

Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

When Barbara Mora (Paiute/Diné) found out she had diabetes, she went home and cried. For months she was depressed and had a hard time doing even small tasks, like testing her blood sugar. But one day she saw her Diné aunt greet the morning sun with a prayer, sit down and test her blood sugar.

Barbara remembers watching in amazement as her aunt sat at a table with her finger stick, the test strips and a glucometer all set out before her. She sat back straight. In a matter-of-fact way, she pricked her finger, drew a drop of blood and placed it on the test strip. She put the test strip in the glucometer, wrote down the results and was done!

Barbara was in awe! She had been terrified of the finger stick! She had been making a "big production" out of testing her blood sugar. Watching her clan aunt sit up perfectly straight, calm and with dignity, and test her blood sugar, is a sight Barbara will never forget.

This vision of strength spoke directly to Barbara's spirit. "You are a Paiute/Diné woman. You are a proud woman, a strong warrior woman. Don't go dragging your tail about a little thing like testing your blood sugar! Get up in the morning. Say your prayers. Sit up straight. Test your blood sugar and get on with your day!"



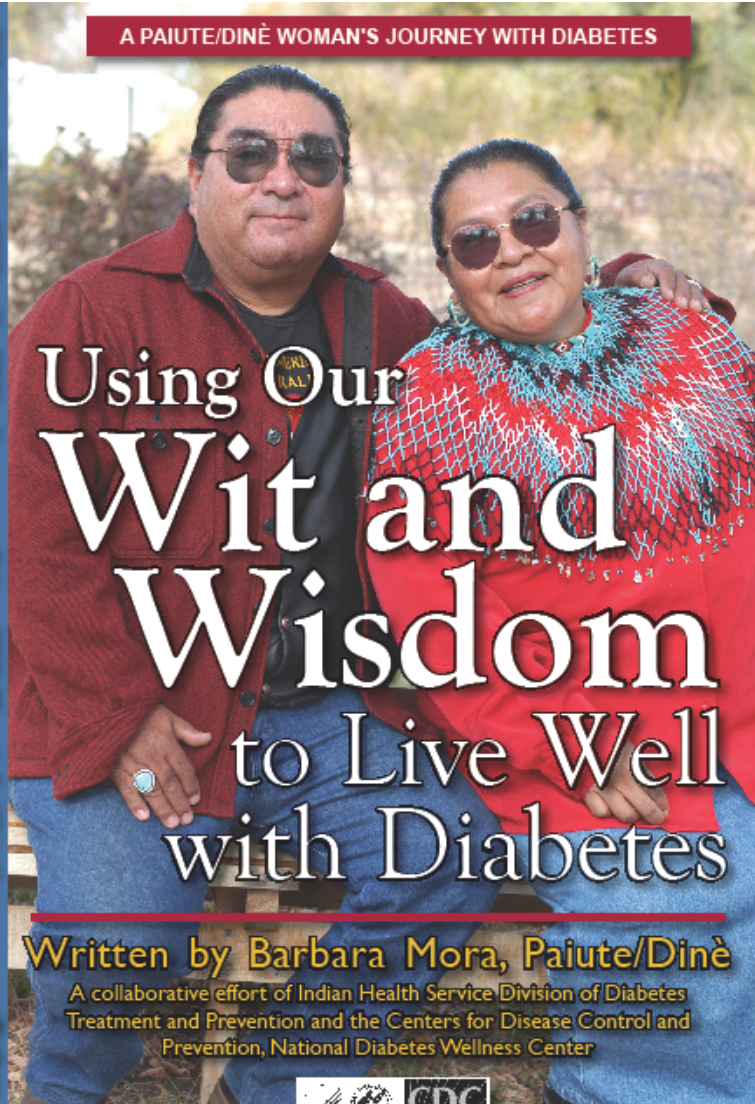
It is with insight and humor that Barbara tells of her journey with diabetes. Barbara's words will help every reader use their wit and wisdom to live well with diabetes.



