



Women diabetics and the community



4



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Theme 4: Women diabetics and the community

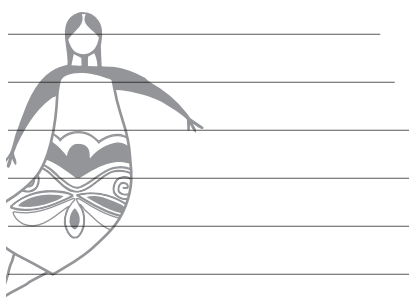
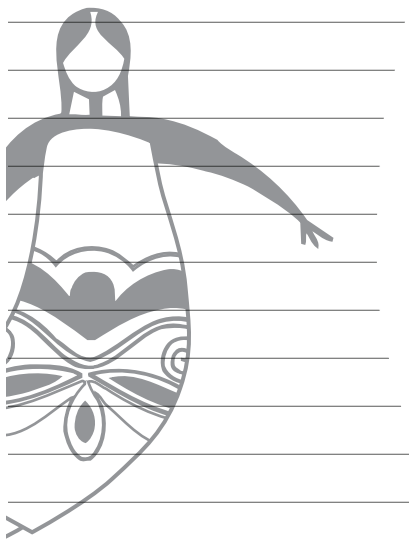
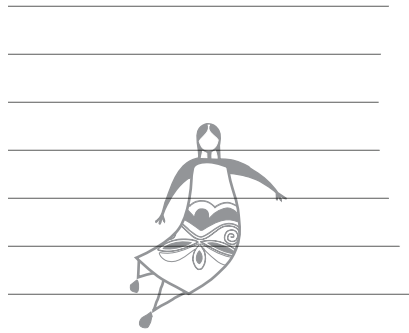


Marianne found out she was diabetic when she was quite young, just under thirty. She didn't believe it and was discouraged by the thought of living all her life with diabetes. Being naturally averse to taking medication, she dreaded having to take all the prescriptions. The only way to avoid them was by controlling her diabetes, so she made the decision, for herself, to watch what she ate. Marianne learned to recognize her body's reactions and most of all to respect her needs.

Having teenagers of her own, it was easy for her to include her new menus in the household, even if that meant eliminating desserts and boiling the meat. True, her husband and children were very concerned about her health and welfare, and encouraged her not only with words but also with actions. They encouraged her to take walks and often accompanied her. The same cannot be said about the rest of her family and the community, whose sarcasm was sometimes hard to bear. She admits that she can be hurt by people's comments, and that she sometimes even forgets to control her eating habits. She is aware of the rumours going around about her and the innuendo in the comments people make. For example, if she walks on the streets alone, people will say she is trying to meet other men. As hard as it may be, she tries to forget about the comments and to stay focused on her health. She admits, though, that she sometimes stays inside because she doesn't have the strength to face such comments. Not only do people point at her when she walks but people who've noticed she has lost weight will frequently ask her if she is sick. And she is happy not to wear large sizes anymore. She will always remember the only person who made an encouraging remark: "You look good, you look younger, you've lost weight." The pressure can be so great that she sometimes wants to leave the community.



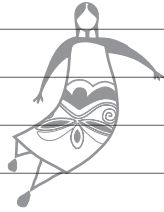
She encourages herself by thinking that nothing should stop her from taking her walk. She has a fundamental right to take care of herself, and that includes going out. Where does her strength come from? She accepts the challenge of succeeding. She finds her motivation in thinking of what would happen to her if she paid attention to what others might say or think, rather than take care of herself, even if it is difficult at times. When she gets discouraged she seeks help, from two friends whom she really trusts and from a dispensary where there are different resources - a nurse with whom she gets along, a psychologist she consults when she needs to. She sees consulting these people as a victory because she used to live shut in on herself. Sometimes she panicked and didn't know what to do. Her children are always on her mind, and they too are a source of strength too. She knows that if she doesn't take care of herself, she will have neither the strength nor the courage to take care of them. In return, they encourage and support her in her diet and exercise. When she doesn't want to go out, they tell her go, and that is often the only push she needs.




Our communities are not like the big city. They have only a few streets and everyone knows where everyone lives. Few people work, so it is natural for them to spend all their time talking with their friends and watching what other people do. There are usually only two or three last names in the whole community, which means that the community is home to big families who have a common past that goes way back. Whether a native community is close to or far from a big city, it is isolated in some way. Whether you have to travel hundreds of kilometres, cross a river or cross a street to find a white town, the natives are labelled by their neighbours and vice versa. When you meet a white person, you can feel different.




1. What are the benefits of living in your community? What are the drawbacks?

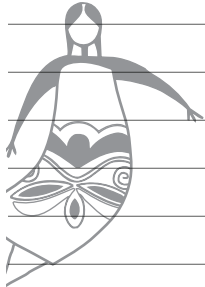




Living in a small community offers many advantages to its inhabitants. You feel at home, people speak your language, and you can practice activities linked to your traditions. Often our whole family, from parents to children to uncles and aunts, live there, and that gives us a feeling of belonging. However, chances are pretty good that tensions and disagreements will arise from all the talking and constant watching of others. Small clans and groups are created and make reconciliation difficult or almost impossible, even if the original disagreement has been long forgotten. If the feuding persons are from two different families, the village could even become divided and remain trapped in a cycle of endless gossip.

2. Does the community help make mutual aid possible?

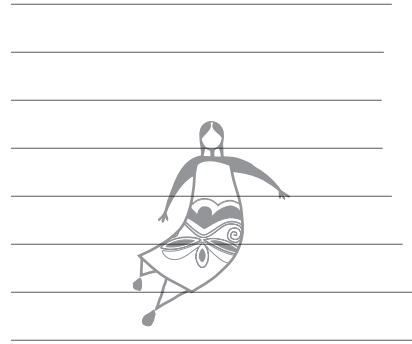




Finally, even though community life fosters mutual aid, communication and a sense of belonging, people can treat the slightest events as major crises, thereby creating difficult situations that poison everyday life. What link can be made here with diabetes? There are several links between diabetes and a community...

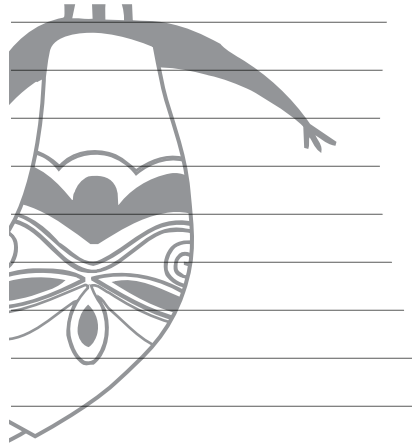


Changing your Eating Habits Within the Community



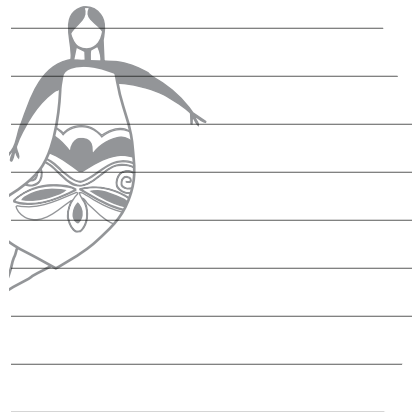
Women who are now middle-aged have gone through a great many changes in their eating habits. Some of them, when they were young, had parents who fished, hunted and trapped to support the family. So they ate almost only fish, forest game and berries, prepared in traditional ways, as well as store-bought goods like sugar, tea, and flour to make the bread. It was a full life, a full-time job that required a great deal of energy (hunting, travelling by snow shoes, upkeep of the camp, picking berries, fishing, etc.).

3. Is the food the same today as before?



Little by little, First Nations people settled in the communities we know today. And as they did, their eating habits also changed. We still eat traditional food but not as often as we once did. Hunting and fishing are also practised in a different way. If snow-shoeing was once the way to travel, today snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles invade the trails. A lot of women blame the spread of diabetes in their communities to the switch from food that the forest provided to store-bought goods, and to the forsaking of activities that meant the energy from the food consumed would be burned.

Store-bought food became more and more appreciated. Chocolate, candies and soft drinks were a real treat, because we usually couldn't afford them. But as time went by, more and more people did have enough money for this kind of food, and they weren't going to deprive themselves of any of it.



Four horizontal lines for writing.



When I went on my own, I had all the pop in the world to drink, and I drank it! I think I drank two litres a day. And then I had chips, pop, whatever I wanted to eat. I would go to a restaurant and eat.

- 4. What foods are rich and fatty?
- 5. What foods are healthy?

Large outline of a woman in traditional dress with horizontal lines for writing.

Some foods became synonymous with wealth and well-being. They are now part of the eating habits that are natural to us. Like many habits, what we've been eating since our childhood brings us a feeling of comfort and satisfaction that may be difficult, at first, to find in a salad...

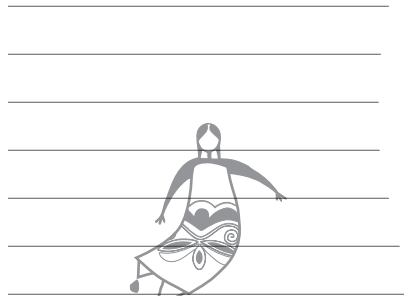


I can't stand salad. I take the lettuce out of my hamburger, I hate it so much. I will eat salad from time to time, but don't count on me to eat it four times a day. Maybe once a week, that's enough for me. But I could eat bread every-day. Bread and potatoes, that would be enough for me. Or molasses. Some times I'd like to have something fatty, with home-made bread and then some sugar, brown sugar. There are lots of things that we always had at home when we were young, which we can no longer eat.

Large outline of a woman in traditional dress with horizontal lines for writing.

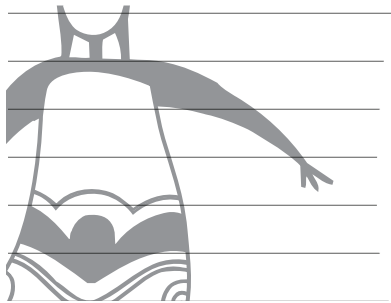
Not only do we have individual habits, but the community also shares ways of preparing and enjoying a meal. A lot of women talk about fast food, and the habit members of their community have got into of frying their food, eating chips, chocolate and drinking soft drinks in front of the television.





