more rarely are they encouraged to take control of the situation. The initial response of their family is often indicative of the support it will or will not give them:

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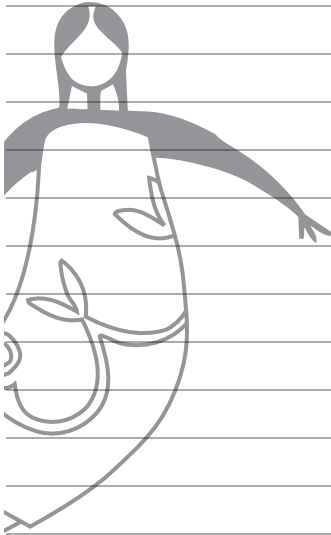




It seems that when people find out that you're diabetic, it means nothing to them. Here's an example: I think I was the first member of my family to get diabetes. It didn't really bother my mother. It was like telling her I had a cold.



There was almost no reaction from other people. Well, it is true that diabetes was almost unknown there at the time. We almost never spoke about it. That's maybe why people weren't surprised. Maybe they didn't think of it as a serious illness.



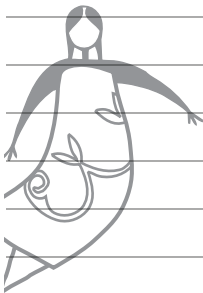
When I learned that I was diabetic, there was no one from my family to help me. That's because they didn't know anything about it. I had to help myself. They didn't give me any help. I never got any support from my family for my diabetes.



Well, my children didn't know anything about diabetes, because we never had to deal with diabetes in our family. My parents didn't have diabetes. And when it happened to me, I guess they thought that it was going to be all over soon, and that I would get over this crisis. But I didn't.



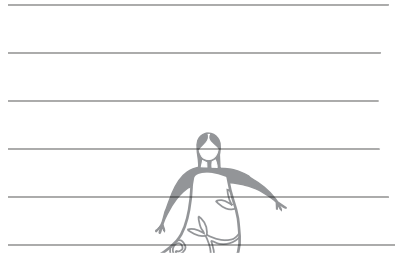
The doctor kept telling me and my sister, "Your mother and your father, they both have it and you'll get it too." The only thing my family had said was, "All you have to do is watch your diet, that will control it."



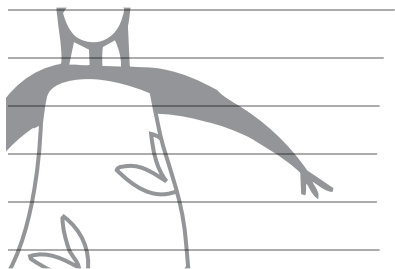
My family helped me a lot. I thought it was really terrible, then my daughter said, "Cut it out Mom, you're still alive." Then sometimes they would just say, "Quit it." That's all I needed. I needed someone to talk to me like that, because I felt like a victim. I was making myself sick by not accepting that I had diabetes.



Fear and Rebellion



11. How does it feel, knowing that there is no cure for diabetes?



12. Were you afraid at the beginning?
Did you rebel?

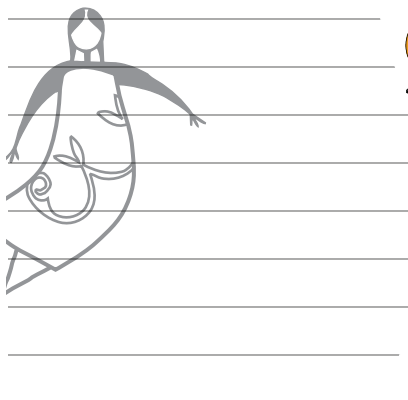


Whether expected or not, a diagnosis of diabetes leaves something like a “lump in the throat” for a long time. The woman is dispossessed of her body, which is subjected to tests and prescriptions of all kinds. Sometimes the body refuses to comply and throws a wrench into the works of life, which was already hard enough, and from which happiness, always fragile at best, could vanish at any moment. Some women feel that they cannot cope.

They want to negotiate with the disease, and try to reach a deal so that it won't be “for life.” Or they may totally reject it, at least for the time being. And even if they do manage to understand that diabetes is for life, they might also see it - momentarily - as a death sentence - death of what they always enjoyed doing, eating, giving, sharing with loved ones. The verdict of diabetes suddenly confines them to the sidelines of “real” life.

