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UCT study reveals power of couple communication in transforming type 2 diabetes care

Breakthrough research from UCT's Chronic Diseases Initiative for Africa shows that when couples talk, diabetes care improves

A new [study](#) by researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT) has highlighted the crucial role of couple communication in managing type 2 diabetes (T2DM). The study, published in [PLOS Global Public Health](#), finds that effective dialogue between partners enhances diabetes self-management and could improve health outcomes.

Funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR, UK) through Official Development Assistance Funding, the study continues [UCT's Chronic Diseases Initiative for Africa \(CDIA\)](#) important work in developing and evaluating the "Diabetes Together" intervention. This novel approach, developed in partnership with Professor Nuala McGrath and team from the University of Southampton, UK, is designed to support not just individuals living with diabetes but also their partners, recognising the vital role they play in managing the condition.

Addressing a critical health challenge

Type 2 diabetes is a growing global health concern that affects not just individuals but their families and communities. In South Africa, approximately one in every nine adults lives with the condition, which requires daily monitoring, consistent lifestyle adjustments, and medication adherence. To explore how couple dynamics and diabetes management are interrelated, the research team originally conducted a [qualitative secondary analysis](#) of data collected from couples who participated in the 'Diabetes Together' intervention.

This new study focused on the impact of couples' communication. The researchers found that when partners engaged in open and supportive communication, individuals living with diabetes found it easier to adhere to dietary guidelines, manage stress and navigate daily challenges associated with the condition. One participant noted: "You always have a high sugar if you don't communicate," underscoring the direct impact of communication on health.

Key findings

The present research explored mainly how couples' communication and interaction affected the health of the person living with diabetes:

- **Partner involvement is crucial** – Individuals with diabetes reported that working with their partners made it easier to overcome challenges together.
- **Communication fosters better self-management** – Open discussions led to increased adherence to medical advice, improved emotional well-being and better lifestyle choices.
- **Shared responsibility eases the burden** – When partners actively participated in diabetes care, the responsibility was more balanced, reducing stress on the individual with the condition.
- **Cultural and social dynamics matter** – The study also found that traditional gender roles and societal expectations could hinder open communication, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive interventions.

Positive feedback and future directions

UCT researcher Professor Naomi Levitt emphasised the importance of these findings for diabetes care strategies. "Our research suggests that strong communication between partners leads to more effective diabetes management. This provides further evidence for the value of couple-focused interventions in supporting individuals living with chronic conditions."

Following this study's success, researchers advocate for further investigation into the long-term benefits of the Diabetes Together intervention. They said future studies could assess whether improved communication directly correlates with better clinical outcomes, such as blood sugar control, weight management and mental well-being.

CDIA's Chief Research Officer, Professor Peter Delobelle, added: "Moving forward, we can build on these results to maximise the impact of future interventions, supporting couples to strengthen their communication skills and, ultimately, improving health outcomes in diabetes care and management."

UCT continues to solidify its role as a global frontrunner in health research by focusing on real-world solutions to pressing medical issues such as type 2 diabetes. With projects like the CDIA, the university not only enhances health outcomes across Africa but also showcases its drive to produce research that is both innovative and culturally attuned.

These efforts reflect a broader mission to address chronic diseases on a global scale and contribute to health equity through dynamic, cross-border collaboration. UCT's ongoing investment in high-impact research reinforces its standing as a leading institution committed to transforming public health through forward-thinking initiatives.

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