

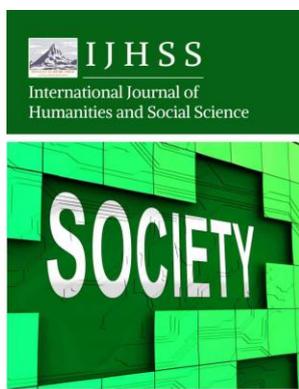
Article

The Role of Online Peer Support Forum in Coping with Diabetes: A Narrative Analysis

Shuai Liu ^{1,*}

¹ University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China

* Correspondence: Shuai Liu, University of Science and Technology Beijing, Beijing, China



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Abstract: This study investigates how diabetes patients construct and share their experiences within an online peer support forum, focusing on the narratives they use to make sense of their condition and cope with its challenges. Using posts from the Sweet Home Diabetes Forum as data, this research employs a narrative analysis framework to identify four predominant narrative types: self-acceptance, education, lifestyle modifications, and social support. The self-acceptance narrative highlights patients' journeys toward acknowledging their diagnosis, building mental resilience, and maintaining a positive outlook. The education narrative emphasizes the importance of acquiring knowledge about diabetes, sharing information, and utilizing diverse resources to better manage the condition. The lifestyle modifications narrative reflects personal efforts to adapt through changes in diet, exercise, medication routines, and glucose monitoring, fostering a sense of control. Finally, the social support narrative underscores the role of family, friends, and online communities in providing emotional encouragement, practical advice, and a sense of belonging. These narratives demonstrate how diabetes patients navigate their experiences, reconstruct their identities, and foster connection through storytelling. The findings underscore the therapeutic value of online forums, offering insights for healthcare professionals to better support patients' emotional and social needs.

Keywords: diabetes; narrative analysis; online peer support; therapeutic storytelling; chronic illness narratives

1. Introduction

Diabetes is a chronic metabolic disease characterized by elevated levels of blood glucose, which can lead to serious long-term damage to the heart, blood vessels, eyes, kidneys, and nerves. The most common form is type 2 diabetes, typically occurring in adults when the body becomes resistant to insulin or fails to produce sufficient insulin. Over the past three decades, the prevalence of type 2 diabetes has risen significantly across countries of all income levels. Type 1 diabetes, formerly known as juvenile or insulin-dependent diabetes, is a chronic condition in which the pancreas produces little to no insulin. Its exact causes and preventive measures remain unknown [1]. Nevertheless, diabetes can be managed and its complications delayed through a healthy diet, physical activity, medication, and regular screening. Recent data indicates that diabetes affects approximately 830 million people worldwide, a number that has more than quadrupled since 1990 [2]. In China, diabetes has emerged as a major public health priority, with over 140 million adults diagnosed with the condition, representing a significant portion of the global patient population [3]. Beyond physical symptoms, the disease carries a substantial

psychological burden, including stress, guilt, and isolation, as patients navigate the complexities of long-term management and social perceptions [3].

Traditionally, diabetes has been studied primarily through biomedical frameworks that focus on physiological and pathological aspects. These frameworks emphasize clinical markers such as blood glucose levels, HbA1c, and comorbidities, but they often overlook the lived experiences of patients managing the condition. While the biomedical approach has led to significant advancements in diagnosis and treatment, a strictly reductionist focus risks neglecting the social, emotional, and psychological dimensions of the illness [4]. For many patients, diabetes management involves much more than medical adherence; it requires lifestyle adjustments, emotional coping, and the navigation of complex social dynamics. To address these gaps, researchers have increasingly turned to qualitative approaches that prioritize patient narratives to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of diabetes.

Narratives offer valuable insights into how individuals make sense of their illness, cope with challenges, and reconstruct their identities. Research on illness narratives highlights how storytelling allows patients to reclaim agency, process their experiences, and connect with others [5]. By sharing their stories, individuals not only interpret their condition but also build supportive communities where they can exchange advice, validate emotions, and foster resilience. For diabetes patients, whose condition demands constant self-monitoring, strict adherence to treatment regimens, and dietary restrictions, these narratives play a crucial role in shaping their understanding of the disease and their approach to self-care.

Online peer support forums have become increasingly popular platforms for chronic illness communities to share their narratives. These forums provide a unique space where individuals can express themselves, access real-time advice, and connect with others facing similar challenges. Evidence suggests that online communities help reduce feelings of isolation while providing patients with both emotional and informational support [6]. For diabetes patients, these forums serve as vital resources for discussing a wide range of topics, including glucose monitoring, dietary strategies, emotional struggles, and family dynamics. Through these shared narratives, patients find solidarity and co-construct collective knowledge about living with the condition.