We don't exercise and we eat fast foods. That's what I see. No-one wants to take time to do things properly, like make a meal and get everybody involved. We don't do that anymore. We fry food instead of broiling or boiling it. Everybody's in a hurry. And there's diabetes. Just up there, to grab one of us again! Another victim! I don't know how to stop it.

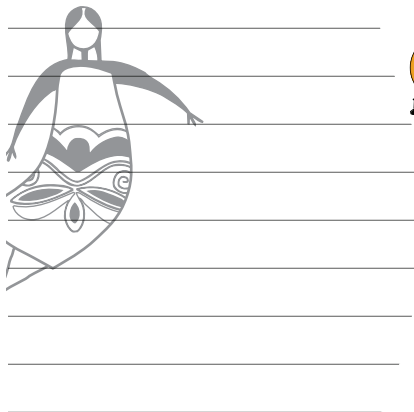
6. Can you socialize with others if you don't eat the same things they do?



We prepare and eat food that make us feel like everybody else. Before we knew what was good and what was bad for our health, we didn't ask ourselves as many questions as we do today. Now, to control our glycemia, we have to follow a diet and that means not as much junk food, not at every meal. No matter what, we won't be eating like everyone else and that can make us feel different, even rejected.

7. What does it mean, to "eat like a white?"

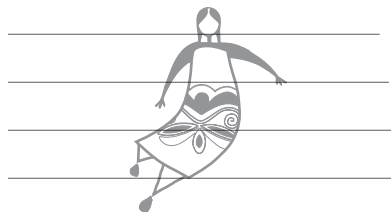
8. Will I become white if I eat like a white?

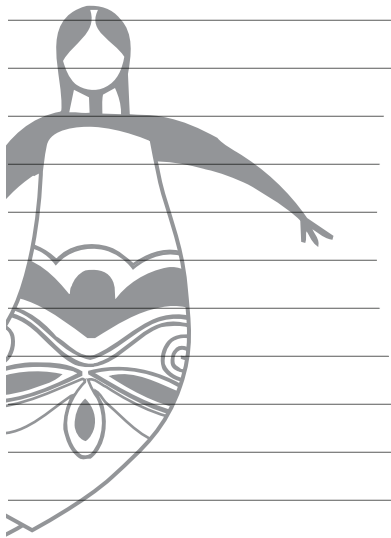


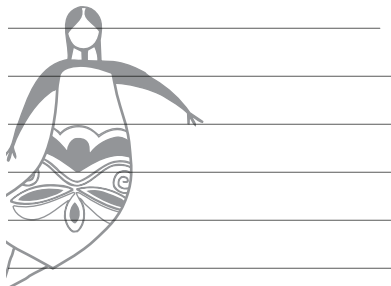
Since I've become aware of what diabetes is, it seems as though I don't like to see my family eat chips every night, when they could be eating a fat-free meal. I can't believe it when I see people eat that way.



9. Are you free to eat what you want at home with your family? In a restaurant?







One problem is that when we're at home, we're more or less free to eat what we want. Our family also may not accept our different eating habits, or we may not want to impose these habits on them. When we go out to the restaurant, the problem is even bigger; we are confronted by what others consider a good meal.

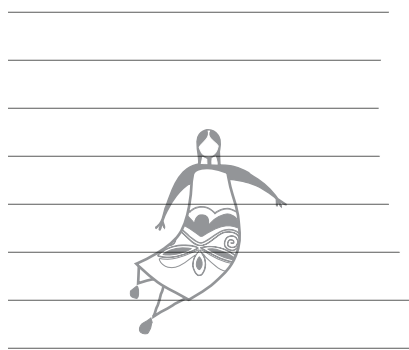


When I first became diabetic, I often went to the restaurant. The people I was with kept saying to me, "Enjoy yourself, have a good meal. Look at us." I always ordered salad., since I was careful from the start. But now, I sometimes have a good meal at the restaurant, but I tell myself that the next day I can't eat that way. That's the way I am. I'm careful.

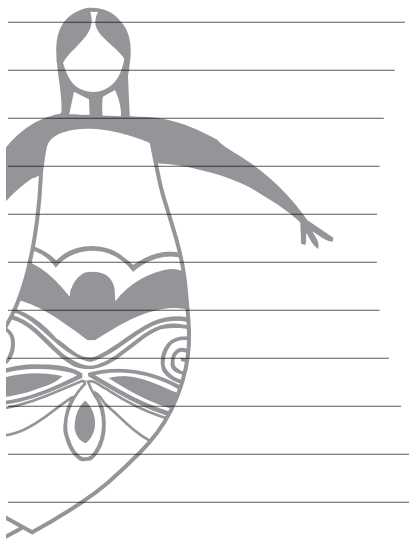
On the one hand, we are tempted to treat ourselves, even more so if our friends encourage us. How do we feel when we're the only one eating salad in a group of people? We feel a little left out, and the other ones may have pity on us. Looking at others' plates will be torture. We won't feel like we're part of the party, or simply that we're enjoying life as it comes, as everyone around us does. We wonder if we are even part of the gang.

On the other hand, sometimes we are surrounded by people who are aware of what good eating habits are. These people encourage us to stick to our diet. Some, however, are so insistent that we feel we are being harassed, that our freedom is being trampled on.

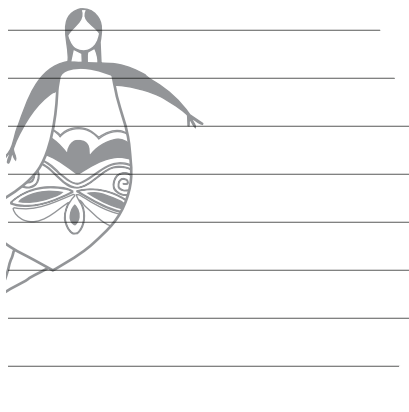




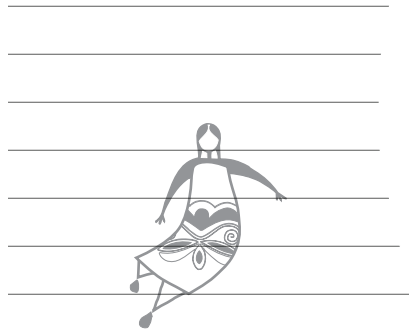
You see, I don't drink any beer much any more. But it's not my neighbour who is going to stop me. I have to make the decision. Even if there are a lot of people behind me, I'm the one on a diet because I'm diabetic. I'm the one with the burden and they're the ones hassling me about your diet, and I'm not even ready to be on one. There are a lot of things going on in my head which people don't think about. Anyway, I noticed that you have to be the one who actually does something to show you can do it.



Occasional encouragement can make you feel good. But the will to change your eating habits has to come from you, if you want the change to be lasting and if you want to be capable of facing the others.



Alcohol



People in many communities believe that drinking poses a major problem. Whether the community is “dry” (alcohol is prohibited) or not, we can get beer or hard liquor one way or another, sometimes at the risk of our lives. Why do we drink so much alcohol? The people of the communities have their ideas about this. It could be because there are no jobs and activities to do in the communities. Another cause of alcohol abuse could be the lack of communication between people, within families and communities. Alcohol becomes a way to escape, a way to kill time and not to think about our problems. Every person in a village can suffer because of alcohol, and perhaps many people consume alcohol because of their problems .

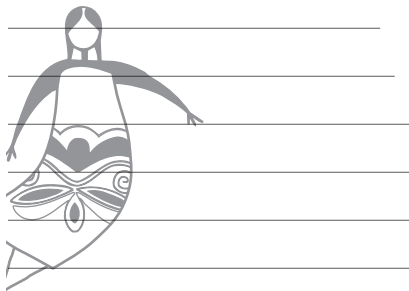
10. Are there any links between alcohol and diabetes?



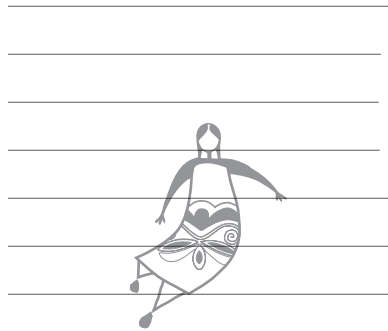
Diabetic women are affected in many ways. If they enjoyed consuming large quantities of alcohol, they know they can't do it anymore. But because alcohol may be a part of their everyday life, they are constantly tempted, or they may even feel isolated or rejected because they don't want to drink.



When you're with people who are drinking and you're not, they'll say, "You're not normal, you should at least have a glass." It seems as if you have to drink.



11. What can be done to lower the consumption of alcohol?



Some women don't drink but see their loved ones drinking. They can experience a lot of anxiety if their children or husbands don't come home at night. They wait in anguish for them to come home. They may even be physically abused, in short, they may go through a living hell.

Sometimes you start crying and nobody is there for you, because your husband is an alcoholic. It's hell. That's the right word to describe that kind of life.



To this anxiety is added the fact that women may have to deal with their families' needs by themselves. Watching their own eating habits and controlling their glycemia is an extra chore that may seem secondary.

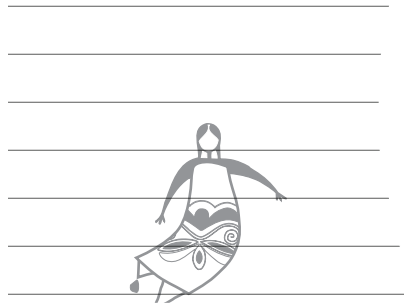
12. Is diabetes effected by our emotions? How?



Numerous women also feel that their sugar level is seriously affected by their emotions.

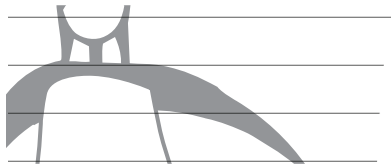


Physical Exercise



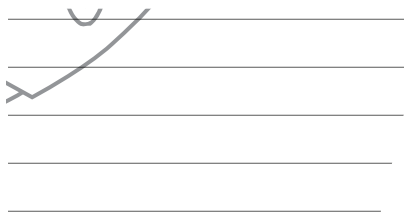
Nurses and doctors often suggest that diabetic women include exercise in their everyday life, to lose weight and control their glycemia when it is too high. They particularly suggest that they go for walks. Why? Because it's good exercise, it doesn't involve over-exertion and it is easy to do. What could be easier than putting your boots or sneakers on and going outside?