Yet amidst these admissions of fear settling into the heart, amidst the fear of being “guilty” of the condition they are suffering from, amidst the pure and simple rage, there begin to emerge the first signs of the motivation and strength that will move them forward and help them regain control of their lives.

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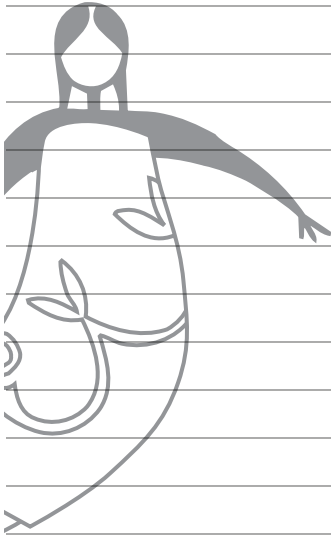
At the beginning I had infection, and it wouldn't go away. They gave me medicine; it still wouldn't go away. Then they sent me to the hospital for a blood test, and my sugars were up to fourteen. And I talked to them, and they said it was diabetes. And I started crying, and I got scared that day. They said, “you have diabetes, you have to take medicine.” I thought I was going to take needles right away.



- *Every time I saw the doctor, he said, “You have to be careful. You can die from this.”*
- *What effect did that have?*
- *It made me sad, I was sad.*



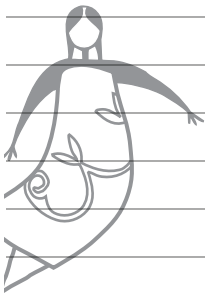
When I learned the news, I didn't want to accept it. I was in shock. And I was also a little mad, upset. For me not to be able to do my activities, that really upset me. I couldn't do things that required a lot of energy at that time, because I would break out into a huge sweat.



- *The doctor told me, “You will have to take some tests.”*
- *Did you find out immediately that you were diabetic?*
- *Yes, I found out immediately. I said, “It must be fault. I wasn't paying attention these last few months.”*



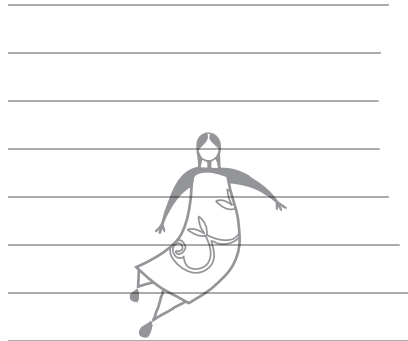
It did affect me. I was afraid, I was thinking about my children and about my mother who had just died from diabetes, and also about my sister who was in pretty poor condition because of it. It made me think. At that time, I was really not very well informed about this disease. That's why I was so afraid. The nurse helped me a lot. I spoke to her and told her I was afraid. I thought it was like cancer. When I first found out, I was really upset. My children were very young and I was afraid of dying young and leaving young children behind me. That was really on my mind, but at least I still had my husband who helped me and supported me a lot.



They told me it might not be pregnancy diabetes. But at the bottom of my heart I was hoping it would be that, because it meant I wouldn't have it for my whole life.



Diabetes never comes unaccompanied



Diabetes also means pills, needles, diets, exercise. It puts a big damper on the joys of life. For the person who is tired, who experiences thirst and who just goes in for an ordinary consultation, and then finds out that she is diabetic, it's a major shock. But in addition to that, she gets as a bonus: a "subscription" to pills, needles, a permanent diet and a general upheaval to her regular habits. Accepting this state of things, although crucial, is not easy.

13. What is courage?

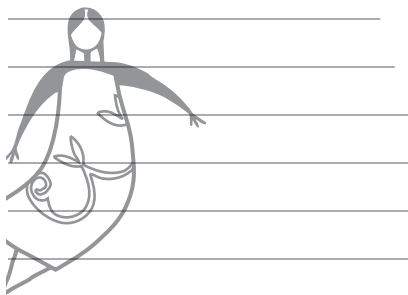
14. Do you need courage when you learn that you are diabetic?