Despite the growing body of research on diabetes management, there remains a need for a greater focus on the narratives of patients within online communities. Much of the existing literature has concentrated on clinical outcomes or caregiver perspectives, leaving a gap in understanding how patients themselves articulate their experiences and make sense of their condition in digital spaces. Furthermore, while the role of online forums has been explored in various global contexts, research on diabetes narratives in China remains limited. Given the social dynamics surrounding chronic illness and the rapid expansion of internet usage, examining the narratives of Chinese diabetes patients in online forums presents a unique opportunity to understand how cultural and social contexts shape the experience of living with the disease.

2. Literature Review

Narrative analysis offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals make sense of illness experiences, construct identities, and find meaning. Ill individuals can be characterized as storytellers who reclaim their voices through the act of narration [7]. By integrating the past, present, and future, patients transform fragmented experiences into coherent life stories, enabling them to clarify emotional confusion, rebuild social connections, and foster resilience. Narratives serve as tools to connect events meaningfully, thus mitigating the disruptions to life caused by illness.

The psychological benefits of storytelling have been well-documented. Narrating life experiences enhances emotional processing and fosters a sense of agency [8]. Core

functions of illness narratives include sense-making, asserting control, transforming identity, decision-making, and building community [9]. Furthermore, anonymity in online spaces allows individuals to share health narratives without fear of judgment, thereby fostering deeper emotional connections [10]. These findings emphasize the therapeutic potential of narratives, particularly for patients with chronic conditions whose challenges are medical, psychological, and social.

For individuals managing chronic conditions, illness narratives serve as vital tools for addressing complex lifestyle changes, emotional stress, and social relationships. Illness narratives provide a framework for patients to contextualize their experiences and develop coping strategies [11]. Key narrative functions include connecting with others, remembering past experiences, and envisioning the future, all of which help patients navigate their conditions more effectively [12].

Diabetes narratives often center around themes of self-acceptance, adaptation, and social support. Research explores how social factors influence self-management among patients, providing insights into the role of community and family support [13]. Other studies investigate the relationships between social support, self-care behaviors, and self-efficacy, highlighting the importance of these factors during challenging times [14]. Personal narratives also reveal adaptive coping mechanisms and the significance of social support in managing the condition [15]. Furthermore, patient narratives influence self-efficacy and self-care behaviors, emphasizing the role of personal stories in health management [16]. By sharing their stories, patients move from being passive sufferers to active participants, reframing the condition as an integrated part of their lives rather than an external burden.

Extending this perspective, narrative analysis provides significant real-world implications for chronic disease management. Analyzing the narratives of patients helps uncover how they make sense of their condition, adapt to lifestyle changes, and rebuild their identities. Furthermore, this theoretical framework explores the value of understanding patient experiences beyond clinical metrics, highlighting the importance of emotional and social dimensions. By examining these narratives, researchers can generate insights into the firsthand experiences of patients, thus contributing to more patient-centered care approaches and informing healthcare professionals on how to better support individuals.

Despite significant contributions to medical advancements, the biomedical model has limitations in addressing holistic needs. This paradigm often focuses on physiological mechanisms, such as blood sugar levels and specific clinical metrics [17]. However, its reductionist approach may overlook the emotional, social, and cultural dimensions of illness. The biomedical model risks distancing patients by reducing lived experiences to clinical symptoms and treatment protocols [18]. For patients, this can exacerbate psychological burdens such as stress, stigma, and isolation [19]. Illness narratives empower individuals to reclaim their identities and create meaning, illustrating the importance of alternative approaches like narrative analysis in capturing the complexities of lived experiences [20]. Such approaches go beyond clinical outcomes, addressing the emotional and social challenges that patients face.

The rise of online platforms has changed how patients share their experiences. Online peer support forums provide individuals with spaces to anonymously narrate their stories, receive real-time feedback, and connect with others facing similar challenges. The anonymity and accessibility of online spaces encourage more authentic and detailed narratives, as they are less influenced by social desirability or observer bias [21]. Online platforms enable patients to openly share intimate details about their lives, reducing isolation and fostering community [22].

For patients, these platforms serve as critical resources for exchanging practical advice, emotional support, and coping strategies. Online narratives are not solely personal but also collective, as individuals co-construct knowledge and meaning within these communities [23]. Studies have shown how individuals use online narratives to share their struggles and seek social support, highlighting the transformative power of digital storytelling in navigating chronic conditions [24].