13. Can we walk alone on the streets of our village without any trouble?

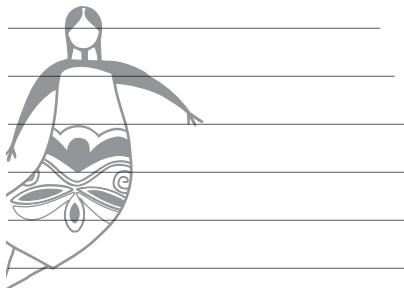


It is unfortunately not always that easy in a community, especially for women. It's not just that women already have a lot to do by taking care of their loved ones; they may run out of time to take care of themselves.

14. What do gossips say about women who walk for exercise?

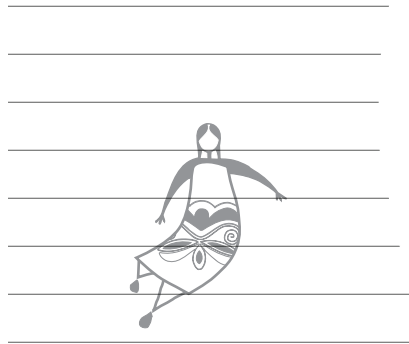


On top of that, they may have to face rumours and whispers if they are seen walking alone in the streets. Because the village is small, all the people know each other and they know what the others are doing. Simply taking a walk can make us an object of surveillance and control, not only by our husbands and children, but also by the whole community.



One day I went I went for a walk because my glycemia was too high. I left my house at nine-thirty. I was walking around the reserve. Every time a snowmobile went by it stopped, and the people on it asked me, "What are you doing?" They asked me what I was doing. And I said, "This is for my health." They want to know everything that's going on.





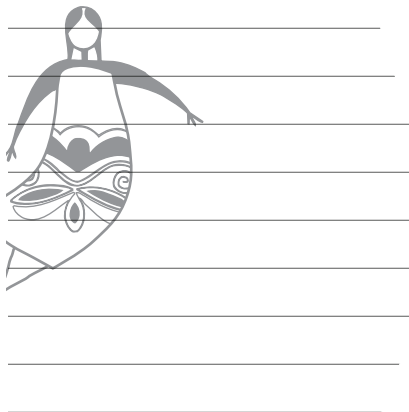
When I went for my walks, I felt good if I was with someone else, either a friend, my husband or my children. Then I felt all right. When I was alone, I asked myself, “What are they going to say about me? Will they invent some stories about me?” and all that. It had me concerned. But today I tell myself that I have to take care of my health. I don’t bother about the others anymore. I figure you have to take care of yourself to feel good

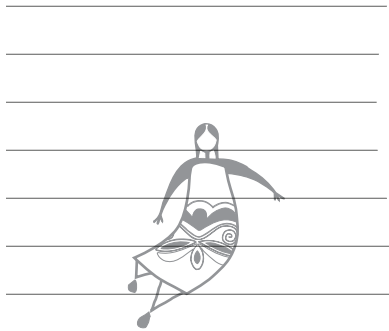
15. What can be done to encourage women to walk, either alone or in groups?



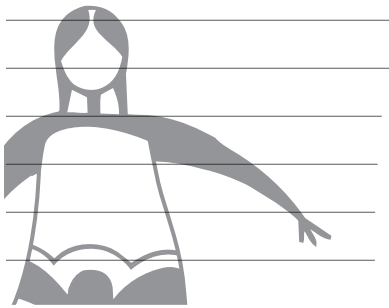
Rumours and whisperings force us to justify taking a walk, when we’re just doing it to be healthy. We hear all sorts of comments, and some of them are even a threat to our marriage, to our family life, to our self-esteem. They make us feel that we’re not part of the community. People may say we’re taking walks to meet a lover, to get a date with another man, or to avoid our chores because we’re too lazy.

When people see somebody walking alone, they all wonder, “Is she looking for a lover? Is she looking for something?” I don’t want to think about what else they might say. I think that in my community we take what people say to heart. We don’t take care of ourselves. We are more concerned about what people might think.





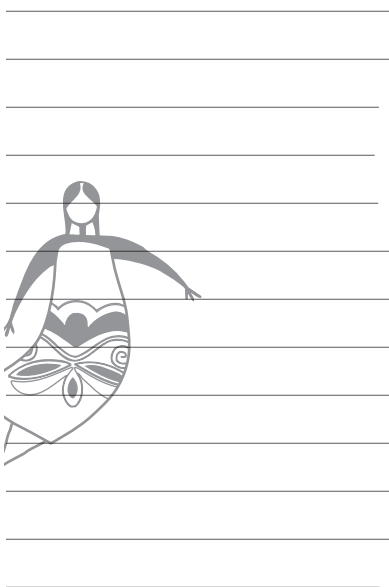
Sometimes, I really want to go for a walk by the river. But I can't go alone. People say, "Oh, what are you doing there. There's nothing there, is someone waiting for you?" I reply: "I'm allowed to go for a walk, I'm not trying to find someone to... I have diabetes, I have to take walks." That's what people say when they see someone out walking.



If a woman walks in the street, some will say, "Oh God, she's already finished her work at home?" We often hear that. "She doesn't do anything, she wastes her time, she doesn't work at home."

These kinds of comments can easily discourage many women from taking walks in their community unless they are going somewhere for a good reason, for example the store or the post office.

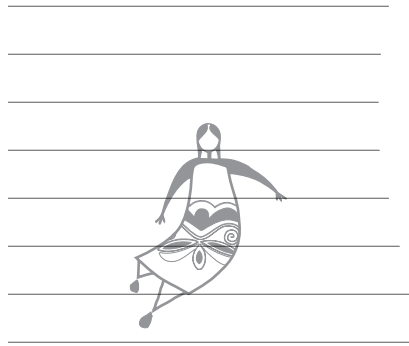
16. What forms of physical activity, other than walking, can be done in the community?



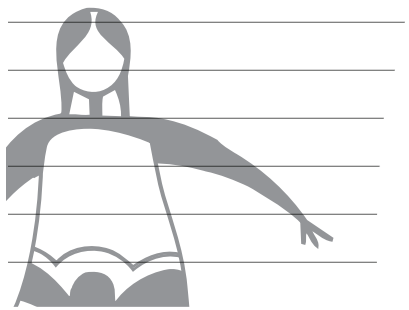
I often go biking or play with my children. I sometimes take my bike and go for a ride. If I meet friends or another person they'll ask, "What are you doing on a bike?" or "You're always with the kids, you still play with kids at your age? You're not getting any younger." I tell them, "I'm still young at heart."

Some women do things other than walk, for example they may like dancing, or cycling, or they may play with their children- and people will still find something to say.



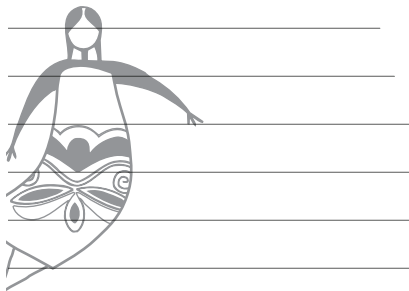


A man once told me, “You’re not supposed to go dancing, you’re too old.” I told him, “I’m doing it for my own good, for my diabetes. You should do the same. If you sit around all the time, you’ll get rusty. I’ve been dancing for a long time and I want to keep on doing it. If you want to stay in bed or sit in the old folks’ home, that’s where you’re going to end up. Either you take my example or you’ll end up in the old folks’ home.” Then he looked at me and said, “I’ll go walking too.”



I was riding around the village on my bike in the evening, alone. The next day people started talking. They started saying I was seeing a married man. That I was going to the other end of the village to meet a married man. I sometimes heard those comments but they didn’t bother me.

17. How do you put a stop to rumours that are preventing you from doing what you want?



People think there’s something suspicious in walking and cycling. Or, if we like dancing or playing with the kids, people say that it isn’t right for people our age. What kind of physical activity is left for a woman to do, besides cleaning, if she doesn’t want to be the victim of rumours? Everything may depend on the attitude we have towards others. And our attitude can protect us from the rumour-mongers. We can’t always act according to what others think is right, and anyway someone will always have something to say about what we do. Isn’t pleasing ourselves and being satisfied with ourselves the most important thing? If we respect ourselves and give importance to our needs, we may even gain other people’s respect.





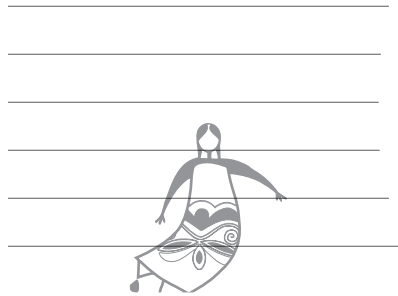
When I started walking around my reserve, I was a lot fatter. And people looked at me through their windows. My daughter told me that when she went for a walk, everyone looked at her and were curious about why she was out. I told her, “If it bothers people, there are a lot of other places they can look.” She also said, “I don’t like dressing this way because everybody thinks it’s ugly.” I answered, “Well if they think it’s ugly, they can look elsewhere. If people don’t agree, they’ll look elsewhere, there’s lots of other things to look at.” That’s what I told my daughter, but even I sometimes found it to difficult to listen to my own advice. I said to myself, “She does it, why don’t I?” That’s what I told her to do it. After that, if people looked through their windows, I waved hello. They moved away from the window. They can say what they want.



Before, when my son came by the house with his friends they said, “Jean-François, is that your mother dancing?” “My son knew what I was doing. He said, “Oh, that’s mom exercising.” He wasn’t bothered by my dancing. He said, “My mother dances because it’s a good exercise and she does it because she’s diabetic.” At that point, kids didn’t pay any attention to what I did. I even went sliding with them. When I have nothing to do in the afternoon I turn up the music and dance with my grand-daughter. At four, when my son gets home from school with his friends and they hear the music he says, “That’s my mother dancing.” They know it’s me dancing and it doesn’t bother them. As soon as I turn off the music they come in.