Using Our Wit & Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

Barbara Mora

A PAIUTE/DINÉ WOMAN'S JOURNEY WITH DIABETES



Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

Written by Barbara Mora, Paiute/Diné

A collaborative effort of Indian Health Service Division of Diabetes Treatment and Prevention and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Diabetes Wellness Center



PRAISE FOR NATIVE AUTHOR BARBARA MORA

“*Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes* is such an awesome book! It touched my heart deeply and gave me understanding that I will always carry. Having diabetes is such a hard thing. This book will help our people know that they are not alone.”

- Reyna Rivera (Pomo), Medical Assistant
Sonoma County Indian Health Project

“As people with diabetes, we all must go on our own journeys, but Barbara’s ability to share her story somehow makes my journey a little less frustrating. Her Native way of expressing her feelings is comforting to me.”

- Luane Spruce, RN, BSN (Seneca)
Diabetes Grant Administrator, Seneca Nation of Indians

“When I found out my husband had diabetes, we both felt instant depression. I read this book out loud to him, and we both cried, because we had the same thoughts and feelings as Barbara.”

- Colleen M. Smith (Duck Valley Indian Reservation)
Diabetes Coordinator, Yomba Shoshone Tribe

“Indian people are often in denial about having diabetes, are afraid to face the truth, and afraid to explain our feelings. Barbara tells the truth about having diabetes. She understands the emotions and helps us understand.”

- Paula Gray (Hupa)
Diabetes Data Coordinator, K’Ima:W Medical Center

“I cannot say enough. Barbara’s book is outstanding.”

- Beverly Calderon, MS, RD, CDE
Area Health Promotion/Disease Prevention Coordinator
California Area Indian Health Service

“This book profoundly affected my life, as an individual and a professional nurse.”

- Carol Ann Strasheim, BSN, RN
Nurse Educator, Area Diabetes Consultant
Billings Area Indian Health Service

“*Wit and Wisdom* is a wonderful book. Instead of just a bunch of facts and figures that can sometimes overwhelm people, it gives a true matter-of-fact perspective on what it is like to live with the fear of diabetes, and then be diagnosed with it. It goes on to relay a feeling of hope. Barbara shows that, by working at it, diabetes can be controlled.”

- Glenda Valliere, RN
Triage Nurse, Peter Christensen Health Center, Lac du Flambeau

“I gave this book to a person with diabetes. She thought the chapter about smudging your glucometer was excellent and started doing this. It has helped her have better control of her diabetes.”

- Carol Schweitzer, RN
Diabetic Coordinator, Leo Pocho Clinic

“Barbara shows much courage to come forth and talk so honestly about having diabetes. This book will help other Native people with diabetes talk about their feelings.”

- Gracie Apachito
Medicare/Medicaid Outreach and Heart Saver Recruiter
Pine Hill Health Center, Ramah Navajo Reservation

“Barbara’s honest story allowed me to see diabetes through the eyes of a patient. It touched me deeply. I laughed and cried. It is a great resource for patients and providers.”

- Norma Cruz, RD, CDE
Director, Albuquerque Service Unit Diabetes Program

“This book is wonderful. It will resonate with any American Indian/Alaska Native with diabetes. I am very thankful to Barbara Mora for having the courage to share her story.”

- Kristin Graziano, DO, MHP
Director, Clinical Diabetes Services
Tuba City Regional Health Care Corporation



“ Native Americans,
indigenous people,
are not weak,
confused people.
We are strong,
smart and wise.
We have quick wits
and love to laugh.
We have generous spirits.
We are grounded
in Mother Earth,
connected to our families
and communities.
We are children
of the Creator,
vibrant and
forever blessed. ”

Using Our

Wit and Wisdom

to Live Well
with Diabetes



Written by Barbara Mora, Paiute/Dinè

A collaborative effort of Indian Health Service
Division of Diabetes Treatment and Prevention and
the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,
National Diabetes Wellness Program



Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes is the story of a Paiute/Diné woman's journey with diabetes. Barbara Mora wrote this book to help other American Indians, Alaska Natives and all those who are beginning their journeys with diabetes.

