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UCT researchers design a couples-focused intervention to improve diabetes management

A groundbreaking [study](#) by researchers at the University of Cape Town (UCT) has revealed that a couples-focused intervention could enhance diabetes self-management. The study, which was conducted in collaboration with the Couples Health Research and Intervention Studies (CHERISH) team from the University of Southampton, UK, has demonstrated that this innovative approach is both acceptable and feasible for couples in Cape Town, where one partner is living with type 2 diabetes.

Funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR, UK) through Official Development Assistance Funding, the study marks a significant step forward in diabetes care. Researchers from UCT's [Chronic Diseases Initiative for Africa](#) (CDIA) piloted the "Diabetes Together" intervention, a novel approach aimed at supporting not just individuals 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 complex condition that affects every aspect of a person's life, from diet and energy levels to mood and sexual health. One of the authors and director of UCT's CDIA, Professor Naomi Levitt, said that in South Africa, approximately 1 in nine adults live with this condition, which, while manageable through lifestyle changes and medication, presents significant challenges in day-to-day life. The "Diabetes Together" intervention acknowledges these difficulties and seeks to empower couples to navigate them together.

Previous research has highlighted partners' crucial role in helping individuals with chronic conditions make and sustain necessary lifestyle changes. Building on this understanding, the UCT team developed the "Diabetes Together" intervention, which was piloted with 14 couples from urban areas around Cape Town. These couples, where one partner attended primary care clinics, participated in two intensive half-day workshops.

"The workshops were designed to educate and motivate participants. Trained facilitators provided essential information about diabetes, its impact, and effective day-to-day management strategies. Sessions covered a range of topics, including diet, exercise, stress management, fear of complications, and the effects of diabetes on relationships," said UCT researcher Dr Myrna Van Pinxteren, who facilitated the workshops. Interactive exercises

helped couples develop communication and problem-solving skills that would support their ongoing journey with diabetes.

In addition, participants engaged in discussions about the more sensitive aspects of living with diabetes, such as its impact on sexual health and the potential need to adjust traditional gender roles. Couples also explored how to manage stress and fears related to diabetes complications, with trained counsellors offering follow-up sessions to address any ongoing issues and help set shared goals.

Positive feedback and future directions

Levitt said the pilot study's success was evident in the overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants, who expressed a strong desire for similar opportunities to be made available to others in their communities. "Participants were eager to share their newfound knowledge and suggested enhancements to the workshops, such as extending the duration and allowing more time for discussion," she added.

Four key themes emerged from the feedback:

- Involving partners is crucial – People with diabetes reported that working with their partners helped them identify and address challenges together.
- Group sessions provide valuable support – Meeting others in similar situations reduced feelings of isolation and facilitated shared learning.
- Improved communication is key – Effective listening and understanding between partners significantly improved their daily lives.
- Empowerment leads to better control – Couples felt more in control of diabetes management after participating in the "Diabetes Together" intervention.

Looking ahead

The UCT team is now planning a full-scale evaluation of the optimised intervention. "The upcoming study will assess whether participation in "Diabetes Together" leads to improved diabetes control over time and whether the lifestyle changes promoted by the intervention result in additional health benefits, such as reduced blood pressure, weight loss, and stronger relationships," concluded Levitt.

The ultimate goal is to offer a robust, evidence-based intervention that empowers couples living with diabetes in South Africa to lead healthy, fulfilling lives.

ENDS

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