Research on online illness narratives has revealed how patients articulate their experiences and construct meaning. Online communities provide a space for individuals to test, validate, and refine their identities in the context of illness [25]. This includes sharing stories about managing diet, exercise, and medication, as well as navigating emotional challenges.

Studies of specific health narratives on digital platforms have identified distinct narrative types, such as those focusing on disclosure or those serving as tools for validation and identity repair [26]. Furthermore, research explores how patients interpret complex health information through narrative meaning-making, emphasizing the role of storytelling in understanding medical data [27]. These findings suggest that online narratives help patients articulate their experiences while providing validation and support within their communities.

Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping illness narratives. Cultural norms influence how individuals interpret and respond to suffering. In societies where family and social relationships are highly valued, patients often frame their experiences in ways that emphasize interpersonal dynamics. Patients may attribute health issues to a lack of interpersonal harmony or perceived failures to meet cultural expectations. Illness narratives can also reflect cultural assumptions regarding resilience and social roles. For patients, these cultural lenses may shape narratives around dietary restrictions, medication adherence, and family responsibilities. Online forums provide a space where patients can navigate these expectations while seeking support and understanding from peers.

Although research on online illness narratives is growing, studies focusing specifically on diabetes patients in certain regional contexts remain limited. Most existing studies are conducted in Western contexts or rely on small interview-based samples. As a result, the unique cultural and social dynamics of patient experiences in other regions are often overlooked. This study aims to address these gaps by analyzing narratives from the Tianmi Jiayuan Diabetes Forum, one of the largest online diabetes communities in the region. By examining how patients construct their stories around themes such as self-acceptance, education, lifestyle modifications, and social support, this research seeks to deepen the understanding of how narratives help patients navigate their conditions. Ultimately, the findings aim to contribute to more patient-centered approaches in care, both online and offline.

3. Method

The research data were collected from the Tianmi Jiayuan Diabetes Forum, a prominent asynchronous and volunteer-moderated online discussion platform. This forum was selected for its high level of engagement and its status as a significant online community for individuals living with diabetes. With substantial daily activity, including thousands of unique visitors and page views, the platform serves as an influential hub where users share experiences, seek advice, and build community. Its widespread use and diverse user base provide an extensive data source for exploring how individuals navigate the experience of living with the condition through shared narratives.

The forum consists of four primary sections, each subdivided into thematic boards tailored to specific aspects of diabetes management. This study focused on the Tangyou Jiaoliu (Diabetes Exchange) and the Tangyou Shenghuo (Diabetes Life) sections. The former serves as a space for discussing medical knowledge, treatment strategies, and related challenges, while the latter offers a more informal platform for sharing emotions, personal stories, and hobbies. These sections were selected for their rich collection of personal narratives. Other areas, such as professional or service-oriented sections focusing on technical discussions, were excluded as they did not align with the objective of analyzing lived experiences.

The dataset includes messages posted between December 2020 and September 2021, during which the selected sections accumulated over 1,000 posts. The initial step involved reviewing posts to identify those containing detailed narratives. To ensure the inclusion of high-quality, developed accounts, specific criteria were applied: first, posts had to contain at least two paragraphs and exceed 400 characters to ensure sufficient depth; second, posts had to demonstrate a coherent narrative structure with a clear progression, capturing the lived experiences of the narrators.

Based on these criteria, 320 posts were identified as eligible. To manage the dataset while preserving a diversity of perspectives, a random selection process was used to choose 160 posts for detailed analysis. These narratives were particularly rich in content, reflecting the narrators' efforts to interpret their experiences, including struggles, coping mechanisms, and personal insights.

The analysis focused on recurring themes and how narrators constructed meaning around their condition. Researchers engaged in an iterative, multi-stage process of reading and coding the data. Initially, a subset of 20 posts was independently coded to develop a preliminary understanding and identify potential themes. This stage involved highlighting statements related to sense-making, coping strategies, and emotional reflections. The researchers then met to compare interpretations, refine the coding framework, and resolve discrepancies through discussion, ensuring a consistent and reliable approach.

Following this, the remaining posts were coded using the established framework. The results were reviewed and refined collaboratively to ensure the coding captured the richness of the narratives. Multiple rounds of coding were employed, including initial, focused, axial, and theoretical thematic coding. During the initial phase, the focus remained on the data itself, allowing patterns to emerge organically. In the focused phase, frequent codes were grouped into categories, such as family dynamics, social challenges, and personal struggles. Axial coding further refined these categories and their relationships. Finally, major categories were synthesized into four primary themes: narratives of struggle, acceptance, support-seeking, and personal growth.

