Tips for sticking to a diabetic diet: a NetWellness column

By Plain Dealer guest columnist
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Question: About 6 months ago, my father was diagnosed with diabetes. He has been put on medication to control it and had a meeting with a nutritionist to discuss his diet. I went with him and my mother to the appointment to make sure that I understood all the directions we were given. Despite my best efforts, there has been very little change in his diet. I’ve tried to explain to him the complications of diabetes (blindness, kidney failure, heart attack and stroke, of which he’s already had one) and that doesn’t seem to phase him at all. What can I do to help him realize that controlling his diet is important AND stick to his new eating plan?

Answer: Of all the chronic diseases, diabetes is one of the most challenging to patients, family, and providers. As you know it requires changes and adherence to in a number of behaviors like eating, taking medications, checking blood sugars, and exercise. We know that adhering to dietary changes and exercise are the most difficult.

Be patient — not everyone is ready or willing to change

Your concern about your father’s health is understandable and, probably, frustrating in that he does not perceive the severity of the disease, risk for complications, and need to change his behaviors the same as you. Most people (about...
85%) are not at a stage where they are ready to make behavioral changes when first given a diagnosis.

Patients are also less likely to heed advice from family members than they are from health providers. Often it is useful if the provider allows the patient to "tell their story". That is, allow the patient to express the pros and cons for maintaining their current behaviors or considering a plan to change behaviors. In your father's case it would entail his provider allowing your father to talk about why he now prefers to not change his eating habits.

Talking with a healthcare provider

Given the opportunity to express himself, and not being told what to do, your father may eventually start to realize that changing his eating habits may be in his best interest. Your father's provider may help your father through this process by using motivational interviewing techniques. Essentially, the provider would gently guide your father to examine what he wants for his health in the future, the state of his health currently (and how his current diet is part of that), your father's level of motivation to change his behavior, his perception of if he has the skills (a sense of mastery) to change, and his desire to develop a plan to make the changes.

Change comes in it's own time

Some people can go through these, so called, stages of change fairly rapidly. Others may take months if not years to eventually decide to change. What we know is that cajoling, demanding, and attempting to manipulate people to change their behaviors usually backfires and causes everyone to feel frustrated and angry. People change in their own way and in their own time.

Motivational interviewing techniques assist individuals to move along that path a little quicker. If your father's health care provider is not familiar with motivational interviewing, you may want to help your father consult with a clinical health psychologist who will be quite adept at it.

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