10 INSPIRATIONAL STORIES

FROM THE EDEN PROJECT’S SOCIAL PRESCRIBING PROGRAMME
DELIVERED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH ST AUSTELL HEALTHCARE
Ten diabetics who have joined the social prescribing programme in St Austell share their stories.

Some people have been recently diagnosed; others have had diabetes for many years. What they all have in common is the desire to make changes in their lifestyle to improve their health and wellbeing; a health service that supports them and believes they can do it; and local organisations that provide opportunities which are supportive and encouraging.

The efforts and commitment of these ten people is truly inspiring. They have all managed to improve their mental wellbeing, lose weight, and reduce their BMI and their blood sugars. Five of them no longer have blood sugar levels in the diabetic range and more are heading in that direction.
My journey started in May 2016 when I had a blood test which confirmed I was a type 2 diabetic. I was devastated and realised that my lifestyle was probably to blame. I was certain that I did not want to take medication and that my health was my responsibility. I needed to make changes, and I was determined to turn my diagnosis around. This is actually possible.

I immediately changed my eating habits and whilst waiting for a blood test at one of the surgeries, I saw a slide about the Eden Project’s walking group for diabetics. I decided that this was going to be good for me, to meet other people who also had diabetes and get some exercise in beautiful surroundings. I made contact with Hayley, the Social Prescribing Navigator for St Austell Healthcare, and she encouraged me to go to Eden to walk. I have continued every week since then. I have trained to become a walk leader and I really enjoy walking every week in the company of fellow diabetics whom I now class as friends. I feel inspired by being at Eden, it feels like you are part of a family – there is a real sense of community amongst the staff, volunteers and even the visitors. Being in nature also really helps my sense of well-being. You can marvel at what is around you – big or small and have a moment of awe and wonder, it helps to clear my head of any worries. I smelt the Daphnes whilst on a walk recently, they smelt so good I went home and planted some in my own garden!

The walking, along with other exercises, has improved my health, weight and general well-being so much. I have lost over two stone. My last HbA1c blood test showed that I have moved out of the diabetic and pre-diabetic range. I was so excited to see what I had achieved, Hayley was as delighted as I was! I am very aware that I cannot become complacent and I need to keep the motivation going.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO OTHERS?

I am now ready to support others on their diabetic journey. If you have a diabetic diagnosis, then it is never too late to start making changes – just ask for support.
John started with the Social Prescribing Programme in February 2017.

My father had been a diabetic and when I was young I had seen him really unwell with it, but he was a hardworking man and he made no fuss; he just worked to put food on the table. His diabetes was not controlled, and I remember as a child having to ring the doctor when he was found unconscious. He later developed a heart condition and suffered a stroke. My sister was also a diabetic and I saw her suffer a premature death in her fifties from a heart attack. My mother was also diagnosed as a diabetic in her sixties. My family all knew very little about their condition.

I am now 73 years old. I find it hard to pinpoint a start date for my diabetes, but it was over 25 years ago. I had a lot going on at the time healthwise and in my personal life and I remember being aware that I was always thirsty and needing to drink. After I was diagnosed, I did what my father did and largely ignored it. I did not appreciate the severity of diabetes or how important diet was.

What Did You Do?

St Austell Healthcare’s Social Prescribing Navigator, Hayley, has been brilliant and so helpful to me, playing an important part in my journey. I attended the healthy weight programme and I also joined the Keep Active over-55s exercise classes and I have learned a considerable amount about diet and healthy eating and I started losing weight.

I also started walking with the diabetic walking group at the Eden Project. I really like the fact that there is always something different to look at Eden and it feels like a safe place to walk, the paths are surfaced and I know no matter what the weather that it is manageable for my wife and me. It is definitely the best thing that has happened to me since joining the surgery. I like to be outside; I always have done. It feels like I can breathe properly when I’m outside in the fresh air. I walk to the shops each day to get the paper – one mile each way in addition to the weekly walking groups I attend.

