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Somatic Psychology and New Perspectives on Diabetes

Diabetes is an insidious, chronic disease defined by chronic elevations in blood sugar. It affects more than 1 person in 18 in the United States and is the third leading fatal disease, following heart disease and cancer. It is also the leading cause of end stage kidney disease, blindness, and amputations in adults. These complications may arise within 15-20 years of having the disease, which means that those with Type I or juvenile onset diabetes who develop diabetes at preschool age or earlier are already at risk for complications by the time they reach their 20s and 30s. Type I diabetes makes up 10% of all those who are known to have diabetes, and the remaining 90% have the more familiar form of Type II or non-insulin-dependent adult-onset diabetes.

Incidence rates of diabetes are increasing around the world, and can double in a single generation. Both types of diabetes are now also occurring at younger ages. Type II diabetes, previously known to arise only in adulthood, is now being diagnosed in childhood and adolescence.

Environmental factors, along with genetic factors, are known to play an important role in determining who gets diabetes – yet a unifying theory for understanding these roles remains elusive. It is not yet known what causes diabetes, and there is no known cure.

Good glucose control decreases the risk of long-term complications and is influenced by factors such as diet, medication, activity level, and emotions. Good control, however, carries the risk of episodes of low blood sugar or "hypoglycemia".

Hypoglycemic events can be difficult to detect, especially by the individual who has diabetes. They can occur rapidly and, if untreated, can lead to seizures, coma, or even death. Awareness of glucose-levels through frequent self monitoring is thus a necessary part of self-care.

Close attention is required for many activities such as participation in active sports or even playing on the school playground, which both use up glucose and can decrease levels rapidly. These facts require that a high degree of self-awareness be maintained, especially during routine activities such as eating out, going to an emotionally charged movie, or traveling. In addition, even something as common as living alone can pose risks.

Self management comprises 95% of diabetic care and means that approaches such as somatic psychology, which focus on the observation of experience in the present moment, may have a great deal to offer. Through the study of how mind and experience affect our body and physiology, such approaches have the

potential for helping individuals identify and modify numerous and subtle factors that affect their glucose levels. They also may help with identifying new perspectives from which to treat diabetes as well as understand underlying causes.

I am a physician and am doing graduate studies at Naropa in order to develop a more integrated approach to working with health and illness. I left my practice in medicine because of a need to work more holistically and I have a vision that could change the way we perceive and work with disease. Through the combination of this medical background with the philosophy on which Naropa University is based, a team exists which has the skills to bridge medical science with our knowledge of approaches that see the mind and body as one.

Through your support of and belief in Naropa, you are a member of this team. Your involvement provides the basis from which new territory can be forged and its repercussions include self-empowerment for improved self-care, prevention, and even cure. Your participation as a part of this process is most needed through financial support.

Contact me directly at 303-527-0551 or via e-mail to vmead@mindspring.com if you would like to discuss these perspectives.

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