

Suppers for Stable Blood Sugar Co-Founder's Story – Karen

Hi, my name is Karen. I have type 1, insulin-dependant diabetes, but my struggles with food began long before this diagnosis. I had always been an active and thin child and never gave a second thought to my weight or the food I ate. I loved to ride my bike, run, jump, play outside and be adventurous. It wasn't until I was a teenager that my issues with food, weight gain and dissatisfaction with my body began. Prior to my senior year in high school, I had spent a summer in Norway living with a rural farm family. While this incredible experience shaped my future career in agriculture, it also led to a 10-pound weight gain and the beginning of my journey with dieting and negative body image. The clincher was the 3 p.m. "midday snack." While most of the family members took one serving of the traditional and delicious pastry and jam (all made fresh), I could not get enough, knowing I would be heading home to the U.S. at the end of the summer. Thus began my first carbohydrate cravings. Once home, I would sneak down to the kitchen late at night and make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to give me the same satisfying feeling I experienced in Norway. By the end of senior year I still carried those extra 10 pounds and had attended my first weight loss program.

I began to pursue my college career in plant science and agriculture and learn about growing food. However, I was always conscious of my body and never happy with my weight. One summer I lived in the Adirondack Mountains and worked with a friend waitressing in Lake George. My friend took a job at a tiki bar where she was required to wear a bikini top and mini skirt. I remember interviewing at the same place. I refused to even try on the skimpy outfit and found work serving breakfast at a pancake house and dinner at an Italian restaurant. Boy was I around a lot of comfort food that summer!

I graduated from Cornell with a BS in Plant Science and went on to work for Cornell Cooperative Extension training vegetable farmers across upstate New York from Albany to Buffalo. Coordinating programs in Integrated Pest Management, I taught farmers new ways to use fewer pesticides. It was extremely rewarding but I gradually became interested in the economics of food and agriculture as I watched the marketplace often dictate the practices used in the field. This new passion led to an MS in Agricultural, Food and Resource Economics from Rutgers. I remember the challenges and stresses of finishing my thesis, getting married, buying a house and starting a new job with an agricultural consulting firm all at the same time. After the birth of my second child I was back in academia working at Rutgers on food and agricultural policies with both industry and government. Food, whether eating it, growing it or studying it has always been a central theme of my life!

My struggles with weight loss intensified after the birth of my children and I joined several diet programs and tried assorted diet books. I was always able to loose a few pounds initially, but then the frustration and self-loathing began as I hit a plateau and eventually gained even more back. I craved whatever I was not allowed to eat. What was wrong with me? Did I lack will power? I was successful in every aspect of my life except controlling my eating and my weight.

I would have continued on with this pattern had I not developed Type-1 Diabetes (also known as Juvenile or Insulin-Dependant Diabetes) at the age of 39. The cells in my pancreas that make insulin were destroyed due to an autoimmune reaction. From then on (for the past 14 years) I have had to rely initially on injections, and then an insulin pump, to provide insulin for my body every time I eat. Now, not only would mindless eating and over indulging lead to weight gain, but it would also lead to high blood sugars and the potential for horrific complications.... blindness, heart disease, neuropathy, amputation, kidney failure, and coma ... to name a few. It was now *imperative* that I gain control over my emotional eating and learn how to eat properly once and for all!

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My journey took me to many places. I started diet programs once again. Weigh-ins, counselors, shakes, bars, and supplements resulted only in minimal success and ever more frustration, as three times per week I had to climb on their scale and get humiliated. There had to be a better way! I figured that by now I knew as much about nutrition as the counselors but not *how* to stick to it. Nothing I did dealt effectively with my crazy appetite.

I started exercising on a regular basis by walking, running and then joining a gym. I loved the variety of exercise options offered at the gym. I could enjoy the endorphin rush of an intense spin class and then cool down with a relaxing and calming hour of yoga. I tried Pilates and felt powerful as the muscles in my core firmed up. My cardio capacity improved and I was getting stronger. It felt good to have this level of control over my diseased body. However, I still could not control my eating and cravings for sweet, chewy carbs. In fact, after a hard workout I would often come home and be so starving that I just ate for the entire rest of the afternoon!