Indian Health Service Division of Diabetes Treatment and Prevention (IHS DDTP) is proud to be a part of the publication of *Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes*. The production of this book is a reflection of our mission to develop, document and sustain a public health effort to prevent and control diabetes in American Indian and Alaska Native peoples. Staff at IHS DDTP sincerely believe in our mission. We are grateful to Barbara Mora for sharing her story in such an honest and heartfelt way.

To order additional copies of *Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes*:

- ◆ Call: 505.248.4182
- ◆ Email: diabetesprogram@ihs.gov
- ◆ Order online: www.ihs.gov/medicalprograms/diabetes

Pages or quotes from this book may be reprinted. Please include the statement: "From the book entitled, *Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes*, written by Barbara Mora (Paiute/Diné) and published by Indian Health Service Division of Diabetes Treatment and Prevention."

Editing, photography and design by Cecilia Kayano.
Layout and graphics by Paula Barr.

September 2007

C O N T E N T S

Introduction ◆ 11

1: The Myth of Diabetes ◆ 13

2: "You Have Diabetes" ◆ 25

3: Blood Sugar Testing Meltdowns ◆ 39

4: The Storm Before the Storm ◆ 51

5: Two Dark Years and Three Blessings ◆ 63

6: "Eat This Cake Now!" ◆ 75

7: Amazing Acts of Kindness ◆ 87

8: Meet My Perfect Family ◆ 103

9: "The Sweat Lodge Might Help You" ◆ 117

10: Wear Purple Shoes ◆ 127

Barbara Mora Biography ◆ 139

A Note About Depression ◆ 151

INTRODUCTION

...with best intentions



I had diabetes for about ten years when I was asked to tell my story in a book. At first, it was just a short book explaining how to test blood sugar. But as I started writing each chapter, the book became longer. And it was less about testing blood sugar and more about everything else.

It became much more personal.

Over and over, I asked myself, “Should I write this book?” I have never considered myself an author. I am not an authority on diabetes.

To find the answer, I offered tobacco and prayed. It came to me in word after word, chapter after chapter. I needed to tell my story from my heart. I thought, “Maybe if I tell my story of diabetes in the most truthful way I can, someone will have an easier time with diabetes.”

That is my intention. I wrote this book to help even one person. As I was writing, I kept thinking, “I wish I had a book like this when I first found out I had diabetes.”

Looking back, there were so many things I wish I had known about diabetes. That is the purpose of this book. To say the things that are not said about diabetes. To explain why diabetes hurt me so much and how it helped me so much.

I do not want praise or fame or attention from this book. I want to honor all Native people who have been affected by diabetes. You are my inspiration. Thank you, Creator, the elders, and all my ancestors for helping me with my diabetes journey and the writing of this book.

It is with best intentions, and not wanting to harm anyone, that I have put these words on paper. May you read them and accept them with an open heart.

Barbara Mora

Bishop, California, September 2007



THE MYTH OF DIABETES

Does the Creator Give Diabetes
to People Who are Bad?

“ My mother thought the Creator was punishing her by giving her diabetes. She thought someone had wished bad things to happen to her. ”

When I was a child, I heard many myths about diabetes. People called it “bad blood” or said that if you had diabetes in your family, then your family had “a touch of sugar.” I didn’t know how people got it. My mother once told me that only mean people got it. She said all the bitter and nasty thoughts of mean people made their blood bad.

I thought, “Well, I’m a nice person, so I won’t get it.” I was so relieved.

But I wanted extra protection against this scary disease. My father was Dinè (Navajo), and he didn’t have diabetes in his family. Since

Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

I spoke some Navajo, sang Navajo songs, and wore turquoise jewelry like my father, I felt surely I would be immune to diabetes.