It requires courage and it can takes a lot of time. But on their journey, these women sometimes find support from their family or a particular health professional.



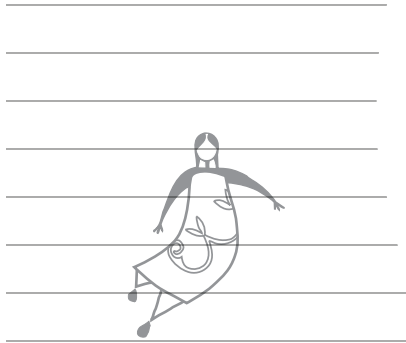
When I was told, "You're diabetic," how do you think I reacted? By saying, now I've got diabetes, what do you want me to do? The only thing I did ask was, "Will I have to take pills?" I was given a prescription for pills, but I couldn't manage to take them. It took me a week or two before I persuaded myself to do it. That's because I had asked the question: "Once I start taking them, is it for life?" I was told yes. And I just couldn't resign myself to the idea that I would be taking them for life.

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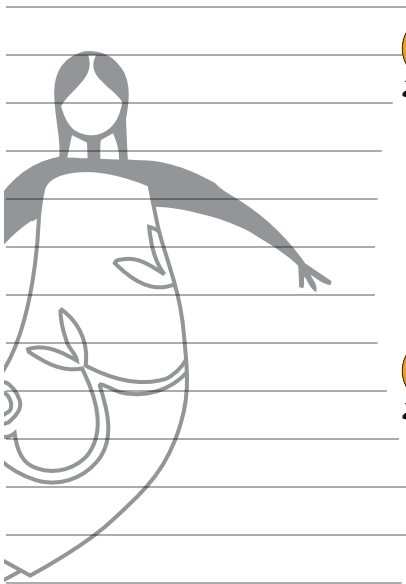


I was wondering and trying to inquire here and there... till I got hold of the doctor... And practising to take the needles with an orange, and crying at the same time. And juice was coming out at both ends. It's really scary when you don't know anything about diabetes and then all of a sudden it hits you. And then there are rules, and regulations. When you have this, your diet, everything, your whole life changes. Everything changes. Then you think about your family, how they're going to take it. And it's





something that's so terrible, I don't want to scare them too, you know. So I asked myself, "What am I going to do? I'm going to learn more about it. In spite of it all." And I didn't like the idea, but I had to live with it and that's the hardest thing to do, to live with something that you don't know anything about. But I went to see my doctor, and I asked him all kinds of questions and he showed me this film. And that helps a lot, when you see something right in front of you. And this is going to be my life from now on.



I met my doctor who told me that it did happen to women in my age range. He said if I wasn't careful, it could get worse, that I might have to administer my own needles, and so on. At first I was afraid. I was also told that if I wasn't careful, I might also become paralyzed and that I could also develop heart problems...



The first thing I thought was, "I've got to get hold of myself." I didn't immediately go into denial. I said to myself, "I'll live with it, I'll try to help myself and be careful." I got a grip on myself. I met the doctor, then I met the dietitian. She gave me a good explanation of diabetes and of how to control it by myself. She really helped me a lot.

In reading these testimonials, we see how much courage it took for these women to accept their new reality.

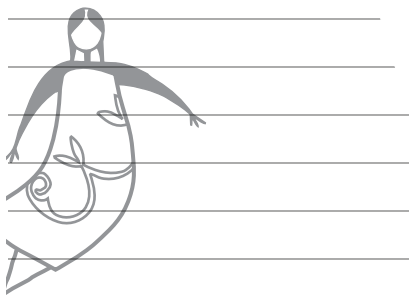
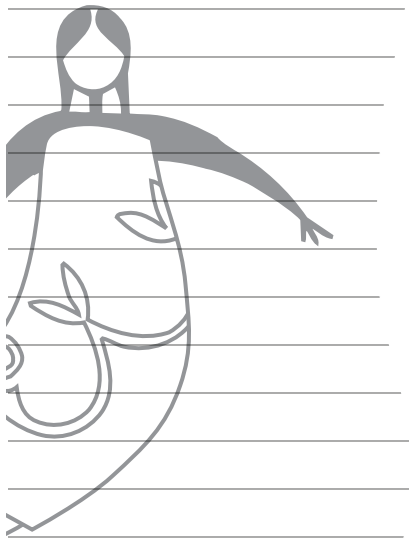
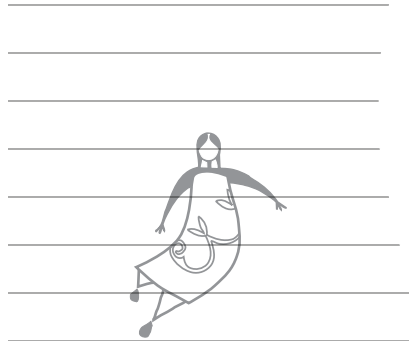
15. Did you get information and support at the beginning?