I decided that this eating problem of mine was all in my head. So I enlisted a private weight-loss counselor. She herself had lost 80 pounds and had kept it off for years. Her approach was to use meditation and mindful eating to gain awareness of the food you put in your mouth. I had come to hate food, to see it as an enemy that I must face three or more times a day. One mistake, and I was either chasing high blood sugars and feeling lousy and irritable, or dealing with low blood sugars and debilitating hypoglycemic reactions that lead to wild swings of over eating and intense carb cravings. My meditation and counseling sessions gradually lead to a new relationship with food. I began to enjoy food and make my peace with it. I would prepare colorful and flavorful foods, eat them on attractive dishes, always sit while eating, and breathe or meditate for a few seconds before taking my first bites. I would eat slowly and fully enjoy my food, noticing the color, taste, texture and smell. My attention was only on my food while I ate. I was practicing mindfulness.

While I did reach a higher level of awareness in my relationship with food, I still had cravings and struggled to control them. Next, I enrolled in a self-hypnosis class. Surely I could hypnotize myself into controlling the connection between my brain and my mouth! I loved the deep, guided meditations and all the little tricks to remind myself of when I was about to eat something I would regret; a smooth stone to keep in my pocket at all times, a rubber band around my wrist, a red dot on the refrigerator and pantry. But I was not good at continuing the practice after the class ended. Then I saw an article about a class on developing mindfulness through a regular meditation practice and living in moment-to-moment awareness to take control over stress-related conditions. Again, this class brought me enormous comfort and healing in both the daily stress caused by living with my diabetes and my relationship with food. But once again, I was a failure. Soon after the class ended, I lost my focus and there went my meditation practice.

Another journey took me to an on-line exercise and nutrition coaching program specifically designed for and by diabetics. They set me up with a team of coaches; two exercise physiologists, one of whom herself has lived with type-1 diabetes for 25 years, a nurse whose 20 year old daughter has type 1, and a nutritionist. The nutrition program was only slightly helpful, as I had heard much of this information many times before. The exercise program, however, was fantastic even though I hardly lost any weight. They guided me with weekly e-mail exercise plans and frequent question and answer contacts. I learned to test my blood sugars before, during and after exercise and “just do it.” If my blood sugar went too low I would get depressed. If it was too high I would get angry and frustrated. I always have to lug my blood sugar meter with me around the gym, on my walks and runs, and always carry some sort of fast acting glucose. What a pain that no one else had to deal with! Why me! My gym pants and shorts have to have pockets to hold my insulin pump and

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all the paraphernalia I need to have with me. Most yoga and exercise pants for women have no pockets! Again, not fair!

By getting to know all of these diabetic athletes who have learned to take these constraints with a grain of salt, I too learned how to just do what I needed to do and enjoy the exercise and benefits for my body. So what if people see me stopping during a class to test my blood sugar. So what if I needed to sit down to eat some glucose tabs. So what if I needed to bolus an extra dose of insulin due to a miscalculation. As it happened, I discovered two other type 1 diabetics at the gym, one a yoga teacher and one a fellow exerciser in a Pilates class. We became great supporters of each other and are now life-long friends! The program helped me appreciate how important exercise is, especially for diabetics. It moves your blood and increases circulation. It strengthens your heart and expands your lung capacity. It increases your muscle mass thus enhancing your metabolism and accelerating the removal of sugar from your blood. It stimulates neurotransmitters such as endorphins and thus is a natural mood enhancer. For my 50th birthday, my family bought me my own bright blue iPod (they were trying to help) and now my walks and runs outdoors, on cardio machines at the gym and in our basement took on a whole new level of enjoyment! My teenagers showed me how to load up my iPod with my music, the tunes that I enjoy and make me happy. Some times I want songs with a fast and up-beat tempo while other times I feel more meditative and want slower, soothing music. It is all there. So what if it is one more thing to find a pocket for!

Around this time I added Suppers to my long list of weekly activities. As one coaching program ended, I found another coach to work with, this time a body builder turned nutritionist, at my gym. He helped me determine what type, how much and when to exercise (both cardio and strength) and how to couple that with what to eat before and after exercise and for the rest of my day for optimal results in terms of losing body fat, gaining lean muscle and improving blood sugar control. Over three months, I did finally see real results! My weight stayed the same, but my muscle mass increased and my blood sugar control greatly improved. I had been attending Suppers for a year when I helped start the Suppers for Stable Blood Sugar program. Unlike other programs, Suppers didn't end and leave me hanging after a few weeks. I do believe that the ongoing support of Suppers helped me achieve my desired results from the coaching. In fact, weekly support was reinforcing all of my efforts at positive change.