What Would You Say to Others?

I would say to anyone diagnosed as a diabetic: get help and support, listen to what you are told, understand what your condition is and know your limitations. Which is something that I didn’t do for years – I never believed that I could change my diabetic diagnosis but I do now. My journey continues.
Fifteen years ago I started noticing that I was going to the toilet a lot along with other pointers towards diabetes. When I had my blood sugar tested I was told I had diabetes, no pre-diabetes for me – straight into it! I was quite disappointed, but to be honest I had almost been expecting it because three or four members of my family were diabetic. It became quite serious for them and some of them had lost limbs. It was with some trepidation that I started on the medication, initially eight tablets three times a day, but I really wanted to avoid going onto insulin.

WHAT DID YOU DO?

I had been grossly overweight for a long period of time and although I was quite active and fit I knew the weight needed shifting. Initially I modified my diet by eating foods with a low glycaemic index, and tried to cut out carbohydrates. I found anything to do with bakeries and bread very tricky. I could eat half a loaf of bread with a meal, any meal. I also started increasing my exercise to try and lose weight. After about 18 months I was told I had to go onto insulin. It was then that I decided I needed a more ardent effort to lose weight. I managed to drop my weight with further dieting and more exercise and as a result my blood sugar levels lowered and it meant I could keep off the insulin. I joined the walking group at the Eden Project and others in the local area which I really enjoy, it provides an added incentive to walk because if I don't attend regularly I can't keep up with the group so it has almost a competitive edge for me. The mood and atmosphere at Eden really encourages people to interact, staff and visitors alike. People come with a positive frame of mind to Eden, it is extremely encouraging for people who have various health conditions. It can change your mindset for the day. You get a sense that life is carrying on around you and you can see nature evolving. It’s very powerful.

In the last 7 years I have gone from 23 ½ stone to 16 stone. My medication has now dropped to one tablet once a day and I am only two points into the diabetic range on my HbA1c test.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO OTHERS?

It is extremely important to lose weight with a healthy diet and exercise. The effects of these in combination can be dramatic. When I was first diagnosed, I wasn’t told I could reverse type 2 diabetes. So the mental approach was one of reluctant acceptance. From the moment I was told it could be turned on its head, I was determined to do it and I am heading in that direction!
I really enjoy walking every week in the company of fellow diabetics whom I now class as friends.

Vanetta

I never believed that I could change my diabetic diagnosis but I do now.

John

I love the atmosphere and ethos of Eden, it resonates with me.

Clint
I was diagnosed as being a borderline diabetic in March 2017. It had been prevalent in my family; most of the women were diabetic.

**WHAT DID YOU DO?**

I was referred by my GP to Hayley, the Social Prescribing Navigator at St Austell Healthcare. She is excellent and very practical and has inspired me on my journey and helps to keep me positive and see that anything is possible. I have been proactive losing weight and improving my fitness.

I am a ‘little and often person’ with food. I need to make sure that the little and often items are healthy items. One of my problem foods has always been bread, I am trying to use it as a treat rather than a regular part of my diet. I have also learnt that if sugar is at the top of a list of ingredients then don’t go there!

I take part regularly in the diabetic walking group at the Eden Project and I have found the walk to be very beneficial to me. First I started walking with the slow group but I think I am now ready to walk with the medium group. I hope that my husband will join me at one of the other weekly walks in the local area and it will be something we can both do together. I am feeling confident enough now to think about training to be a walk leader and I’m interested in being involved in other volunteering opportunities at the Eden Project.

My diabetic journey is ongoing and I am determined to get it under control.

**WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO OTHERS?**

I would say to anyone who has been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes to take it seriously. A lot of people think that they can just leave it until tomorrow. But it needs to be dealt with by healthy eating, getting excess weight off and a total life style change to be effective.
I attend annual medicals because of my learning difficulties and health problems. I have an under-active thyroid and struggle with my weight. About a year ago I was told my blood sugar and my weight was up and I was diagnosed as a pre-diabetic. I was very worried about this because my sister had diabetes and she didn’t manage her medication very well and I worry about going blind or having injections.

WHAT DID YOU DO?

I was referred to Hayley, the Social Prescribing Navigator at St Austell Healthcare – who I like very much. She has really helped me, she told me I needed to cut down on carbohydrates but it was not making much difference so I started to increase my exercise. When I went back for another appointment my blood sugars and weight came down a bit. Each week I go swimming and to the gym. I don’t like to walk on my own as I get worried, so I have really enjoyed the walking group at Eden Project and I really look forward to it. At first I was a bit worried about attending but I found everyone was friendly and now I love it. It made me feel better seeing other people with diabetes and to know that I’m not on my own. It also makes me walk a bit faster so it does me good. There is now another walk I do in the town which gives me a second walk each week.

I have always loved puddings so now I make sugar-free jellies with fresh berries, I also enjoy yoghurt and fruit. Most of my bread has now been cut out and I only have a sandwich occasionally. Porridge is what I like in the cold weather for breakfast and then in the warmer weather I like grapefruit. I have learnt to cut down on my portions, also my partner used to eat lots of biscuits and other unhealthy food but now he has been told to cut down so that has made it easier for me. My weight has gone down by 4kgs and Hayley has been very pleased with me. If I have done really well I feel so delighted after my appointment.

[Interview carried out with help from Valerie’s support worker]
In the summer of 2015 I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. It was at a fairly low level but it needed to be controlled by diet. My first move was to make dietary changes and although I rarely had much sugar I cut back on the carbohydrates. This stabilized my blood sugar. Then in July 2016 while I was on holiday I had really severe reaction to the blood pressure medication I was taking. That was when I decided I need to take control of my health.

I knew that I needed to lose weight so I cut down on beer significantly apart from special occasions like a beer festival. I ate mainly salad and some fruit and my weight lowered from 88kgs to 78kgs. Even though I am not so strict now, I do keep an eye on my weight and like to stay between 75-78kgs.

I joined the diabetes walking group at the Eden Project which I really enjoy. I class myself as a lazy person and I usually only walk with my wife, however I am happy to walk at Eden without her – it is probably the only place I would do this. I love the atmosphere and ethos of Eden, it resonates with me. I don’t have much knowledge of plants but I really enjoy the different seasons and looking at the plants as I walk. On the practical side the scheduled walks in a group works well to encourage me to go and the paths are good and comfortable to walk on, I like it that I don’t need any special equipment to walk.

What would you say to others?

My advice to someone diagnosed with type 2 diabetes would be choose a time of year to start losing weight. It is much easier in the summer with salads and lighter meals. Cut down on booze and get plenty of exercise. I have found the Eden Project is a great place to do just that.
I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes seven years ago. I had no idea I was diabetic but I was feeling really ill. I was at the point of collapse and whilst having tests for anaemia I also found out I was diabetic. I was feeling so poorly and also facing a major operation so that meant my diabetes was not my priority. Our family has a lot of dealings with diabetes. My brother, my father and his cousin are all type 2 diabetic. My father managed to get control of his diabetes by losing weight; he even managed to come off insulin. His cousin did not and unfortunately he had to have his leg amputated.

WHAT DID YOU DO?

Since being diagnosed I have tried to lose some weight but due to my mental health I started comfort eating and everything got worse. I was prescribed medication and still I didn’t really get on top of things. Then last year I saw St Austell Healthcare’s diabetic nurse, who was very supportive. I attended a group meeting at my GP surgery where they talked about healthy eating and the importance of exercise. At the meeting they told us about the diabetic walking group at the Eden Project. I joined the group and started to feel much more positive. I really like walking as part of the group at Eden and there is no mud! It’s lovely to be in a place where you can watch the seasons change too there is always something different to see even over a short period of time.

