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Chronic illness in college: You are not alone

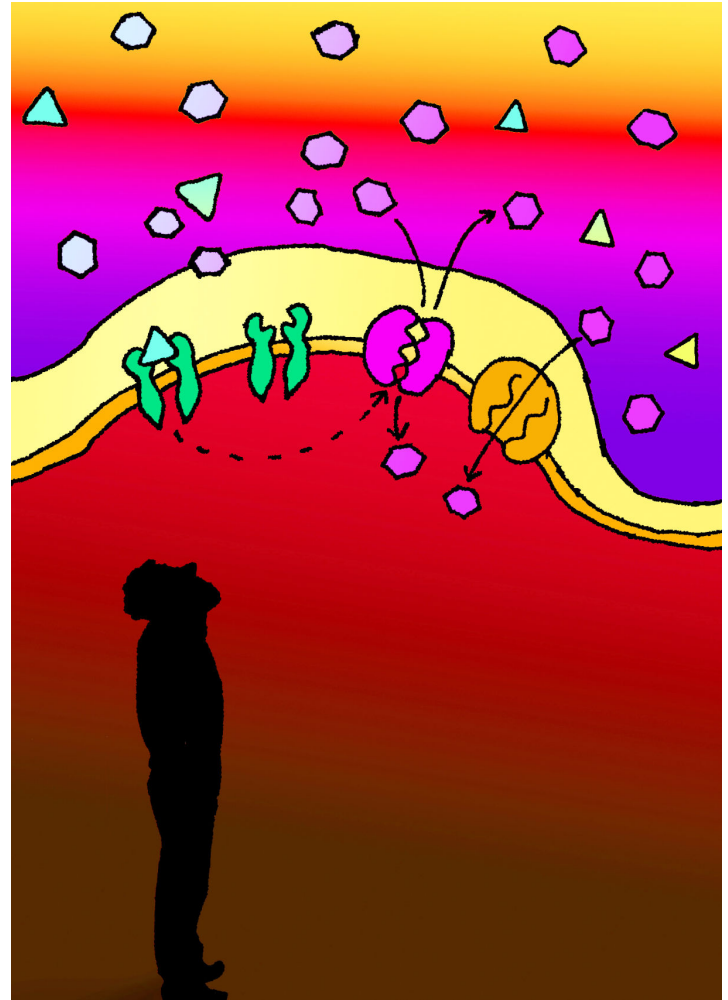
A UW student's experience as a Type I diabetic

Claire Summa Contributing writer Nov 16, 2017

For most students, health maintenance might mean a yearly flu shot, a tennis class at the IMA, hiking with friends, or working with a counselor at the [Mental Health Clinic](#). For a Type 1 diabetic, managing health requires a constant awareness of their physical state on top of accessing regular care.

Andy Zeiger was diagnosed with Type 1 during winter break of his junior year at the UW. He spent his remaining time as a student learning to manage his disease, and co-founding a College Diabetes Network chapter at the UW to reach out to other students.

For Zeiger, habitually checking his blood glucose levels and injecting himself with insulin several times daily became relatively ingrained. Mental health has proved a daily climb. At first, he felt he had to walk it alone.



Ben Celsi

"This was my diabetes and everything that my diabetes entailed had to be mine," Zeiger said.

As with most chronic illnesses, much of the work in managing health is a hidden, endless battle for control. It was easy for Zeiger to feel like he was failing his own expectations and those of the people around him.

"I always felt like I had to be perfect at it," Zeiger said. "I always had an outward show that everything is going great. Over time, I had to ask myself, why am I doing that?"

Managing his health with mindfulness was a form of personal empowerment. Each time he ate, he stepped out of the moment to check on himself: examining his current blood sugar level, how long ago he ate and exercised, how much he had slept, and his stress level. While sometimes exhausting, Zeiger's efforts made him feel like he was on top of his game most days "but not every day."

"And that's okay," Zeiger said.

For a college student with Type 1, glycemic events may affect academic performance. This is especially so during freshman and sophomore year, when many students are used to their parents playing a supporting role in their Type 1 management.

Zeiger quickly discovered that while the UW was a world leader in diabetes research and care, the UW campus itself lacked any group support for students with Type 1.

According to a Hall Health consulting nurse, the UW does not have any organized services for Type 1 diabetics but does have providers that see patients with Type 1. Typically patients are managed out of the [[Endocrine and Diabetes Care Center](#) at the] UW Medical Center.

UW Disability Resources for Students (DRS) counselors explained that the UW DRS can provide accommodations, but not retroactively. Student accommodations are "tailor-made." They meet with the student, review documentation from their doctor, and form a plan with everyone's input.

Zeiger got involved with the Seattle-based Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation ([JDRF](#)), which connected him with Cassidey Short, another UW student with Type 1. Together, Zeiberg and Short started [T1 Dawgs](#), the College Diabetes Network ([CDN](#)) chapter at the UW.

"We figured the most important resource was social connection, talking with people who understand the context," Zeiger said.

He believes the T1 Dawgs structure, with the institutional backing of organizations like the CDN and JDRF, can be applied to help students with other chronic illness.

"Everybody has something," Zeiger said. "The quicker you can talk about it with somebody, the quicker they can talk about it with you, and then you can both help each other through it."

Zeiger was fortunate to have local access to comprehensive medical care within a few days of his diagnosis. Other young adults he met were not so lucky. If the UW Medical Center is not within network for newly-diagnosed students who want information about managing Type 1, there is a [Diabetes Education Series](#) available through UW Neighborhood Clinics.

Zeiger met one young woman diagnosed while abroad by a doctor who told her to call her parents because she was going to die. This further inspired Zeiger, already a pre-med student, to pursue a career in medicine.

“The way someone is diagnosed with chronic illness is really important,” Zeiger said. “And I want to be the type of doctor who gives someone that type of diagnosis in the most respectful way.”

Resources

Hall Health Consulting Nurse: (206) 221-2517

UW Hall Health: Mental Health: (206) 543-5030

UW Neighborhood Clinic: Northgate: (206) 528-8000

UW Disability Resources for Students: (206) 543-8924

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