Relations Between Men and Women



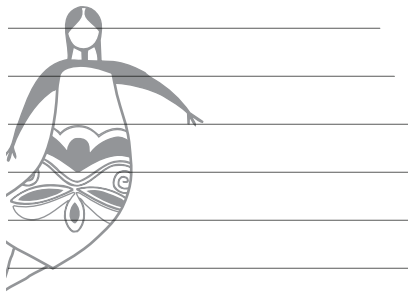
Relations between men and women have a varied impact on diabetic women, for example, their morale, their capacity to take time out for themselves, and the kinds of activity they can do. Relations between men and women refer to both the relationship in a couple and the relationships in the community. The private and public behaviour of men and women has deep roots in the community's history.

18. How are household jobs shared in the home between men and women? Is it possible to change the way they share those jobs?



Sharing the chores is an example. It may be said that in many households, the woman is in charge of the cleaning. Gradually, some men are starting to help with the cleaning and are feeling more responsible for their children's' well-being, not just in a material sense. Women have had to learn to let men take on these extra responsibilities. Men, in turn, have had to allow women to take part in activities that were once exclusively reserved for men. This changing nature of men's and women's roles has to occur through mutual respect and understanding.

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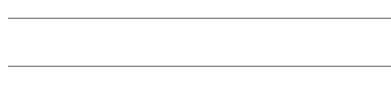
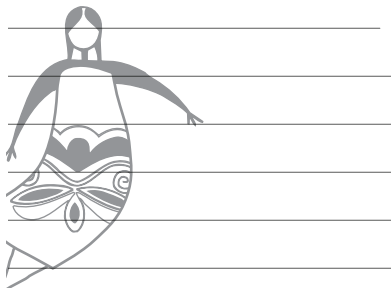
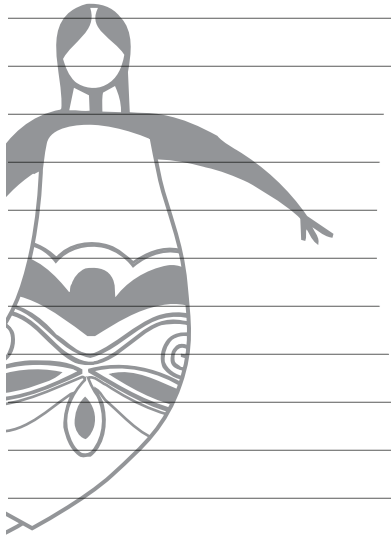
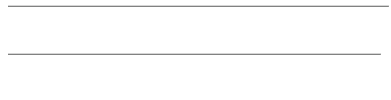


I can go out alone. Sometimes, when my boyfriend and I are talking, I'll say, "I'm going for a walk." And he'll answer, "You can go, I trust you."



- What did your boyfriend tell you?
- *He always encouraged me. He said, "You're beautiful, so don't even think about what others say. Ignore them;, you're the one that matters." He's helped me a lot.*





My husband cooks sometimes. And he puts a lot of fat in the food. Sometimes he boils it. Sometimes, he serves me a good meal, with vegetables and no fat. I appreciate it every time he does that. It's as if he was giving me a bouquet of roses.



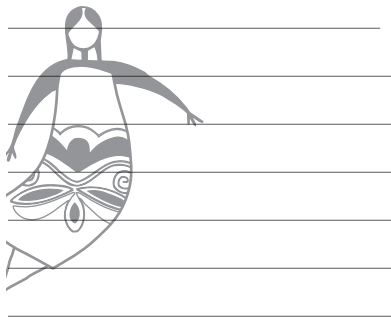
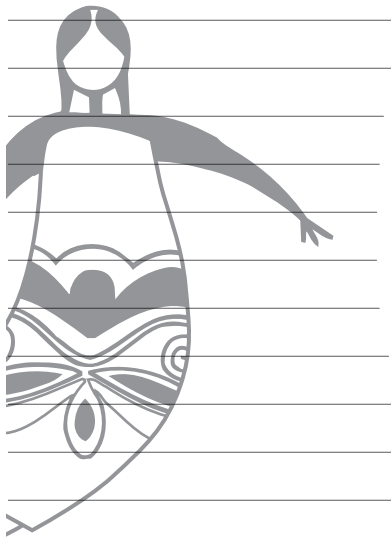
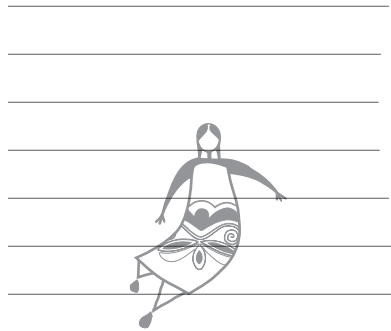
I walk with my husband every evening. And with my daughter too, the one who has diabetes, I ask her to come with us. Now she's the one who asks me to go for a walk. She has diabetes too.



My husband comes with me when I go out. He supports me. Every night, when we're finished work and we've eaten, he asks me, "Do you want to go for a walk?" I say yes, I get dressed and I go out with him. We go around the reserve. Even when he's not there, when he goes to the woods, he tells me, "Go out, go for walks, don't stay home." I say, "There's some rumours sometimes when I go out." He answers, "Take care of your health, of your diabetes."



19. Can our husbands help us in our efforts to control our illness? (weight management, walking, diet)



Some women have a very positive and fulfilling relationship with their partners, who give them support and encouragement. But it's not that way for all women. Problems come up when a man enjoys his freedom to its full extent and leaves all the work for the woman.



A man is more active than a woman. He goes hunting, he has fewer problems, he's not in such a hurry. He doesn't have to stay home; he has a lot less stress. A man has more freedom. He'll go to the woods to relax and there won't be any problem. A woman has more stress. Because of alcohol too. It's mostly the women who deal with the kids when they drink or take drugs. The women keep it all inside. And they want to cry, they want to throw a fit and they want to go out. They feel trapped inside the house. And inside, they're suffering.

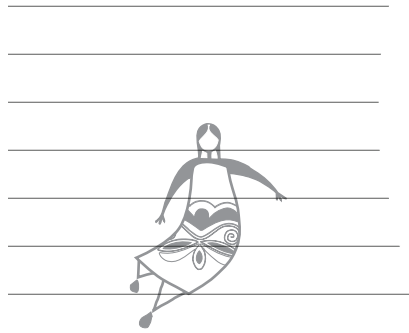


- *Women have more stress, because of alcohol and other reasons. It's mostly the women who deal with it when their kids who drink or take drugs and it hurts them inside.*
- *What kind of pain is it?*
- *A kind of pain that's like anger. We think, "I don't understand, why is this happening to me. Why is it happening this way? I want to get out of it but there are no exits."*

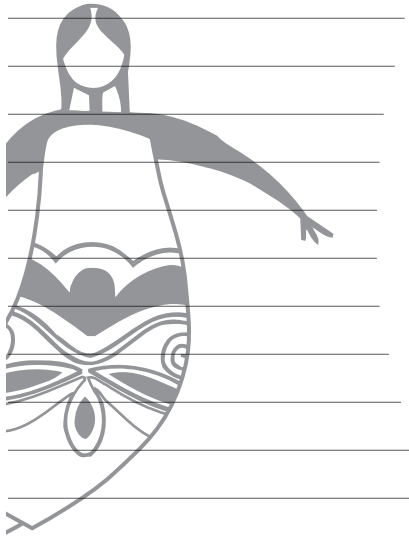


The men don't help the women. I don't believe there's much support between men and women.

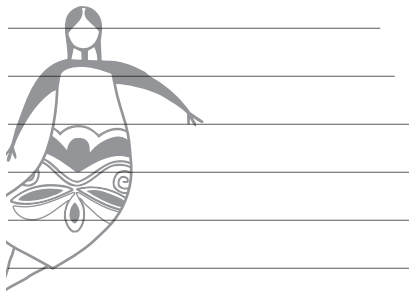




Sometimes I listen to women who have diabetic husbands or boyfriends. And all of a sudden, the women cook for the men. Yet when the wife or the girlfriend is diabetic, no-one is there to try to help them follow her diet. But when it's the men, oh they want to be treated with the right kind of food. It's a lot easier for a man. Every day you see the young men, they say bye, they put their jackets on, and they walk out. They're going out for a walk. Yeah, if they want to, they just put their jackets on and go for a walk. A woman, she has to stay home and do supper and do the dishes and laundry. Everything. She has to clean the house. He comes home, sits on the couch, watches t.v.

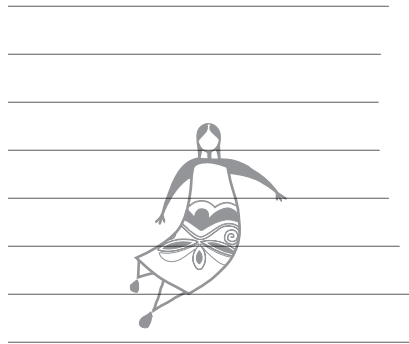


Some women don't get enough support from their partners. For example, the men let the women do the daily chores which are, after all, their lot in life. This creates difficult situations that can poison a relationship. Men, just like women, were raised to act a certain way in the community. It's not easy for a woman to start taking care of herself, and it's no easier for a man to start thinking more about others or to stop drinking. Some people may even say that a man who does that is not a real man any more, that he's lost control of his wife, that he's not part of the gang. The cycle of conflicts, in these situations, can repeat itself over and over.



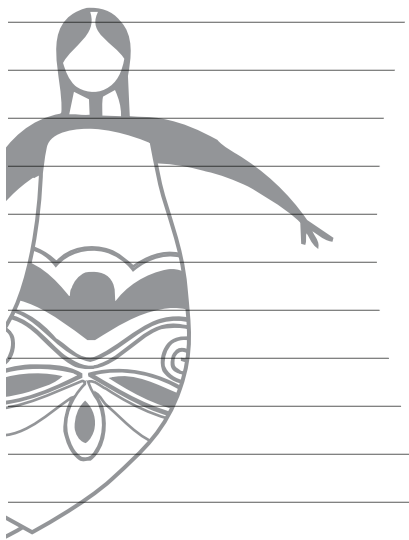
I've known women who were diabetic; I remember one women who couldn't exercise, because her husband wanted her to stay at home. She wanted to go for walks, yet she was afraid of her husband's jealousy.