It is only after they got over some basic fears that they were able to roll up their sleeves, seek help for themselves - and take the initiative to find for themselves any available information about this disease, so that they could make the choices that were right for them.



We're still healthy - we just have diabetes

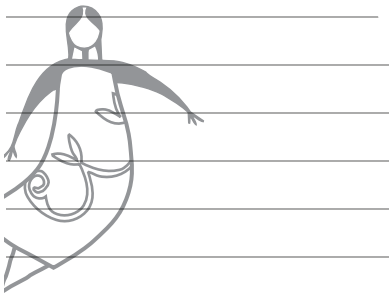
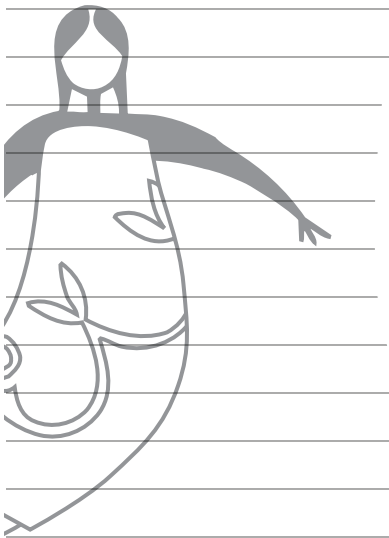
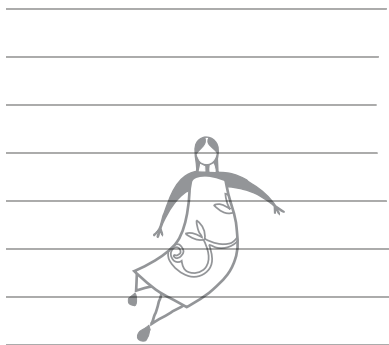


How does one go beyond the diagnosis, and move from rebellion and sadness to acceptance - which is not the same thing as resignation, but is closer to action, independence, and renewed self-esteem and love? After having consulted the full range of health professionals, attended meetings, workshops, etc., a woman may think that she might just as well be listening to a wall and that she is riding a roller coast between her desires and the risks of diabetes, as she explores the limits of what she can and what she cannot do, of what she can and cannot eat. She lives in constant fear that sooner or later, the whole thing will blow up in her face. How does one surpass this denial of the new realities being dictated to a woman by her body?

The women we met told us that the strength to deal with the disease had to come above all from one's self, that it was up to each person individually to love herself enough to accept her situation, to forgive herself for her slight failures and to congratulate herself for the small and the big victories as she moved forward, to love herself just as she was to give herself the best possible chance of beating the disease. Acceptance is above all an individual matter; there are many ways to get there, but there is no magic recipe.



16. What is your philosophy of life?
(what is the flame, drive or principle of life?)

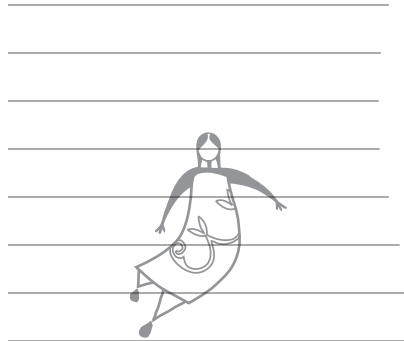


Here are a few positive messages from people who overcame their diabetes, words imbued with an inspiring philosophy of life for all women, whether they are diabetic or not.