The constant comparison method was central to the analysis, comparing narratives within and across posts by various narrators. This approach identified commonalities and variations in how individuals interpreted their experiences. The analysis prioritized accounts of emotions and lived experiences over a simple catalog of events. Coding continued until thematic saturation was reached, which occurred after examining approximately 110 to 120 posts.

To enhance credibility, the identified themes were reviewed by a clinical specialist in diabetes care, who confirmed that the findings aligned with professional observations. All analyses were conducted on the original texts to preserve narrative integrity. Selected excerpts were translated for presentation, with careful attention to accuracy and cultural nuance.

4. Findings

In exploring how individuals in the Tianmi Jiayuan Diabetes Forum navigate their experiences with diabetes, four overarching themes emerged from the narratives: self-acceptance and mental resilience, education and knowledge acquisition, lifestyle modifications and health management, and social support and community engagement. These themes reflect a journey of coping, transformation, and empowerment through the lens of personal and communal narratives.

4.1. *The Resilience Narrative*

Acknowledgment of Diagnosis

The first theme encapsulates the emotional and psychological journey participants undergo as they come to terms with their diagnosis and build resilience. One sub-theme is the acknowledgment of diagnosis, where members grapple with the initial shock and gradually accept their condition. For instance, one post reflects the participant's emotional shift towards accepting the reality of the diagnosis:

"I know the problem is serious, I have to accept this fact."

This statement captures the moment of acknowledgment that the severity of the condition cannot be denied. It signals a turning point where the individual moves beyond initial disbelief, illustrating the internal struggle to accept a life-altering reality. This acceptance forms the foundation for resilience, as it enables the participant to prepare mentally for the challenges ahead, suggesting a move from passivity to active engagement with health management. Another example captures the transition from initial disbelief to eventual acceptance of the diagnosis:

"At first, I didn't believe I had diabetes, but now I know it is a part of my life."

Another participant's account also demonstrates a mental readiness to confront the challenges of living with the condition. The acknowledgment that the path may be difficult reveals an active decision to face those challenges with resolve. This highlights the psychological preparation necessary for dealing with a chronic illness, signaling an emotional transformation where the individual not only accepts the diagnosis but also embraces the reality that management requires sustained effort and perseverance. This mindset is a key aspect of resilience, enabling the individual to approach the future with strength and determination:

"Although this road may be difficult, I am mentally prepared."

Maintaining Positivity

Maintaining positivity also emerged as a vital strategy. Narratives illustrate a commitment to maintaining a positive attitude even in the face of difficulties, reflecting a conscious, self-directed effort to overcome adversity with optimism. By choosing to face challenges with a smile, participants reinforce a positive coping strategy, suggesting that mental resilience involves cultivating an internal resource of positivity. This approach serves as an emotional buffer against the stresses of living with the condition, enabling the individual to maintain a sense of agency and control over their emotional responses:

"Even when faced with difficulties, I always tell myself to face them with a smile."

Other shared experiences reflect the deliberate strategy of using positivity as a coping mechanism. These accounts demonstrate the active cultivation of positive traits to combat the challenges of management. The emphasis on effort points to a determination to stay mentally strong despite adversity. The focus on optimism,

broad-mindedness, and courage reveals a comprehensive approach to resilience, emphasizing emotional flexibility and inner strength. This strategy enables individuals to navigate difficult moments with an empowered mindset:

"I'll try my best. We still need to maintain optimism, broad mindedness, and courage in our spirit."

Another example highlights the pivotal role of optimism in managing life's challenges. It emphasizes the practical benefits of maintaining a positive outlook as a tool for navigating adversity. By framing optimism as a means of coping, participants reflect on how positive thinking acts as an emotional anchor, allowing them to endure the psychological fluctuations associated with chronic illness:

"An optimistic attitude enables me to better cope with the ups and downs in life."

Proactive Attitude Towards Health

Participants often declared a proactive approach to managing their health by distinguishing between the diagnosis itself and its potential complications. This reflects a cognitive reframing where the focus shifts from the immediate threat of the diagnosis to the long-term management of the disease. By emphasizing the need to face the situation correctly, participants reveal a determination to take control of their health through informed and deliberate actions. This perspective highlights a shift from passive acceptance to active involvement in health management:

"A diagnosis of diabetes is not terrible. It is the complications that should be worried about... We should face it correctly."