For even more diabetes prevention power, I made deals with the Creator. I bargained, “If I’m extra kind to my mother and other people, then please don’t give me diabetes.” I was nice. I focused on my similarities to my father. I prayed. Surely I was protected against diabetes.

WAITING FOR THE MEDICINE MAN

During this time, my mother developed severe complications due to diabetes, but told only my father. She thought the Creator was punishing her by giving her diabetes. She thought someone had wished bad things to happen to her. My father told her, “We will find a medicine man and get you cured.”

My father and family searched for the right medicine man. My mother stayed angry and upset, waiting for him to come and cure her. She didn’t take steps to help herself. She didn’t check her blood sugar or go to clinic appointments, and many times she didn’t take her diabetes medicine as directed.

She did not take control of her diabetes. She felt angry, upset, overwhelmed and not in control. She stayed that way for the rest of her life. She passed away from kidney failure due to diabetes. My father was wracked with guilt. He had not found the right medicine man to help her.

DIABETES STRIKES

When the day came ten years ago, and my doctor told me I had diabetes, I couldn’t believe it! I was terrified that my

1: The Myth of Diabetes

mother’s fate would be my own. I was shocked and angry! I couldn’t believe the Creator had let me get diabetes! He forgot our deal! For awhile, I lost faith and could only see a dark, terrifying future. I felt like the doctor had handed me a death sentence.

*I couldn’t believe the Creator
had let me get diabetes!
He forgot our deal!*

My doctor saw my immense pain and fear. He had patients lined up waiting for him, but he gave me time. He closed the door and let me cry. He told me my diabetes did not have to be like my mother’s or anyone else’s. I could create my own life with diabetes. I could decide how to *live well with diabetes*. I could choose. I could have control.

My husband, Bob, drove me home. I sat there in the passenger seat, holding my glucometer and a booklet on how to test blood sugar. I didn’t speak. Bob kept looking at me. When we walked into the house, I burst into tears, and Bob calmly said, “We have to deal with this. Whatever you have to do, I’ll do too.” Then he quietly walked into our kitchen, opened the refrigerator and cupboards and threw away any food that had sugar in it.

During those first few weeks, Bob was calm and ready to do whatever I needed. When I was overwhelmed with diabetes information, Bob read the glucometer instructions for me! He read the lists of what to eat and what to avoid! He learned about Hemoglobin A1c! He was the clear-headed thinker. His acceptance and calmness made it possible for me to feel sad, cry and then slowly start feeling better.

Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

THE FIRST FEW MONTHS WITH DIABETES

I started telling some friends and family members that I had diabetes. For some, it was too scary. They thought, “Oh no! If Barbara has it, I might get it!”

Others were angry. Their actions seemed to say, “How dare you get diabetes! You are upsetting me by getting diabetes. I told you you should have lost weight! I told you you should have gone to ceremony!”

And others seemed to avoid the subject. They did not want me to be weak, in need or different. They pretended I didn’t have it and nothing had changed. “Here, eat this cake! Eat this cake!” was their response.

The first few months with diabetes were tough. My blood sugar levels were going up and down while my medication was being adjusted to fit my needs. I had many emotional ups and downs. Every time I was supposed to test my blood sugar, I just put my head down on the table and cried. Looking back, I think I was depressed.

During those difficult months, I made myself go to a diabetes clinic meeting once a month. I don’t know if I was really hearing the words of the health staff or other people with diabetes. They were saying I could live well and feel great even though I had diabetes.

I sat there in the meetings, still depressed, still scared. But every month my depression was a little less and hope was coming back. At every meeting, I could hear more of the words of the health staff and other people with diabetes.


My spirits lifted.

I was beginning to see that I could have a happy, fulfilling life with diabetes.


1: The Myth of Diabetes

OVERCOMING DIABETES AND BEGINNING A NEW LIFE

Many years later, I am writing this book, and I have a wonderful life. I am healthy with diabetes. My blood sugar levels are good. If I can overcome the fear, the pain, the hopelessness of diabetes, you can too.



