

Originally published Jan. 25, 1993

The tyrant within shows no mercy

By SUSAN AGER

Free Press Columnist

Reader comments: An unnamed woman from Allen Park suggested this column as being one of Susan Ager's best, being about how she was diagnosed with, and continues to live with, Type I diabetes.

This month marks the 28th anniversary of the most intimate, most uneasy relationship of my life.

I was a few weeks shy of 11 when I was diagnosed with diabetes, after a month of weight loss and fatigue so dramatic that I was two or three pounds lighter each day, and would stumble home from school, throw my bookbag on the floor and fall into bed until dinner.

I had never heard of the disease the doctor said I had. But he told me it would be forever.

Thank God, at 11, I didn't realize how long that was.

My partner in life, diabetes has made me who I am, yet I hardly understand it. As old married couples will say, though, we've reached some accommodation, my disease and I. Problem is I'm the one who's done all the compromising. It never relents, never retreats.

I measure its mood several times a day with a \$39 gadget that, after I've pricked my finger and squeezed out a drop of blood, tells me how far off normal my blood sugar is. A normal person, even after a hot fudge sundae, will register between 80 and 140. For diabetics, a handful of potato chips or the adrenalin of 20 minutes of high emotion will shoot the number to 200.

Diabetes demands

If my number is high, I inject insulin. If it's low, I eat carbohydrates. If it's normal, I sigh and wonder what I did right, knowing full well that other times when I do everything right the numbers are dramatically wrong.

The injections are the least of it. I now take five or six a day, usually in my abdomen, right through my clothes, often in public. But they're no more difficult or painful than brushing my teeth. The hard part of the disease is paying attention -- every meal, every day, no vacations.

And the worst part is there's no getting away with anything. Sure, I cheat. Everyone does. A sliver of a friend's birthday cake, a few after-dinner mints, a foil sack of airline honey-roasted peanuts. But for every sin I pay a price within an hour: higher blood sugar, and a sick, thick, sluggish feeling. Over time, high and erratic blood sugars destroy the tiny blood vessels in the eyes and kidneys, and speed up the hardening of arteries, dramatically increasing the risk of blindness, kidney disease, heart failure, loss of limbs.

Although I worry about each twinge and ache and skipped heartbeat, I'm fine so far. No complications except those of the spirit: regular vexation over sharing my body with an unreasonable, unyielding, unsympathetic bully.

Then, though, I feel guilty for resenting a disease that has neither killed nor maimed me, but with which I've managed to build a life, albeit an idiosyncratic one.

An altered life

In the same way that tallness or shortness or smarts or birthmarks thread their way through a child's developing personality, my disease served as a kernel for the adult I became.

Its possible threats to an unborn child scared me away from having any. I joined Zero Population Growth when I was 13, never fantasized about being a mom and am now content to be childless.

The rules and schedules by which I lived turned me into a rebel against almost all rules, regulations, expectations. A friend my age who is a 30-year diabetic carries the same trait. Her husband calls her "the rebel without a cause."

Because diabetics are prone to early death, I've never imagined living past my mid-50s. I resisted investing in an IRA because you have to be 59 to collect it. And I hate planning, even for vacations. For me, the future is uncertain and dark, so I cast my hopes with today.

Who would I be, I sometimes wonder, if it weren't for this disease? Do I control it, or does it control me? Alas, we alternate leading the dance. Maybe I attribute to it all the soft spots of personality that would have been there anyhow.

And yet, it's done me good, too.

I'm healthier than I would have been if I'd ranged freely and without limits through the aisles of my life's supermarkets.

I'm attentive to people and problems, I think, because I've learned that paying attention involves more than focusing now and again, but requires daily, even hourly commitment.

I'm resilient, having learned early that a good number will follow a bad the way a bad number will follow a good. I can't take a string of bad numbers personally, or I'll lose the energy to turn them around.

Chronic disease, I've learned, is best approached day by day, just like life. Each meal is a new chance to succeed.

Stretching pleasures

Best, though, from my perspective, is that my diabetes has taught me to find more joy in food than anyone else I know.

When I was young and just diagnosed, my mother and captain of my diet would prepare my evening snack by counting 12 salted peanuts into a shot glass. I would separate the peanuts and suck each half until it had disintegrated, thereby stretching my snack to last hours.

I'm still one to stretch my pleasures, to lick my plate. To try, whenever I can, to hold the hand of my disease and act as if we're friends.