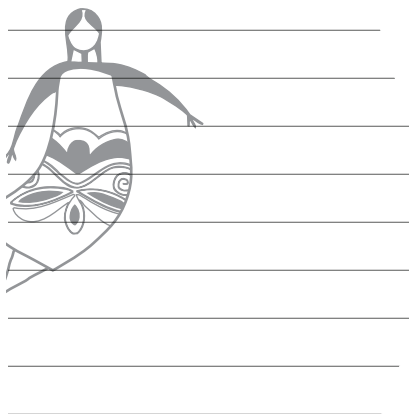


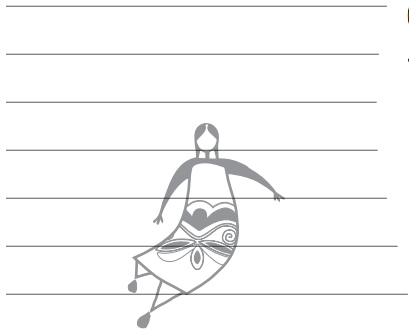
I'm suffocating at home. My husband doesn't want me to do this, to go there, doesn't want me to have friends, wants me to stop seeing a new friend. It's hard. I think the reason a woman can't take care of herself is because her husband doesn't want her to.

- If a woman wants to do physical activity, can she?
- It depends on her husband. If he's authoritarian, she can't.

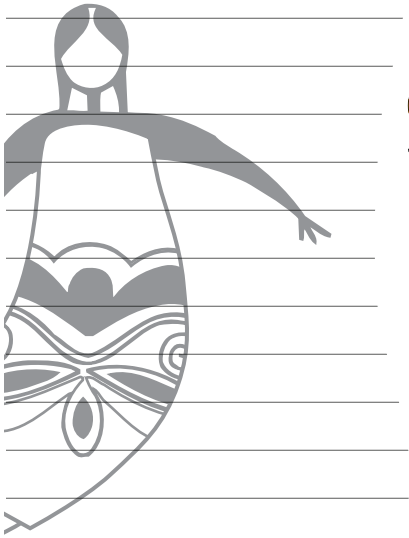


Couples are supposed to share their suffering. But some kinds of suffering you can't show, so you hide them. Other kinds you cry out. Sometimes anger is expressed by violence. From a diabetic woman's point of view, the problems related to being in a couple make getting the health care she needs even more difficult. Difficult relationships with her husband create an extra weight, an extra hassle that turns into a feeling of isolation and often into a lack of support. And this lack of support and love can push us to eat more to fill the void. These problems form a vicious circle that is very hard to break.

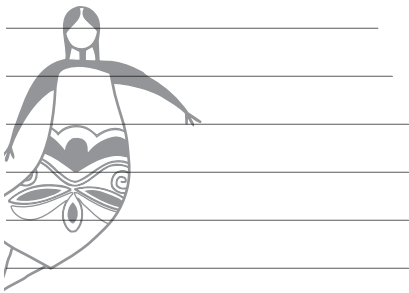




When I got married, my husband didn't let me go see people. He didn't want me to go, he wanted me to stay home. If he told me today, "Make my lunch", I would tell him, "If I don't want to cook, I won't. Nobody can force me. Just find something in the fridge. Serve yourself. I'm going for a walk." I don't feel bad about that. Why should I? Maybe if I had done it before, I would have felt good inside, and closer to my husband. Today we both feel closer to one another, especially since he's stopped drinking. It's as if we were starting a new life together. I would've liked to marry him the way he is now.

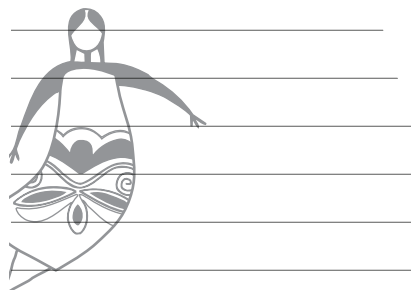
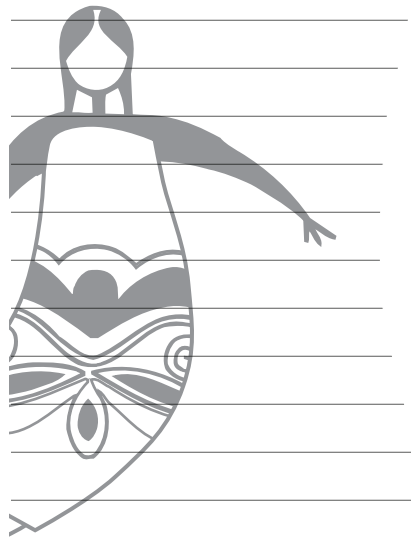
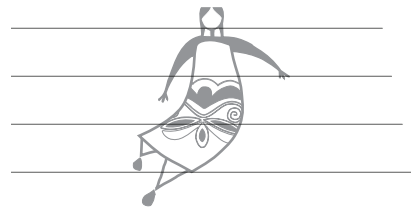


I think that if diabetic women want to be self-sufficient, if they want to make progress, they have to get out of the house. They have to exercise even if their husband doesn't trust them. Something has to change in the couple.



Being thin and looking sick... or being fat and looking healthy

- 20. In your opinion, what is a beautiful woman?
- 21. Do our husbands tell us we are beautiful?

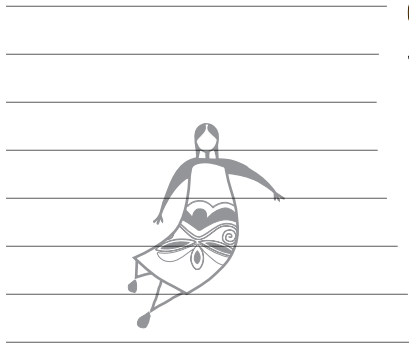


Pleasing others, feeling pretty and being loved are understandably important to many people. Being pretty can be associated with “looking good,” “being comfortable with yourself,” “enjoying life,” and “feeling fulfilled.” Being pretty also means being not too far away from what is normal. If others don’t wear glasses and you do, you’ll feel different and perhaps less attractive. Native communities have standards for people’s physical appearance and bearing, for example, ways of dressing. There are things you can do and things you can’t do. Some attitudes are accepted, others are shunned. These latter may be judged and commented on , and they may even set us apart and make us feel inadequate.

Doctors and nurses often tell diabetic women that they should gradually lose weight by watching what they eat and by exercising. They are told that their disease has something to do with their weight, and to some it comes as a surprise. A lot of them didn’t see their weight as a problem, and suddenly it becomes one, at least in the eyes of doctors and nurses.

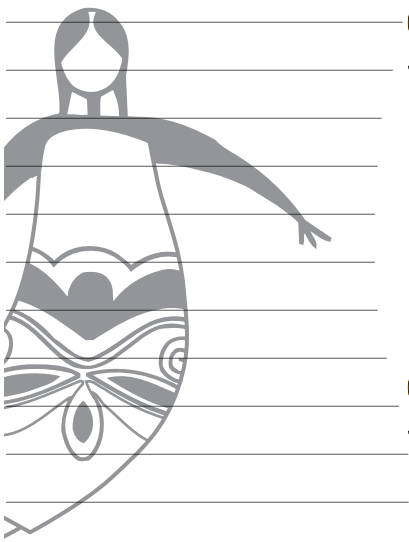
Continuing to take care of their children, feeling more at ease, not running out of breath after their every move, not having to take insulin shots- these are some of the reasons why diabetic women want to be healthy. They feel more light of foot when they lose weight. But what other people have to say doesn’t necessarily match this new feeling. Even though they are healthier than ever, they are reminded by some people that they are different from the rest.



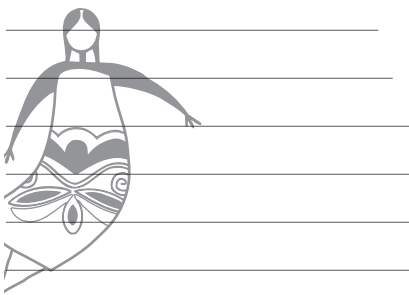


• *My daughter is thin and some women asked me, “Your daughter is skinny, is she sick?” I asked myself if what they were saying could be true. So one day we took her to the dispensary for a check-up, to see if she was sick or not.*

- *Because she was thin?*
- *Because she was thin, skinny. We went to the hospital just for that, and in the end my daughter was perfectly normal, more normal than the others!*



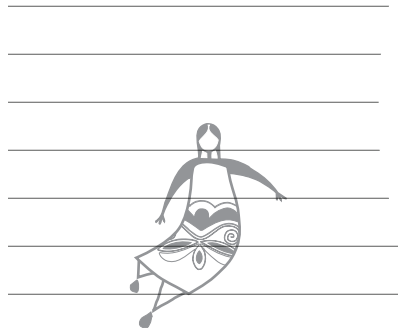
I was losing weight and some people who hadn’t seen me in two or three months said to me, “Oh, are you sick?” I answered, “No” and they said, “What’s wrong, you’re skinny so what’s happening to you?” I told them, “Nothing’s wrong, I’m fine, I’m healthy and I’m not sick.” They answered, “You look sick.” I said, “I’m not sick, I’m fine.” They always say the same thing when they see me.



• *Some men say that they prefer chubby women. I’ve already heard that.*

- *They’d rather touch a chubby one?*
- *They prefer you when you’re chubby because there’s fat. They say that if you’re thin, they only have bones to feel.*
- *That’s why I say that a woman can’t help herself when she hears this kind of negative talk from a man. She won’t ever feel valued. If she is small, she’ll say, “Well, I’m small.” But if she tells herself, “I don’t care what the man says, if he doesn’t want to touch me there he doesn’t have to. I’m going to take care of myself and of my health, and it’s mine anyway.” The day women think like that is day the diabetes rate will be stabilized.*





When I lost weight, people asked me, “You’re skinny, you’ve lost weight, are you sick?” They also said, “Your husband won’t be interested in you, you’re not attractive to look at.” It was all negative. But I pulled myself together and thought, “I don’t care about satisfying a man. I’m going to take care of myself.”