I lost a stone in weight and came off the anti-depressants. However I still couldn’t deal with the diabetes while everything seemed like a vicious circle and unfortunately my tablets were increased. I was then referred by my GP to see St Austell Healthcare’s Social Prescribing Navigator, Hayley. Her support and encouragement enabled me to lose another stone in weight. My confidence has returned and I have managed to get back into the various roles that I had been able to do so easily at one time, but have seemed so hard until recently.
I would say to others, take note of the latest research, follow advice and join this walking scheme and you can keep your diabetes under control.

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Judith

I was referred by my GP to Hayley, the Social Prescribing Navigator at St Austell Healthcare. She is excellent and very practical and has inspired me on my journey and helps to keep me positive and see that anything is possible.

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Neena
I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes 10 years ago – I had a raging thirst and I was losing weight without even trying so I knew something was going on. However, because I had been ill for 25 years with ME (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis) I just accepted my diabetes diagnosis. I had been used to taking tablets, so I didn’t really feel a great deal of difference when I was put on Metformin, two tablets twice a day. The only advice I was given was a very slim leaflet.

I knew my diabetic diagnosis was serious and I knew that my lifestyle had to change. At first I struggled as my ME meant that I couldn’t go on five-mile bike rides or go to the gym. My blood sugars had been very high at the beginning of the year – possibly because I had been tested in my birthday month! It was at this point that I was referred to Hayley, the Social Prescribing Navigator at St Austell Healthcare. That was the first time that I felt there was any support for me.

Soon after, I started attending exercise classes and I did my first walk in June 2017 at the Eden Project. I have continued with this walk ever since. I have seen changes in me that perhaps others would not think were huge improvements, but for me they make a huge difference. I can now sit for longer at my sewing machine on the days I feel better. I so much enjoy sewing, knitting and crochet. Cooking is difficult for me because I can’t stand for long and I have to adapt food for my husband as he needs calorie-packed food! I try to go for no carbohydrates and then if some slips in it is still low. I managed to lose 6 stone and although I have put some back on my weight is stable and I realise that my diabetes is something that needs continual monitoring.

I have had no visits to the doctor because I don’t need them for my ME and I see Hayley for diabetes-related issues. Recently I was told I could reduce two Metformin tablets, I am delighted that this medication has now halved.

What would you say to others?

Take note of the latest research, follow advice and join this walking scheme and you can keep your diabetes under control. This could result in being able to reduce medication or in some cases not have to have any. You need to be strong-willed and determined.
I found out that I was diabetic in February 2014. I had an inkling that I wasn’t right for a couple of months. I had been out for an afternoon tea with masses of cakes and I had eaten quite a lot. When I got home I had to go to the loo a lot and thought something was not right. I then had it confirmed by my GP. My initial HbA1c reading was 95mmol/mol, which was very high, and I felt quite stressed by the result.

I thought I would be strict with myself and sort this out. I hardly ate anything for several months, cutting out carbohydrates totally. I then had other unrelated health issues and became quite depressed. I had no advice. As I had been a nurse I had knowledge about diabetes but that is not the same as personal advice. After about 6 months I was sent to the Diabetic Centre at Treliske and I got included in a diabetic survey which helped as I saw a dietician and the diabetic nurse. The doctor had started me on Metformin which made me quite ill. I went back to the doctor about 1 year later, and because my HbA1c had shown my blood sugars had come down, he took me off Metformin.

Over the next while I lost two stone through hard work and exercise. I eat a healthy low-carb diet but do allow myself occasional treats but then pull it back in. At the end of last year, I joined the diabetic walking group at Eden and attend regularly. I enjoy the walking and the company of others. I like to walk at least 10,000 steps five days per week. My HbA1c has come down quite considerably. My last test was 50mmol/mol so a big difference since I was first diagnosed.