I should mention that over all this time, I had been using the traditional medical establishment for diabetics by seeing my endocrinologist or certified diabetes educator (CDE) every three months. They showed me rubber food servings to learn portion sizes, taught me how to count my carbohydrates and figure out how much insulin to take. They trained me to regulate my insulin with my insulin pump, a vast improvement in living relative to multiple daily injections! However, when it came to nutrition or dealing with cravings or problems controlling my appetite, all I was told was to exercise and lose weight! *I* taught *them* about my activities at the gym and results on my blood sugars. *I* taught *them* about the mindfulness approach. I do not want to dwell on the medical community except to say that in my experience some of their practices are actually contributing to the problem. I feel that if they were taking the proper approach toward prevention, our country would not be facing a diabetes epidemic whereby one in three children born today are expected to develop type 2 diabetes. Something is vastly missing!

I discovered that "something" as I sat in Dor's living room hearing a presentation on a healthy cooking and eating support group called "The Suppers Programs," designed to stabilize blood sugars. While she was initially talking about the rollercoaster of blood sugars encountered by recovering alcoholics, a field I knew nothing about, everything she said

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related exactly to my life with diabetes and my daily struggles to maintain stable blood sugars. At the end of the presentation, I approached Dor and gushed as I so desperately wanted to learn how to control my cravings and weight, and *finally* take control over my brain and my eating. She had explained how both hypo- and hyper-glycemic conditions in our bodies trigger various neurotransmitters and hormones that induce cravings and *force* our brains to take control over our eating. Our body's mechanisms are very powerful when it comes to feeding its cells, especially those in the brain. Thus, a craving is borne, and once established, is nearly impossible to suppress with meditation alone. Some people need to change their personal biochemistry by changing how they eat. Suppers is a learn-by-doing program. As I have mentioned earlier, I knew *what* I should be eating, but *doing* it on a regular basis was the hard part. To think that at Suppers I could actually learn and participate in making blood sugar stabilizing meals that tasted delicious (a critical component for keeping my family happy) using lean proteins, lots of low carb vegetables, and healthy fats. No more fear of fats and obsession about calories and restrictions. The Suppers concept of "nutritional harm reduction" suited me just fine: start adding in the healthy things and slowly the foods you want to eliminate will fade from your plate, your house and your desires. This was about eating what your body needs and preventing cravings before they ever get started! Wow was I excited!

As soon as Suppers meetings got started in September, I was there! I taught Dor about diabetes and she taught me how to eat! I invited several friends who also struggled with issues of weight, depression and anger. We all had kids for whom we were desperate to develop better eating habits. We all had husbands whose health and stress we worried about and who required their food to be delicious. We were all on board and loved the program! Every week I learned to cook new recipes... egg frittatas and quiches, coconut milk soups with salmon, turkey chili loaded with healthy vegetables and protein, lentils, black beans, and curries of all sorts. We roasted spaghetti squash and every other vegetable we thought could be roasted, shredded every type of vegetable to make slaws and prepared salads of every type and flavor. We also learned to use spinach and kale and make them taste good. I learned how to cut vegetables to make them taste better. Who would have thought that how you cut the food could make such a big difference in the flavor? I learned about the power of lemon and lime juice for boosting flavors in soups and salad dressings, the hunger prevention ability of nuts and between-meal snacking, the blood sugar moderating effects of eating protein, fiber and fats along with a carb to prevent spikes. The list goes on and on. During meetings we read books and gave book reports, practiced deep breathing and body relaxation, shared our successes with recipes, and offered support in our struggles and setbacks. We also heard presentations from nutritionists and physicians on a wide range of topics: the importance of healthy fats like Omega-3's, supplemental vitamins and minerals, and the acid-alkaline balance in our food and bodies. We are always learning and sharing!

As soon as we started Suppers for Stable Blood Sugar, we realized that type 1 (T-1) and type 2 (T-2) diabetics needed separate meetings. While the foods they eat are basically the same, T-1s must be much more concerned about counting their carbs and frequently testing their blood sugar. There are specifics about using insulin pumps, continuous glucose monitors and other topics that are of particular interest to T-1s and insulin-dependent T-2s. The hard part has been reaching out to the T-1 community, as most of the traditional endocrinologists and dieticians are leery of a program not run through the medical establishment. I had to drive an hour to reach a hospital-based support group, there were none closer.

