THE ABLE DIABETIC
Able Guide No. 13

INNER CIRCLE RESOURCE

Managing T1D Through Stress: The Invisible Saboteur
What stress actually does, why it is harder to talk about than you think, and what helps

Why this guide exists

Stress is listed as a factor in t1d management in almost every clinical resource. It usually appears in a bullet point, between exercise and alcohol, with a brief note that it can affect blood glucose. Then the document moves on.

What that treatment entirely misses is the scale of the problem. Stress is not an occasional variable to account for. For many t1ds it is a permanent companion - compounding the existing demands of the condition in ways that are both physiological and behavioural, and almost impossible to convey to someone who has not experienced it.

This guide is an honest account of what stress and t1d look like from the inside as a lived reality.

1. What stress actually does to blood glucose

When the body perceives stress - whether physical, emotional, or psychological - it releases hormones including cortisol and adrenaline. These are part of the body's fight-or-flight response. They signal the liver to release stored glucose into the bloodstream. In a person without diabetes, the pancreas responds by producing more insulin to manage that glucose automatically. In a t1d, that response does not exist.

The result is that stress reliably pushes blood glucose up. A difficult day at work, a tense conversation, a period of sustained emotional pressure - all of it shows up in the numbers. The stress response is not always proportionate to the stressor in any obvious way. A difficult meeting can produce the same physiological response as a genuinely significant crisis. The body does not distinguish between the two.

© The Able Diabetic 2026. All rights reserved.

2. The double impact - physiological and behavioural

Stress affects t1d control in two distinct ways and the combination is what makes it so corrosive.

The physiological effect is the direct hormonal impact described above. But the behavioural effect is equally significant. When you are under serious pressure, t1d management tends to slip down the priority list. Not because you have decided to be less careful - but because the mental bandwidth required to manage well simply is not available when life is consuming it elsewhere.

Looking back at my busiest and most pressured periods - a demanding career, sustained family difficulty, the sheer complexity of keeping everything running simultaneously - I can see clearly that my management became reactive rather than active. Responding to problems rather than preventing them. Checking when something felt wrong rather than checking as routine.

At the time I would have said I was coping fine. I was coping, but that is not the same thing. The blind spots were there. I just could not see them until much later, and only then because I finally had the space to look.

3. The constancy that nobody talks about

Here is the thing that is genuinely almost impossible to convey to someone who does not have t1d: the stress is never absent.

Every meal involves a calculation. Every bout of exercise requires a plan. Every late meeting, every disrupted lunch, every unexpected day carries a management question. The CGM alarm goes off in the middle of the night. You are about to walk into an important presentation and your levels are not where you want them.

There is no version of daily life that is free of this. No holiday from it. No day when you just eat without thinking, just walk without planning, just go out without checking what you are carrying.

I genuinely cannot imagine what that feels like. The accumulation of that permanent low-level vigilance - over years, over decades - is a form of stress in itself that sits underneath everything else and is not properly acknowledged.

People sometimes describe stress as productive - sharpening focus, driving performance. There may be truth in that for certain kinds of stress. There is nothing productive about the constancy of t1d. It does not motivate. It is an ongoing challenge.

© The Able Diabetic 2026. All rights reserved.

4. When the things that should relax you make it harder

The easiest version of living with t1d is staying at home. Your equipment is there. Your food is there. The environment is controlled and familiar. Blood glucose stays more stable. You are not navigating the unexpected.

The problem is that this creates a real gravitational pull - often unconscious - towards staying contained. Towards the smaller life. And it means that many of the things people turn to for rest and recovery carry an additional layer of complexity for a t1d that simply does not exist for everyone else.

Take a holiday. There is the planning - extra medication to carry, insurance implications, storage considerations in the heat, crossing time zones and what that does to a regime. There is the beach - where sand and water are hostile to CGM sensors and pumps, where equipment is harder to manage, where the spontaneity that defines a relaxing day is constantly punctuated by practical concerns. There is the travel itself - bag checks, rules about what you can carry, food restrictions at venues, situations where carrying glucose for an emergency is treated as suspicious rather than medical.

I was once unable to carry anything on a Sydney Harbour Bridge climb. Nothing at all. For a t1d, that is not a minor inconvenience - it is a genuine safety consideration that requires advance thought and advance conversation that nobody else in the group has to have.

The irony is significant. The things most people rely on to decompress - travel, adventure, days out, social events - often carry more stress for a t1d, not less. Managing this requires either accepting a certain amount of extra cognitive load as the price of doing them, or gradually retreating from them. Neither option is without cost.

5. Why it is hard to talk about

Attempting to explain the stress of t1d to someone who does not have it is a particular kind of frustrating experience. A few sentences in, you become very aware of how you sound. There is a fine line between describing your reality and sounding like you are complaining - and most t1ds are acutely conscious of that line.

The result is that you present the coping face. The “I manage it fine” face. Which is often also true - you do manage it. But competence is not the same as ease. The fact that you are handling it well does not mean it is not heavy.

This matters because the stress that goes unexpressed tends to be subjugated rather than resolved. It accumulates. It contributes to burnout. It becomes part of the invisible load that t1ds carry alongside everything else.

© The Able Diabetic 2026. All rights reserved.

The irony I have recognised in my own life is that in my busiest years, when the pressure was highest, I would have laughed at the suggestion of taking time to reflect on any of this. There was simply no room for it. It is only with distance that the picture becomes clear enough to examine honestly.

6. What actually helps

I find this hard to offer perspective on, because my own approach for many years was to push through. What I can offer is what reflection has taught me rather than a framework I was applying at the time.

The most useful thing is recognition - simply noticing that a stressful period is likely affecting your blood glucose and adjusting your expectations accordingly. Not trying to achieve perfect control during a crisis. Giving yourself permission to manage adequately rather than optimally when life is demanding everything you have.

Peace of mind genuinely supports t1d management. Reducing unnecessary sources of conflict and pressure, where you have any choice, has a direct physiological impact on control - not just a psychological one. It's valuable to learn to distinguish between what you can control and what you can't.

And where travel and activities are concerned - go anyway. The extra planning is real, the friction is real, the moments of feeling more separate are real. But the alternative, a smaller, more contained life, carries its own cost that accumulates over time in ways that matter just as much as good blood glucose management.

The mental strength that comes from having managed this condition for a long time is considerable. You may not fully recognise it in yourself but you should.

Based on Sarah's lived experience of over 30 years managing T1D through significant personal and professional stress. Not medical advice. If you are struggling with stress and its impact on your condition, please talk to your GP or diabetes team.

Want to understand more?

Sarah's memoir **Invisible Impacts** covers her first decade living with Type 1 diabetes - including the early years of learning how stress, work and life combine to make t1d management harder than anyone prepares you for.

Visit www.theablediabetic.com or contact Sarah at sarah@theablediabetic.com

THE ABLE DIABETIC | Share • Enjoy • Empower

© The Able Diabetic 2026. All rights reserved.