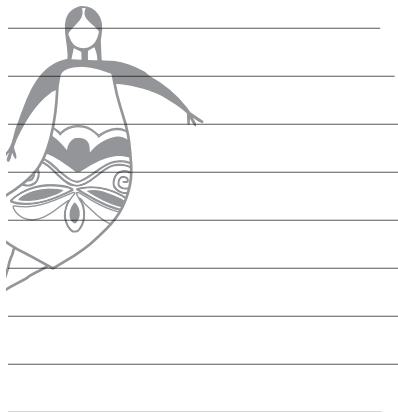
I have eight children. They’re all chubby, like little piglets, you might say. They are all chubby, from the youngest to the oldest.

22. Are overweight women fashionable? Was it always like that?

23. Is weight loss encouraged in our community?

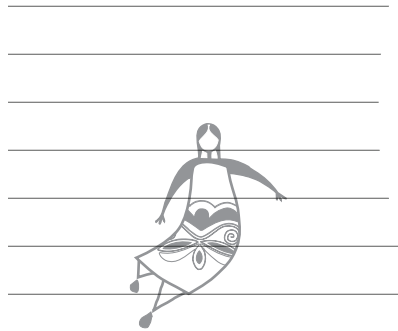


Is the equation as simple as that? Being thin and appearing sick in the eyes of others, or staying fat and looking healthy? Not necessarily. Young people seem to be more and more careful about their weight, to a point where the chubby ones may be seen negatively. Even some middle-aged people have changed their way of seeing things. The image of what is beautiful and what isn’t, of what is healthy and what isn’t, could be starting to change. As one woman said, losing that extra weight is a big step forward. A big step towards being healthy.

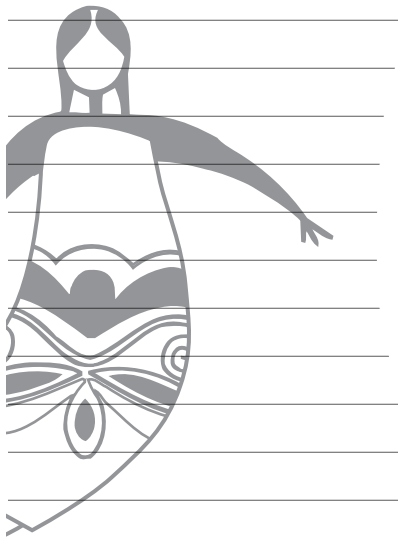


When I lost ten pounds, a woman told me, “You’re making a big, big step forward, towards the future.” That’s what she told me.

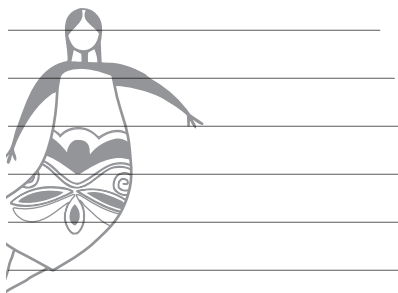




- Has the way people think about slim people changed? Has it changed over time?
- *Oh yeah! Before, if you were fat, it didn't matter. But now, even the children, if the child is obese, they tease him, or her. They'll make remarks like "she's fat" and so on. You know, all those remarks.*



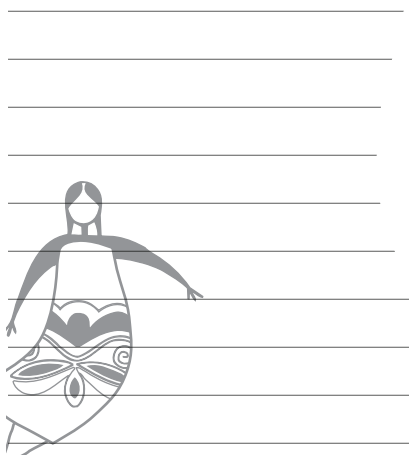
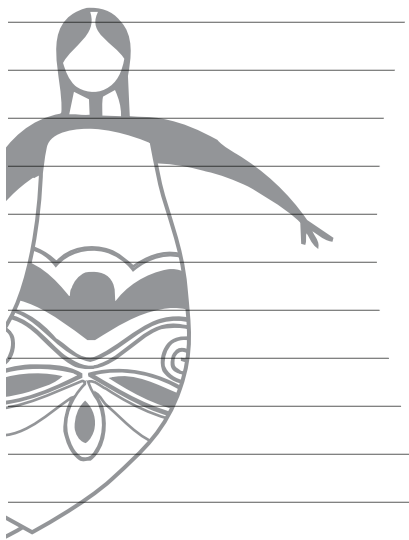
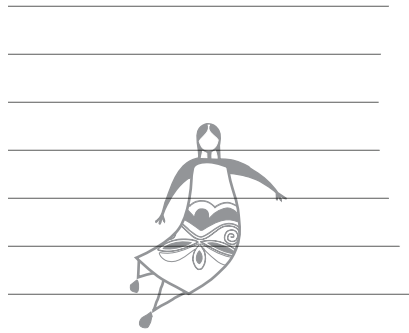
A woman once told me, "You look younger, what happened? What happened to you?" I said: "Nothing, I'm fine." And that helped me to change.



- Did any young people say negative things when you lost weight?
- *No, never. No, young people never said anything negative. Young people told me, "You're beautiful." And some wrote to me, young school kids, they wrote me, "You're beautiful and smiling. You're the most beautiful one in the village." I still have those notes in my office.*

The most important thing to do while we wait for the whole community to learn the importance of having a healthy weight may be to love ourselves and to accept being loved for who we are.





People are surprised when they see me in jeans. They also say, “Oh, you’ve changed, how come? You were fat. You’ve changed. You’re not the same.” But I haven’t changed, I’m still the same except that I’ve lost weight. My husband told me, “I liked you better when you were fat.” But either he takes me the way I am or he leaves. I told him, “I’m fine the way I am. I won’t put on weight again. Either you love me the way I am, or you find a fat one, it’s your choice.” I don’t pay any attention to the others, nor to what people think about me. My husband has to love me for what I am and not for what he would like me to be. But he once told me, “I loved you more when you were fat.”

If we listen to negative comments, we can lose all our self-confidence. We already have to fight an inner battle to lose weight, and it’s not easy. There are all kinds of comments; some people even meddle with our private life and question our femininity, our self-esteem. Letting comments slide off your back like a duck’s back, as this woman succeeded in doing, is a strategy that can take the weight off your shoulders, which you shouldn’t be carrying.



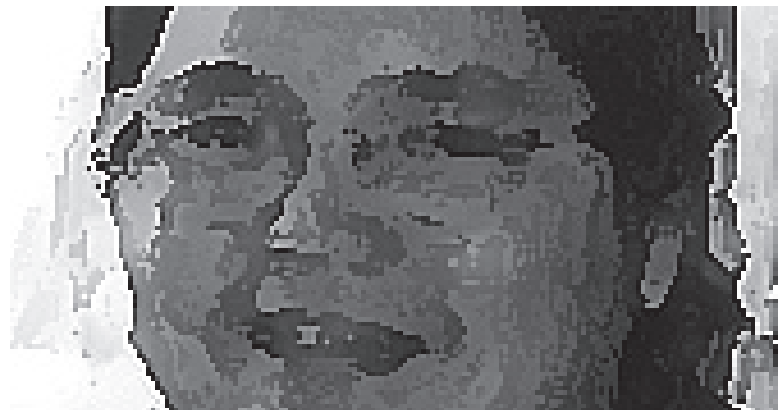
- They told me I wasn’t beautiful, that I wasn’t taking care of myself. They said, “You’re wasting away” and they told me, “You don’t have any fat. You have no fat left; a woman with fat is more fun, there’s more to get hold of.” I paid no attention. I told myself, “It’s up to me to pull myself together and not to let the others discourage me.” But all I heard were negative comments about me. “Your clothes are too big.” What else did they say to me? “Your husband isn’t giving you enough sex.” And then: “You’re probably no good in bed, you must be...” They told me all sorts of negative things like that.*



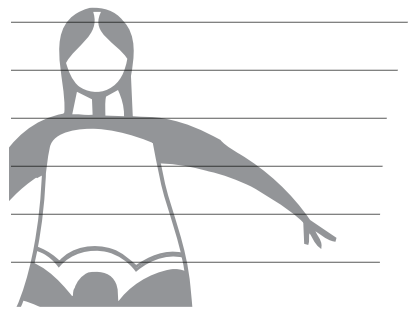
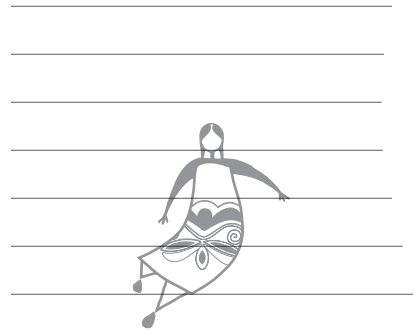
Handwriting practice area consisting of horizontal lines. It features three decorative icons of a woman in traditional dress: a small one at the top, a larger one in the middle, and another small one at the bottom.



• Because you were losing weight?
• Yes. Because I was losing weight. The older people asked me, “What’s wrong with you? Are you sick?” Everyone was worried. They would ask, “You’ve lost weight. Are you sick? Did you go see a doctor? Did you go see the nurse?” And I answered, “No, I’m not sick. But I am diabetic”. I told myself I could control my diabetes if I pulled myself together. I never wanted to think diabetes was something that could control me. I said to my disease, “You’re not the one controlling me, I’m going to control you.” I was proud of myself to think that way. And I let pass all the negative comments. I told myself, “Don’t bother with that; if you do, you’re going to have to take medication, and insulin... I’m going to have to be careful”. But there were days when I wanted to eat chips and get fat again.