The joys, learning and growth of the participants in the Suppers for Stable Blood Sugar meetings have been nothing short of miraculous. An avowed carb addict discovered an

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actual craving for vegetables and effortlessly lost 25 pounds. Another reported peace at family dinner tables as everyone was happy with the food and mom did not have to make separate "diet food" just for her. Another member found the support and encouragement she needed to join a gym and build exercise into her life. Together we read and shared, learned, cried and hugged. OK, maybe the crying happens when we are chopping onions, but much of our growth occurs around the stove, cutting board and at the Suppers table.

I have found joy and support in helping others on their journey to health. I flourish in sharing what I have learned in my long 14 years with diabetes. I find strength for making my own good choices. I continually share supportive and informative articles with the group. We all have so much to learn and explore. My heart heals as I help others heal emotionally and physically. Yoga and exercise have brought much benefit to my life with diabetes and I thrive on encouraging and supporting others to find something physical that works for them. In the last year, my A1C (a measure of blood sugar control over a 3-month period) has declined over a full point from my typical readings in the low 7s, to readings that are now in the low 6s. I could never have achieved this level of diabetes management without the support and education of Suppers.

Suppers has given me the guidance I needed to finally stop drinking caffeinated coffee first thing every morning. Coffee had always spiked my blood sugars and was not a good way to start my day. However, I was addicted to this stimulant and relied on its effects to get me going in the morning, both to clear out my brain fog and start up my intestinal tract. Daily fish oil supplements turned out to be the single most effective tool in quitting coffee. I just lost the taste for it! I learned all about the benefits of fish oil and healthy fats at Suppers meetings, both from guest speakers and in the normal course of people sharing their experience. Now I start my morning with the juice of a whole lemon in hot water and a few drops of stevia.

The recipes we prepare at Suppers are loaded with fiber. Increasing my vegetable consumption and removing processed foods have helped end my daily struggle with constipation. Diabetics are particularly prone to constipation as we often suffer from dehydration. This results when our blood sugars are high and our kidneys draw extra fluids from our systems to flush out sugar. I was worried about the consequences of removing my daily coffee that "got things moving" in the morning. However, I have no problem when I eat the Suppers way. I also discovered chia seeds. These little black or white seeds are loaded with healthy Omega-3 fatty acids. They absorb 10 times their weight in water and are amazing at moving things through my intestinal tract in a very gentle manner. I add a few teaspoons to my foods or stir them up in a glass of water whenever things start slowing down.

I have come to rely on the weekly support of Suppers. There are times when I facilitate up to three meetings a week. While I have added a wide range of recipes to my dinner repertoire, I am faced daily with the issue of "what to serve for dinner tonight?" The meals we design and prepare at Suppers meetings are a never-ending source of inspiration and guidance. I often head directly to the grocery store after a meeting to buy the ingredients for the dishes we just prepared. That will be my family's meal for dinner tonight! Again, as much as I know intellectually what I *should* be eating, I have discovered that I need and rely on the continual support and inspiration of Suppers to *actually prepare* and *eat* the foods that keep my body healthy. We live in a food culture that constantly throws roadblocks and detours in our way. Suppers helps me to steer clear of the food hazards lurking all around! Do I ever slip up? You bet I do! But it is a huge comfort to know that Suppers is always there to help put me back on track.

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Diabetes never stands alone. I have developed another autoimmune disorder, a type of hypothyroidism called Hashimoto's Disease. Thanks to friends at Suppers who also live with an under active thyroid, I have learned about foods that can either support or inhibit healthy thyroid function. And then there is menopause. This past year has also brought with it the erratic production of my reproductive hormones and the physical changes that result, mainly unpredictable periods of insulin resistance and hormonal depression. Again, around the Suppers table I have learned and shared solutions with others who also want to manage this challenge in as natural a way as possible. It has eased my soul as I find support and share my struggles in this health journey. Thank you Suppers!

I plan to continue to learn tools that will help people at Suppers heal both their physical bodies with nutrition and movement, and their emotional and mental bodies through mentoring, and of course love, empathy and compassion!