Other contributors noted their initiative in taking control of health through self-monitoring, revealing a proactive shift in responsibility. By choosing to regularly monitor blood sugar without waiting for external prompts, participants emphasize personal agency and foresight. This decision signifies an understanding of the importance of self-care and a commitment to maintaining control over one's health. Such actions reflect a key resilience strategy where the individual reduces reliance on medical interventions alone:

"I have decided not to wait for the doctor's reminder, but to regularly check my blood sugar myself."

Finally, narratives illustrate a significant shift from passivity to active problem-solving. This stresses an active mindset where the individual takes ownership of their health by actively looking for ways to address the challenges of the disease. This transition reflects a deeper engagement with the condition and the importance of self-empowerment in overcoming obstacles. Such a mindset is crucial for fostering resilience, as it involves taking deliberate, informed actions to improve well-being:

"In the face of illness, I am no longer passive, but actively seek solutions."

4.2. The Learning Narrative

The second theme mainly focuses on the participants' recognition of knowledge as a tool for empowerment and effective diabetes management. A recurring narrative involves recognizing the need for education.

Recognizing the Need for Education

This stance highlights the recognition of the growing prevalence of diabetes and the urgent need for education within the community, reflecting the participant's awareness of a significant gap in public understanding. By noting the increasing number of diabetes patients, the participant stresses the importance of spreading awareness and educating others to prevent and manage the disease. This realization drives the individual's desire

to be better informed and to advocate for greater education, illustrating a commitment to learning as a means of empowerment.

I found that diabetes patients are increasing year by year, while most people lack of knowledge about diabetes.

One companion mentions the challenge of addressing a common misconception about diabetes management, highlighting a prevalent belief that medication alone can effectively manage diabetes. It points out the gap in understanding, emphasizing the necessity of acquiring comprehensive knowledge beyond medication. This recognition implies the participant's understanding that proper diabetes management involves a holistic approach, including lifestyle changes and education. By highlighting this misconception, the participant stresses the importance of self-education as a critical aspect of managing the condition effectively.

Many people believe that taking medication is enough, but in reality, it is important to learn more about it.

Another post emphasizes the belief in the essential role of knowledge in managing their condition, revealing a fundamental understanding that effective diabetes management requires more than just following medical advice, it requires an informed approach to self-care. The participant emphasizes the connection between self-awareness and control, suggesting that understanding the disease's mechanisms empowers them to take proactive steps in managing blood sugar levels. This narrative highlights the participant's commitment to continuous learning as a vital strategy for achieving better health outcomes and self-management.

Only by understanding my own illness can I better control my blood sugar.

Actively Seeking Information

Someone talks the proactive approach to learning by engaging with external resources. The act of subscribing to Friends of Diabetes demonstrates their initiative in seeking valuable information to improve their understanding of diabetes. By actively pursuing educational materials, the participant takes control of their own knowledge acquisition, recognizing that staying informed is crucial for effective disease management. This strategy not only enhances their understanding of diabetes but also empowers them to make informed decisions about their health. The choice to subscribe to a dedicated resource reflects a commitment to continuous learning, which is vital for self-management and resilience in managing chronic illness.

I have always subscribed to Friends of Diabetes, which has increased my knowledge.

This post highlights the active commitment to enhancing their knowledge through continuous education. By attending "many online lectures on diabetes", the participant demonstrates a deliberate effort to deepen their understanding of the condition. This action reflects an intentional and sustained engagement with educational resources, signaling the importance of learning as a means to manage diabetes more effectively. The willingness to invest time in these online lectures shows the belief that ongoing education is essential for making informed health decisions. This proactive learning approach illustrates a critical aspect of self-management, empowering the participant to take control of their diabetes care.

I attended many online lectures on diabetes.

A user shares about the recognition of the value of peer learning in managing diabetes. By seeking advice from both doctors and fellow patients, the user acknowledges the importance of diverse perspectives in gaining a well-rounded understanding of the condition. The active effort to "constantly update my knowledge" demonstrates a commitment to continuous learning, integrating insights from both professional healthcare providers and personal experiences shared within the diabetes community.

This approach not only broadens the participant's knowledge base but also fosters a sense of connection with others facing similar challenges, reinforcing the collaborative nature of learning in health management.

I seek advice from doctors and other patients, constantly updating my knowledge.

Utilizing Multiple Resources for Learning

One user advocates for a well-rounded approach to learning by emphasizing the importance of utilizing diverse resources. It highlights multiple channels, books, newspapers, television, radio, and computer networks, as valuable sources of information. This broadening of learning methods reflects a strategic effort to access varied perspectives and expertise on diabetes. By actively engaging with different types of media, the participant underscores the necessity of a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to self-education. This strategy not only enhances the depth of understanding but also ensures that knowledge is continuously updated, which is essential for effective management of diabetes in an ever-evolving medical landscape.

