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UW students start first type 1 diabetic support group on campus

Janae Janik Oct 20, 2016



Lucas Boland

Kassidey Short was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes as a young child at the age of five, whereas Andy Zeigler received the same diagnosis only ten months ago. Together they are spearheading an effort to start a support group for UW students with diabetes.

When Kassidey Short realized that there wasn't a support group for people like her, she knew she had to do something. Short is a type 1 diabetic, which means that her pancreas does not produce insulin, a hormone that regulates the amount of glucose in the blood. Although she is a typical college senior in every other regard, the work it takes to manage her diabetes amounts to a full-time job. While searching online, she found the website for the College Diabetes Network, which explained how to start a chapter at your own school.

Through connections at Seattle University, Short met senior and fellow diabetic Andy Zeiger, with whom she joined forces in order to provide a much needed resource on campus. Together, they have started the first type 1 diabetes support group at the UW, and only the second group of its kind in the entire state of Washington. The group now has nine members, and seeks to provide a community in which people can talk about day-to-day issues with those who truly understand the difficulties of living with a chronic illness. Currently, the group is in the process of becoming an official RSO.

"The reality is one in every 300 people has type 1 diabetes," Zeiger said. "At a school like UW, with 30,000 people, that means that about 100 people probably have type 1 diabetes. And that's what blew my mind. There was nothing at UW for type 1 diabetics."

While Short has had diabetes since she was six, Zeiger was only diagnosed this past year. After losing 30 pounds, Zeiger thought that the stress of college and coursework might be seriously affecting his health. His dad, who works as a doctor, noticed that his son had to go to the bathroom multiple times during a single movie and decided to have his blood sugar levels monitored by a doctor.

A blood sugar meter is used to measure the amount of glucose in the bloodstream. Normally, an average rating is around 100. Zeiger's reading was at 670, almost seven times the normal rate.

After being hospitalized for a day, he was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Nobody in his family had ever had this disease, so it came as a surprise to him. He quickly accepted the necessary lifestyle changes that came with the diagnosis.

"Diabetes kind of forces you to live a really healthy lifestyle. Because of that, I've been focusing more on what I eat [and] when I exercise," Zeiger said. "I actually feel really lucky, but it was a huge identity crisis."

Diabetes, like any condition, is a very serious disease and can have fatal consequences if not managed properly. Contrary to popular belief, diabetes does not always get diagnosed in people who are overweight or unhealthy. Type 1 diabetes is also known as juvenile diabetes because it is often diagnosed in young children, although late diagnoses like Zeiger's are not uncommon.

Managing diabetes can seem like a full time job; emotions, stress, exercise, adrenaline, and diet all affect one's ability to function for the rest of the day. On top of these factors, along with the stress that comes with work or school, diabetics must remember to regularly inject insulin when necessary.

Cassady Kintner is a therapist in Seattle who specializes in helping clients manage life with diabetes. A diabetic herself, she understands how important it is for one to have a support system of people who truly understand what they are going through.

"I saw how important it was, how much of a difference it made to have a therapist in my own life, and I wanted to be that for someone," Kintner said.

Both Kintner and Short emphasized that it can be extremely tempting to just forget about management and act like the disease doesn't exist.

"One of the most vulnerable times for college students to have type 1 diabetes is freshman year where they're just starting to become who they are apart from their parents and have their own identity," Kintner said.

Short and Zeiger want students to know that they are not alone, and that they don't have to figure everything out by themselves. Kassidey encourages students to come to the group but acknowledges that it can be nerve-racking to freely talk about something so private. She invites students to reach out to her at uw@collegediabetesnetwork.org if they have questions, and Short can connect them with alternative resources.

Zeiger agrees, saying that there is so much potential for community and connection that comes from being vulnerable and letting people in. Everyone has their own private issues they're dealing with, but opening up can give others permission to share and foster connections.

"Type 1 diabetes is a silent struggle, but depression, ADD, and obesity [are also] a silent struggle. If we can talk about it with each other, there's a lot more power in a group dynamic," Zeiger said. "It's like trying to carry a 200 pound weight by yourself. If you share the burden with somebody, you can carry a 500 pound weight together."

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