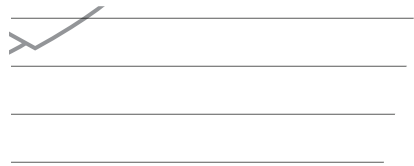
The diabetic woman's new-found place in the community



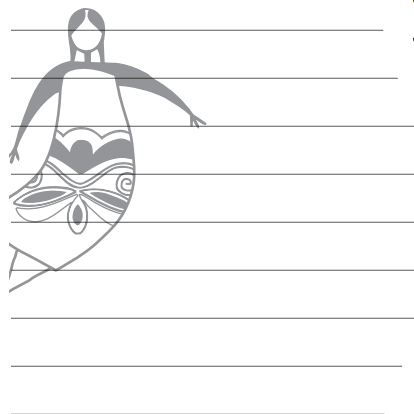
To a certain extent, being labelled as diabetic in a community can be hard to deal with. We live with other people watching what we eat and the kinds of physical activity we do. Not only may our attitudes change, but our physical appearance may change too (for example, if we lose weight) and the people we share our everyday life with may push us away.

On the other hand, being the centre of attention isn't all negative, even if it's often hard to live with. It gives you a certain power. You will be questioned, but that means you can speak your mind and even help change things, in obvious and sometimes not so obvious ways. Facing one's problems alone is already more than any person can handle. If others give their support, they will find that they are helping themselves too.

24. How can diabetic women help each other?
By sharing?

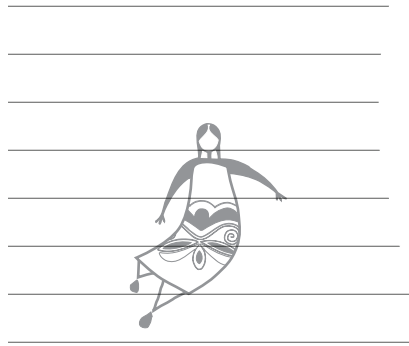


That's the way support works: the help, teaching and encouragement you give to others comes back to you. By sharing your experiences, they take on a whole new dimension.



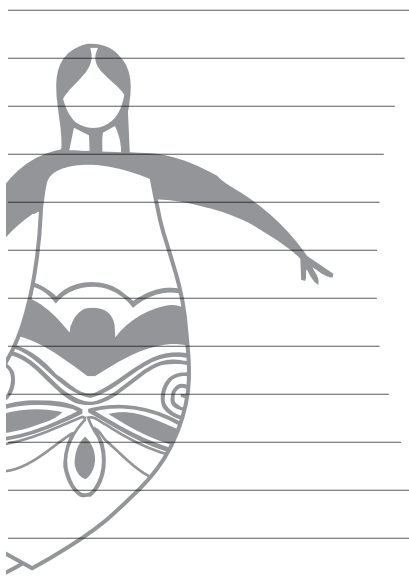
I'm a person who can't stand still. I have hobbies, I want to go out. As soon as someone asks me, "Are you diabetic?", I answer, "Yes, I'm diabetic." "How long has it been?" "It's been fifteen years." "What kind of pills do you take?" "I don't take any." "How do you do it?" They're surprised that I haven't taken anything for all that time. But I try hard to tell them, "Have the courage to take control." From time to time I tell them, "You can do it too, you're capable of it, you're a self-sufficient person." They tell me, "But I take pills." I tell them, "Go get some information.





If that bothers someone, if he doesn't want to listen to your questions, go to another person. You'll find that person, keep on looking, you'll find her." People seem to think the information will come to them. They don't look for it.

Do you too feel you are being watched? Good, it's by watching others that young (and even older) people learn.



Most parents nowadays sit at home. So, for me, if I see my mom sitting there watching TV, well then it's okay for me to do the same. If you want to have healthy children, you got to have healthy parents. Or at least somebody who is going to go out and motivate them.

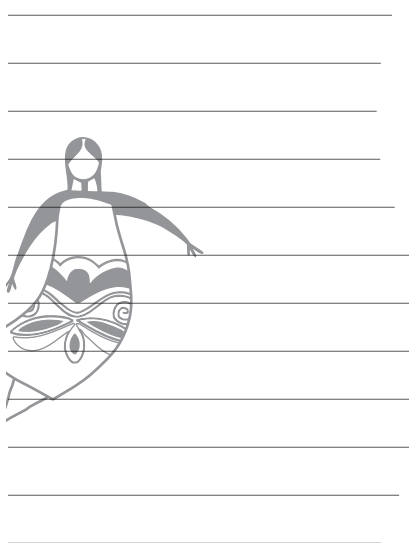
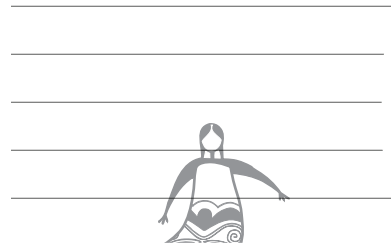


Photo : Jimmy Sam, coll. M.E.Q.

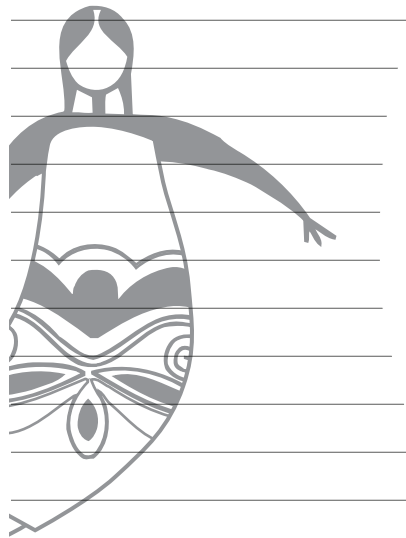


Strategies for dealing with rumours - It's all a question of attitude



Women who control their diabetes have found that the best ways for facing reality with optimism or getting back on their feet when things are rough all come from within. You may or may not find support from others. And the situation will change over time; it may get better or worse.

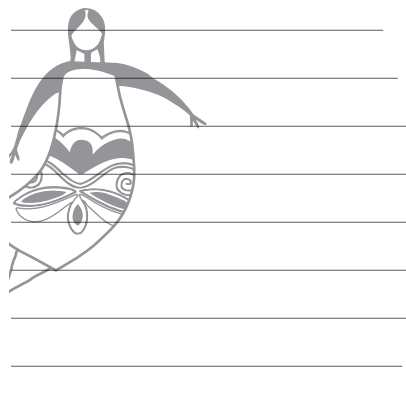
25. Do women respect themselves?



But you are the master of your own thoughts. These thoughts nourish your spirit. If we have to respect our bodies by giving them healthy food because of their new condition, the same thing is true of our minds: we have to nourish our thoughts. A woman has to be her own best friend, she has to give herself the same love and understanding she gives others. Just like them, she is an individual who needs, deserves and is entitled to love and respect.



I said, "That's enough, I don't want to be hit, insulted and humiliated, and I want to be respected because I am an individual. Nobody can invade my private life. It's my life, I'm the only one in it. Nobody can go in there. Nobody can tell me what I can and can't do, nor can they stop me from doing what I want to. I'm the master."



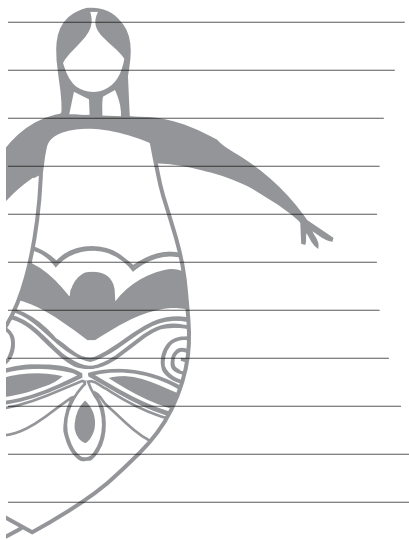
I said to myself, "Now that I've brought up my children, they're on their own. For the rest of my life, I'm going to do what I want, what I see fit for me." My husband didn't like it, because he had a controlling personality. I told him, "Here and now, I'm in control now of myself and I'm going to do as I like, do as I please. I'm not going to do something stupid or run around and do all these kinds of things that you accuse me of, but I'm gonna have a better life." And I'm still doing it today. I think I'm just a fighter or something.



To be happy as one can be in a life of their own choosing gives women a lot of energy and determination. To be happy with our choices, we must compare ourselves with ourselves, not with others. We have to “look at ourselves,” not others.

26. Do our family and friends respect us as women?

To take full responsibility for ourselves is also a way to earn the respect of others.

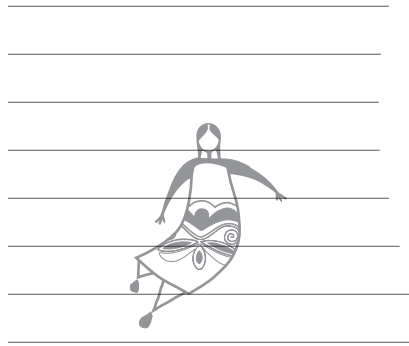


I don't care what anybody calls me. It doesn't matter to me. I live my life, I see my life. And I'm happy the way I am. You can call me names all you want, it doesn't bother me.