We need to learn through various channels such as books, newspapers, television, radio, computer networks, etc.

Another user discusses how community engagement can provide practical, hands-on resources for diabetes management. It emphasizes finding "practical recipes and management techniques" on the forum, illustrating the tangible benefits of being part of a supportive online community. By engaging with others, the participant gains access to real-world strategies that can be directly applied to their daily life. This use of peer-shared resources emphasizes the value of learning from others' experiences, complementing formal educational materials. The forum becomes an essential space for the participant to gather diverse tools for managing diabetes, reinforcing the role of community as a powerful learning resource.

I have found many practical recipes and management techniques on the forum.

One participant also mentions the use of diverse learning resources to enhance their knowledge and effectively manage their diabetes. The phrase "obtaining information from multiple channels" reflects a broad approach to learning, where the participant integrates various sources, whether online articles, expert advice, or community discussions. By accessing multiple resources, the participant is able to construct a more comprehensive understanding of diabetes management. This method not only increases the depth of their knowledge but also ensures that the information they gather is well-rounded and applicable to different aspects of care. It highlights the importance of diversity in learning tools for effective self-management.

Through obtaining information from multiple channels, I have mastered more comprehensive control methods.

4.3. *The Adaptation Narrative*

The third theme delves into the tangible steps participants take to adapt their lifestyles and better manage their condition.

Dietary adjustments

One post reflects the approach to managing patients' diabetes through a focus on moderation rather than strict dietary control. The participant's choice not to use nutritional supplements or count calories foregrounds a preference for a more balanced, less burdensome approach to diet. By opting for moderation, the participant demonstrates an adaptable strategy that avoids rigid dietary restrictions, which might be perceived as overwhelming or impractical. This choice highlights the individual's desire for a sustainable lifestyle, where small, manageable adjustments help them maintain control over their health while avoiding unnecessary stress. This approach aligns with a practical, long-term adaptation to living with diabetes.

I have never eaten nutritional supplements or health supplements, and I don't count calories in my meals because it's troublesome.

One participant also records the deliberate adaptation to healthier eating habits in response to their diabetes diagnosis. The decision to "add more vegetables" and "reduce intake of staple foods" represents a conscious effort to modify dietary habits in a way that aligns with the management of their condition. The focus on vegetables and portion control suggests a shift toward nutrient-dense, low-glycemic foods that support blood sugar regulation. This change in dietary patterns highlights the participant's active role in shaping their lifestyle to better manage diabetes. It also reflects an understanding that long-term health depends on sustainable, mindful adjustments to everyday habits.

I have added more vegetables to my diet now and reduced my intake of staple foods.

This statement reflects the participant's structured approach to managing their diet, specifically focusing on portion control. By setting a precise limit, "not exceeding two taels", the participant demonstrates a disciplined strategy for managing their carbohydrate intake. This method of controlling staple food portions indicates a careful and calculated effort to balance dietary needs with the requirements of diabetes management. Such precision highlights the participant's commitment to adapting their eating habits in a way that actively supports their health goals. It reflects a deliberate and ongoing process of adaptation, where small, controlled changes are made to better align daily habits with long-term health management.

I control the amount of staple food in every meal to ensure that it does not exceed two taels.

Incorporating Regular Exercise

This post highlights the commitment to incorporating physical activity into their daily routine as a key strategy for diabetes management. The decision to engage in "light exercise" for about two hours a day demonstrates a consistent and deliberate effort to stay physically active. By emphasizing brisk walking, a moderate and sustainable activity, the participant shows an understanding of the importance of exercise in maintaining overall health and managing blood sugar levels. This structured routine reflects an adaptive approach, where physical activity becomes an integral part of their daily life, reinforcing their proactive stance in managing their condition.

I exercise lightly for about 2 hours every day (mainly brisk walking).

Another statement demonstrates the commitment to a well-rounded and diversified exercise routine as part of their diabetes management. By joining the gym and engaging in both strength training and aerobic exercise, the participant actively incorporates a variety of physical activities into their lifestyle. This approach reflects a thoughtful strategy to address different aspects of physical health, such as muscle strength, cardiovascular health, and overall fitness. The inclusion of both strength and aerobic exercises indicates an understanding of the complementary benefits these activities offer, enhancing the participant's ability to manage their diabetes more effectively through a balanced and sustainable fitness plan.