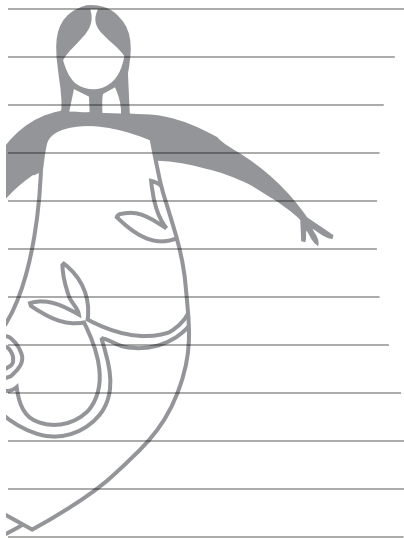
I accepted diabetes right away. I believe in God and prayer, and that helped me accept it. But it has to come from within you. You have to decide what you're going to put in your mouth. It's up to us individually. No one can tell you, "Well, you're going to have a carrot or eat this way, or eat that way." Nobody can do that; it has to come from within. And that's how it's been for me. No matter how much weight you lose, once you have diabetes, you're diabetic for life, and that's something you have to accept. And, for me it's better to accept it sooner rather than later because the future complications... can get you in quite a mess later on.

It's something that is going to stay with you the rest of your life. It's not like a toothache, it's sore and you go to a doctor and have it removed, and it's gone. When you get diabetes, then you really smarten up, and say, "Wow, this is my situation now. I never thought I would get diabetes. Now I have it so I have to do something about it." And that something you have to do as an everyday thing. It's just like getting up, getting dressed and going out, it's the same thing everyday. It's very dangerous but it's not all that dangerous when you take good care of yourself. Knowing what do is a big help. The faster you learn to accept these things that are happening to you, the faster it's going to be okay for you. I think the best thing for a person to do, when you learn of your situation being a diabetic, is to accept it. And once you accept it, you have this willingness of mind to work with it, and prolong your life by helping yourself.

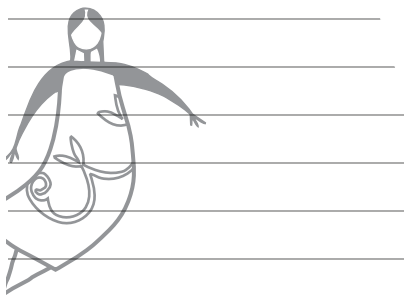
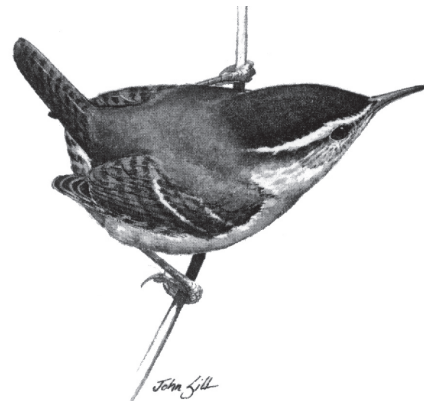




We're still healthy. It's just that we have diabetes. I feel like a healthy, normal person. How should I put it? It's become part of my life. I accept the diabetes - it's just there. Even if I take all my medication, it's always present. However, I am healthy, I've got my diabetes under control, as long as I take my medication. But it's still there.



Today, I began to understand this illness. I have to live with diabetes, I'm all right with it but when I begin to feel its effects, I know it's because I haven't kept to my diet.



Suggested questions for facilitators

1. What does it mean to be in good health?
2. What role does the family play regarding health?
3. What does it mean to be sick?
4. How did each person in the room find out that she was diabetic?
5. Did you ever think it would happen to you, that you would get diabetes?
6. Could you have avoided getting diabetes?
7. How did you react to finding out that you were diabetic?
8. How did you tell your family and friends that you were diabetic?
9. What was their reaction?
10. How did you deal with their reaction?
11. How does it feel, knowing that there is no cure for diabetes?
12. Were you afraid at the beginning? Did you rebel?
13. What is courage?
14. Do you need courage when you learn that you are diabetic?
15. Did you get information and support at the beginning?
16. What is your philosophy of life? (what is the flame, drive or principle of life?)





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