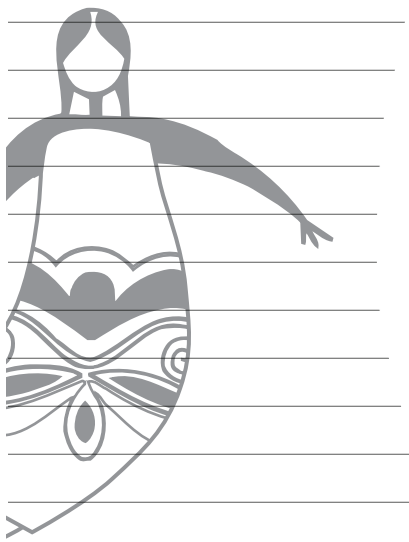


• *My strength? Sometimes I'm on the defensive. I think about myself and what could happen to me, what I have to do about my diabetes, and then what could happen to me if I don't think about myself. I think about myself instead of keeping myself busy with others. I have to do all that I can to get out and not listen to people spreading rumours. I have to do this for myself, not concern myself with the rumours. I get out and I'm the one who decides to open the door and get out. I walk as much as I want, and even if I meet those people, I don't concern myself with them.*

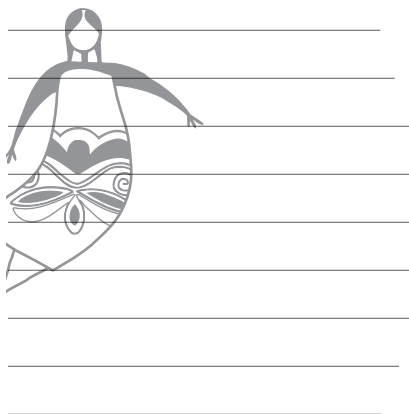




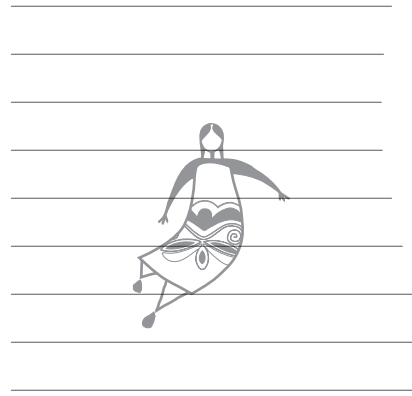
• Is it hard sometimes?
• Yes, it's hard, but I have to do it for me, for my health. That is what I always say to myself. I have the right to get out too, I have the right to take a walk for my health instead of staying in the house. I have to move too, I have to think about myself too. That is what I tell myself when I want to get out, regardless of the rumours. Even if rumours start, I don't think about them, I have to get out. Yes, I have to get out.



In the community, even when I was fat, I always wanted to look good compared to others. I told myself that this is how I would gain others' respect. People respect me as I am, and I respect them. I saw that it was because of my clothes, because of my physique, that I was respected, I thought.



New kinds of solidarity

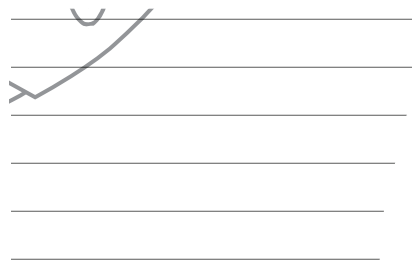


There are many diabetics in First Nations communities. People 45 and older are especially affected, but more and more younger people are also getting diabetes. In some communities, almost half the women from 45 to 64 suffer from it. The diabetic woman walking alone down the road is perhaps thinking about her health more than any of you. Why not take her hand and encourage her? It seems that the community, in some way, hinders its diabetic members from helping one another, and thus contributes to the vicious cycle of solitude felt by diabetic women.

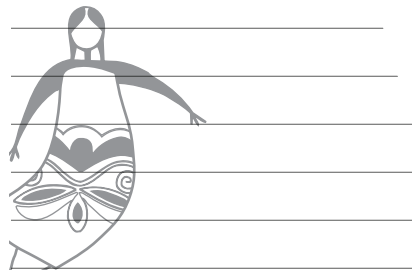


When I see someone walking alone, I tell myself, “Good, she’s getting out, she’s taking a walk. But it’s like there is a barrier. I can’t say to her, “Congratulations, you’re taking a walk.” It’s like that. I would love to be able to do that, but I can’t.

27. How can we encourage diabetic women to form groups?



But the community doesn’t have to be a hindrance. The close relations people have with other community members and their great concern for each other can be made the most of in all sorts of positive ways, each more creative than the next: talking with colleagues at work, going for a walk with friends, forming women’s networks for support and encouragement, etc.

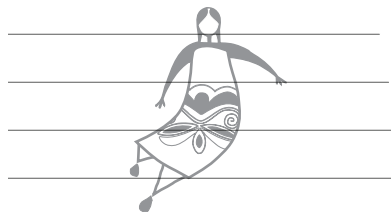


Colleagues at work will say to me, “I saw salt-free tomatoes at such-and-such a store.” Or else sometimes they will even buy some and sell them to me. Because sometimes, you know, you have a hard time finding them. It’s a form of support because they know that I am on the lookout for them.

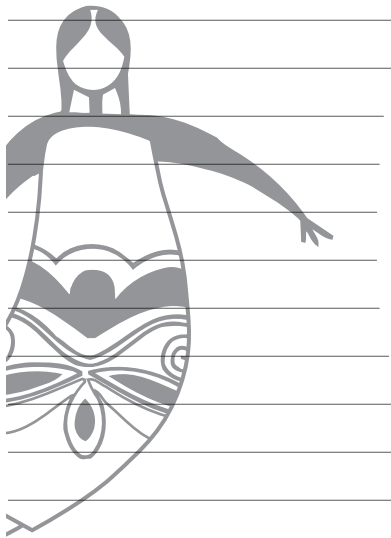




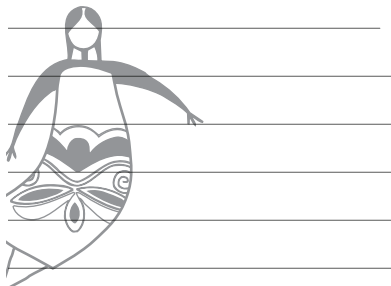
When I want to go out, when I want to take a walk, I have friends, some even with the same illness as I have, and I ask them to go for a walk with me. It's like we are doing the same activity together and its no longer an obligation.

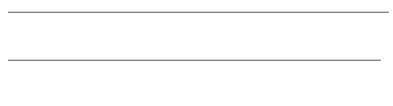


I have "sensitive friends." For these women I have a strategy. If there is one who needs to talk, you have to go say to another woman that this woman here, she needs help.

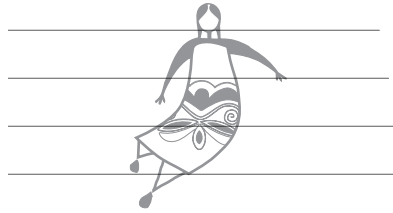


Some activities, despite your efforts to organize them, don't always work as well as you'd like. There are never enough people. But when things go well, for example, a Christmas party, it's great fun, it gives you a fresh outlook. But experience shows that it can be difficult to mobilize people, especially those who don't want to talk about diabetes. If some of our efforts at getting diabetic women together fail, it may be wise to re-examine our goal. For diabetic women, two things are important if they are to talk freely about what they are going through and to accept help. First, everything must be confidential. Secondly, they must not be treated as "sick," but with respect.

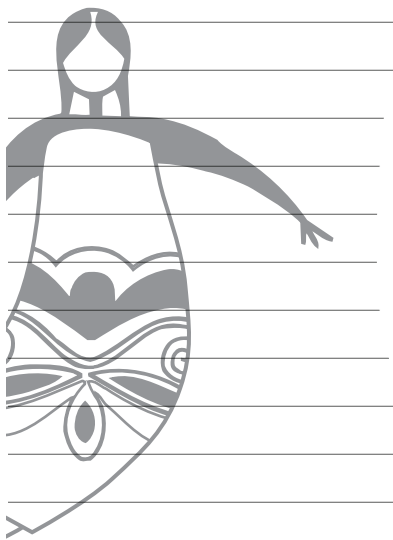




Women can talk to me about their feelings, and I can also talk to them about my problems or my health. I know that it will remain confidential, just as if I were talking to my husband or my children.



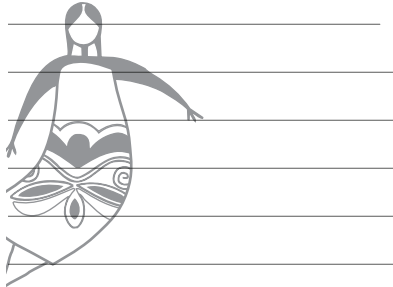
• Others are not living this illness, I am. And they can see that I have really changed. I was an active woman who pushed myself, who loved making meals with my family or with others at my house and all that. They can see that I am no longer the same person-I cut myself off and I sleep.



• Are you isolated?
• Yes, because I didn't want any more. I knew that one day I would have to tell my friends that I was diabetic. But my husband had already told everyone! I didn't want to be treated like someone who was sick. I think it was because I was treating myself as someone who was sick that I didn't want others to treat me as someone who was sick.

• You saw yourself as someone who was sick, but you didn't want others to see you as someone who was sick?
• Yes.

• And so you isolated yourself?
• Yes. But I had lots of attention, from girlfriends who came and helped me with the housework. Also because of my pregnancy. But even today if there is something going on in the community, women will come and give my baby a bath, play with him or put him to sleep.



• Spontaneously?
• Spontaneously. I also think that they have a great deal of respect for me. But they had never done that before, when I was not diabetic. I think it is because of that a bit. Then I was never a person who could accept help from others. I was always the one helping others.



Suggested questions for facilitators

1. What are the benefits of living in your community? What are the drawbacks?
2. Does the community help make mutual aid possible?
3. Is the food the same today as before?
4. What foods are rich and fatty?
5. What foods are healthy?
6. Can you socialize with others if you don't eat the same things they do?
7. What does it mean, to "eat like a white?"
8. Will I become white if I eat like a white?
9. Are you free to eat what you want at home with your family? In a restaurant?
10. Are there any links between alcohol and diabetes?
11. What can be done to lower the consumption of alcohol?
12. Is diabetes effected by our emotions? How?
13. Can we walk alone on the streets of our village without any trouble?
14. What do gossips say about women who walk for exercise?
15. What can be done to encourage women to walk, either alone or in groups?
16. What forms of physical activity, other than walking, can be done in the community?
17. How do you put a stop to rumours that are preventing you from doing what you want?
18. How are household jobs shared in the home between men and women? Is it possible to change the way they share those jobs?
19. Can our husbands help us in our efforts to control our illness? (weight management, walking, diet)
20. In your opinion, what is a beautiful woman?
21. Do our husbands tell us we are beautiful?
22. Are overweight women fashionable? Was it always like that?
23. Is weight loss encouraged in our community?
24. How can diabetic women help each other? By sharing?
25. Do women respect themselves?
26. Do our family and friends respect us as women?
27. How can we encourage diabetic women to form groups?





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