I joined the gym and regularly engage in strength training and aerobic exercise.

One companion points out the positive effects of consistent exercise on both physical and emotional well-being. The experience of feeling "energetic" and observing gradual weight loss demonstrates the tangible benefits of regular exercise in managing diabetes. By emphasizing the positive outcomes, improved energy and weight reduction, the companion illustrates how incorporating daily physical activity has become a sustainable and rewarding habit. This narrative not only reflects the companion's commitment to exercise but also highlights the adaptive nature of their approach, where the physical

changes serve as reinforcement to continue making exercise a regular and essential part of their diabetes management.

After persisting in running every day, I feel energetic and my weight gradually decreases.

Monitoring and Managing Weight

Someone shares the success in managing health through weight control. The reduction in weight from over 160 pounds to 140 pounds reflects a significant personal achievement, highlighting the participant's focus on controlling blood sugar levels through weight management. This change emphasizes the direct impact of weight loss on overall health, suggesting that the participant has adopted a methodical approach to managing their diabetes. The specific mention of weight reduction also points to the participant's active monitoring and adjustment of lifestyle choices. It emphasizes that weight management plays a crucial role in adapting to and managing chronic conditions like diabetes.

My weight has dropped from over 160 pounds to 140 pounds.

This statement demonstrates the participant's proactive approach to managing their weight as part of their diabetes care. By regularly recording weight changes, the participant takes an active role in monitoring a key aspect of their health. This habit reflects a conscious effort to prevent weight gain and maintain a healthy range, which is crucial for managing blood sugar levels. The practice of tracking weight regularly indicates a commitment to self-awareness and accountability, empowering the participant to make adjustments as needed. It reflects a disciplined and ongoing process of adaptation, where monitoring weight becomes an essential part of their overall health management strategy.

I regularly record my weight changes to ensure that I do not exceed the limit.

Another post illustrates the successful efforts in managing weight through a combination of diet and exercise. The achievement of bringing their BMI into the "normal range" highlights the importance of maintaining a healthy weight as part of effective diabetes management. By emphasizing the role of both "balanced diet" and "exercise", the participant demonstrates a comprehensive approach to weight management, where consistent effort in these areas leads to measurable results. This narrative reflects the participant's adaptability in adjusting their lifestyle and reinforces the significance of regular monitoring and active engagement in achieving long-term health goals.

Through a balanced diet and exercise, my BMI has finally dropped to the normal range.

4.4. *The Supportive Narrative*

The final theme captures the crucial role of interpersonal and community relationships in participants' coping journeys.

Sharing Experiences in Community

Someone shares the personal experience in the forum, illustrating the engagement with the community as a means of gaining knowledge and support. By "browsing through many patients' experiences", the participant highlights the valuable exchange of information and shared wisdom within the forum. This act of reading others' stories not only provides practical insights but also fosters a sense of connection and mutual understanding. The participant's emphasis on learning from others underscores the emotional and informational support that community members offer each other. This communal sharing creates a space where individuals can feel less isolated, reinforcing the idea that collective experiences can enhance personal coping strategies.

I have browsed through many patients' experiences on the forum and learned a lot of knowledge.

This post also reflects the emotional support and sense of belonging fostered by community engagement. The participant's acknowledgment of "everyone's efforts" highlights the collective nature of the group's experience, where individual struggles are shared and validated. By recognizing that they are "not alone", the participant expresses how the community's shared commitment creates an emotional bond, reducing feelings of isolation. This sense of solidarity reinforces their motivation and emotional resilience, illustrating how mutual support within the community enhances coping strategies. This narrative emphasizes the role of community not just as a space for information exchange, but as a source of emotional strength and encouragement.

I see everyone's efforts and feel that I am not alone.

Another tangyou's share illustrates the emotional benefits that arise from engaging in shared experiences within the community. By highlighting the encouragement and support received after sharing their own story, the participant emphasizes the emotional nourishment gained through community interaction. The act of sharing becomes a reciprocal exchange. While the participant expresses their struggles, they also receive validation and motivation from others. This mutual reinforcement strengthens emotional resilience, suggesting that community involvement provides not only informational support but also vital psychological resources. The narrative underscores how such interactions foster a sense of connection, offering a buffer against the isolation often felt by those managing chronic illness.

Every time I share my experiences, I receive a lot of encouragement and support.