*I have a wonderful life.
I am healthy with diabetes.
If I can overcome the fear,
the pain, the hopelessness of
diabetes, you can too.*



Think of yourself as a child. You are a child with diabetes, and everything from here on in is going to be new. You are still the same person, with the same hopes, dreams and unique abilities. But you have diabetes. You now have a new challenge and a new opportunity.

When I first found out I had diabetes, I certainly did not view it as a challenge or opportunity. I viewed it as a huge problem I was not capable of overcoming. It was a problem bigger than my mother, father, medicine men, maybe even the Creator. A simple, nice Paiute/Dinè person like me couldn’t possibly overcome the problem of diabetes!

Now I know that I had it within me to overcome diabetes. In fact, having diabetes started me on a new life. During the ten years that I have had diabetes, I have become a more spiritually, emotionally and physically strong person. I have grown in wisdom and self-discipline. I am more honest.

Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

I trust and depend on people more. I have grown closer to my husband, family members and friends.

Looking back on those early days, I see that I focused on the negative. I thought, “Why did I inherit this from my mother? Why didn’t the Creator protect me from this?” Now I see the positive. I see that, along with diabetes, I inherited my mother’s generous spirit and love of people. Friends tell me, “You are just like your mother,” and it is the greatest compliment.



I see now that I cannot change the fact that I have diabetes. Moreover, I see that my having diabetes has nothing to do with “bad blood,” or bad behavior, or displeasing the Creator. I am a good person who is learning to speak Dinè and Paiute, who says her prayers in both languages, and who has diabetes.

1: The Myth of Diabetes

I accept the fact that I have diabetes, and I know I can have control over it and have control over my life.

UNDERSTANDING AND BEING STRONG

Understanding Native American diabetes myths, and making peace with our history with diabetes, did not happen in an instant. If you just found out you have diabetes, you may feel like you are all alone. If so, go look for someone you trust who will support you and help you be well with diabetes. You cannot do this alone. You will need support to do this.

I see that my having diabetes has nothing to do with “bad blood,” or bad behavior, or displeasing the Creator. I am a good person who is learning to speak Dinè and Paiute, who says her prayers, and who has diabetes.

You have two choices: to take care of yourself and be well with diabetes or not to take care of yourself. Sometimes I have felt like giving up. At times like that, I think of my ancestors. I think of the sacrifices they made to stay alive, to bear children so our people could live on.

All of us are the descendents of survivors. My ancestors do not want me to give up. Their struggle is wasted if I give up because of diabetes. Sometimes when I am at my weakest,

Using Our Wit and Wisdom to Live Well with Diabetes

I hear them say, “Daughter Barbara! You are made of stronger stuff than that!”

They’re right! Native Americans are not weak, confused people. We are strong, smart, wise. As children of survivors, we know how to fight and win battles. It is in our blood.

Having diabetes is not a punishment dealt by the Creator. He didn’t give us “bad blood.” Native Americans have bold, brave blood! If there is anyone who can overcome diabetes, if there is anyone who can show that a person can live well with diabetes, it is a Native American. The Creator gave us that strength. With the challenge of diabetes is the opportunity to return to complete wellness. The person to pave the way for



1: The Myth of Diabetes

wellness, for ourselves, and for our children, is me.

The person is you.

As you read this book, know that you are not alone. Already your extended family has expanded. You are my relation. You are in my thoughts and prayers.

I pray to the four directions.

*I am thankful for
the animals, plants,
sacred sites and healers.*

*I pray for all those
who feel alone,
those who have no one
to pray for them.*

*Let them know
they are not alone.*

Aho.



Wit & Wisdom

I asked myself:

Do I really believe diabetes
is a punishment?

Can I be a good person
and have diabetes?

How can I make peace
with myself and the Creator?