What would you say to others?

My advice to someone who has been diagnosed would be not to be overwhelmed and not panic about the extreme side of losing limbs and blindness. Take it a step at a time and take advice from the medical practitioners. Do small manageable changes to start with, and then build on that.
I was diagnosed with type-2 diabetes 25 years ago. I was aware that I was needing to go to the toilet all the time, feeling tired and had increased thirst but it was only when a colleague said you might have diabetes that I went to have myself checked out and found that I did have it. It was quite a shock as I had no one else in the family with it. I started on medication and also a diet to try and control it but unfortunately I ended up going onto insulin which I have been taking for twenty years.

Recently I retired to Cornwall and for the first year my blood sugars were out of control. I had left a busy job behind and I didn’t know many people so I spent a lot of time at home and I put on another stone. I was very anxious about it all and was very scared of hypos (when your blood glucose level is too low).

I was referred to Hayley, the Social Prescribing Navigator at St Austell Healthcare, and Esther the diabetic nurse. My HbA1c levels at the time were at 81. At this point my life was turned around. Hayley has been a huge encouragement to me because she was totally understanding of what I wanted to do in getting my blood sugar under control and to lose weight. Through Hayley, I attended a 12 week healthy eating course where I learnt about food portion sizes and the importance of drinking water daily. I attend the diabetes walking group at the Eden Project, and some of the other walking groups in the St Austell area. I was also guided to a knitting group and find my days are very well spent and have met so many lovely people. It has been great to walk through the town and be recognised and spoken to.

The next part of my journey starts next week with a healthy eating programme and also being moved onto different insulin which I hope will enable me to not only lose weight but really take charge of my health.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO OTHERS?

Once you have got over the initial shock, keep more active and eat sensibly reducing carbohydrates. My last HbA1c result was 65! Definitely a move in the right direction! I cannot thank Hayley and her team enough. I can’t remember the last time I had to see a doctor!
HbA1c range for normal (non-diabetic) adults: Below 6.0%, or below 42 mmol/mol
HbA1c range for pre-diabetes: 6.0% to 6.4%, or 42 to 47 mmol/mol
HbA1c range for diabetes: 6.5% or above, or 48 mmol/mol or above.

WEMWBS (THE WARWICK-EDINBURGH MENTAL WELL-BEING SCALE)
A SCALE OF 14 POSITIVELY WORDED ITEMS FOR ASSESSING A POPULATION'S MENTAL WELLBEING SUMMED TO PROVIDE A SINGLE SCORE RANGING FROM 14-70.
Mean score for the general population is 51 in the UK.

BMI (BODY MASS INDEX)
A MEASURE THAT USES HEIGHT AND WEIGHT TO WORK OUT IF YOUR WEIGHT IS HEALTHY
Below 18.5 – you’re in the underweight range
Between 18.5 and 24.9 – you’re in the healthy weight range
Between 25 and 29.9 – you’re in the overweight range
Between 30 and 39.9 – you’re in the obese range

HBA1C (GLYCATED HAEMOGLOBIN)
A MARKER USED TO MEASURE LONG-TERM BLOOD SUGAR (GLUCOSE) LEVELS
HbA1c range for normal (non-diabetic) adults: Below 6.0%, or below 42 mmol/mol
HbA1c range for pre-diabetes: 6.0% to 6.4%, or 42 to 47 mmol/mol
HbA1c range for diabetes: 6.5% or above, or 48 mmol/mol or above.
What is Social Prescribing?

Social prescribing enables GPs to refer patients with medical, social, emotional or practical needs to a range of local, non-clinical services such as exercise programmes, social clubs and nature-based activities.

At the Eden Project we believe that being in and around the natural environment, and giving people social shared experiences, provides us with the basis to improve our health and wellbeing. That’s why we run regular weekly activities on our site for people with long term health condition.

www.edenproject.com/socialprescribing