Family Support as a Foundation

This statement highlights the crucial role of family support in managing diabetes. By recognizing that effective blood sugar control would not have been possible without their family's involvement, the participant underscores the foundational importance of familial encouragement and assistance. This acknowledgment reflects how the emotional and practical support provided by family members becomes integral to successful diabetes management. The participant's gratitude demonstrates the emotional bond between them and their family, emphasizing how such support fosters a sense of accountability and strength. This narrative reinforces the idea that family involvement is not just helpful, but vital, in sustaining long-term health management.

I can effectively control my blood sugar, and it can be said that my family members have played a significant role.

The crucial role of family support in the diabetes management is also implied in the supportive narrative. This participant credits the understanding and assistance from their family as a source of increased motivation to control their diet. By emphasizing the emotional and practical help provided by family members, the participant underscores how this support strengthens their resolve to make healthy choices. This narrative reflects the deep impact of familial involvement, which not only provides emotional reassurance but also reinforces commitment to health goals. It demonstrates how family can act as both a moral and logistical foundation, making the process of self-management more manageable and sustainable.

The understanding and assistance from my family have given me more motivation to control my diet.

This participant again highlights the critical role of family support in coping with the emotional challenges of living with diabetes. The participant's mention of their family's consistent presence during moments of distress, providing both companionship and encouragement, demonstrates the profound impact of emotional support in managing the psychological burden of chronic illness. This support not only alleviates feelings of loneliness but also fosters a sense of safety and reassurance, reinforcing the participant's emotional resilience. The family's unwavering support serves as a stable foundation,

enabling the participant to navigate difficult moments with a greater sense of strength and hope, further facilitating their coping process.

Whenever I feel down, my family always accompanies me and gives me encouragement.

Collective Encouragement and Motivation

This post expresses the participant's desire to contribute to the community's collective strength by offering encouragement. The expression of excitement in writing a motivational message demonstrates how the participant draws on shared emotional energy within the group. By addressing "all companions" and hoping to inspire them, the participant not only seeks to uplift others but also reinforces the sense of mutual support that defines the community. This act of collective encouragement creates a shared space for empowerment, where individuals are motivated by both their own efforts and those of others, strengthening their resolve to continue managing diabetes together.

I wrote this paragraph with excitement, hoping to inspire all companions.

A similar statement highlights the powerful role of mutual support within the community. By emphasizing how group members "motivate each other" and "face challenges together", the participant illustrates the collective strength that arises from shared experiences. The reciprocal encouragement fosters a sense of solidarity, where individual struggles are normalized and addressed collectively. This shared motivation not only strengthens individual resolve but also enhances the group's overall emotional resilience. The community's collective efforts create an environment where members draw strength from one another, illustrating how shared encouragement can significantly boost both personal and collective coping capabilities in the face of diabetes.

In the group, we motivate each other and face challenges together.

This example illustrates how the success stories of others within the community can inspire and motivate individuals in their own journey. The participant draws strength from seeing "successful cases of other companions", which provides them with "great confidence and courage". This narrative highlights the powerful role of shared success in fostering a sense of collective achievement. By witnessing others' triumphs, the participant feels more empowered, suggesting that community experiences not only provide emotional support but also serve as tangible proof that progress is possible. Such stories create a cycle of encouragement, where the success of one member becomes a source of inspiration for others, enhancing overall motivation.

Seeing successful cases of other companions gave me great confidence and courage.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that individuals in the Sweet Home Diabetes Forum construct their experiences of living with diabetes through narratives that emphasize self-acceptance, knowledge acquisition, lifestyle adaptation, and the power of social support. These narratives not only illuminate the participants' personal journeys of coping and transformation but also highlight broader cultural and social dynamics in how diabetes is understood and managed in the Chinese context.

First, the narratives underscore the centrality of self-acceptance and mental resilience in managing diabetes. Participants' acknowledgment of their diagnosis and their emphasis on maintaining positivity align with the cultural value of perseverance. By framing diabetes as a challenge that requires mental strength rather than a purely medical condition, participants emphasize the importance of psychological adaptation as a complement to medical management. This finding resonates with prior research emphasizing that chronic illness narratives often serve as a means of integrating disruptive health experiences into one's identity (Salifu et al, 2023; Schuft et al, 2022). For

individuals with diabetes, developing resilience allows them to construct a coherent and empowering life story, even amidst uncertainty and challenges.

Second, education and knowledge acquisition emerged as critical tools for empowerment. Participants frequently highlighted their proactive efforts to seek information through diverse channels, reflecting a shared understanding that self-management hinges on being well-informed. This focus on knowledge acquisition not only aligns with the biomedical model of diabetes management but also reflects a collectivist orientation, where individuals feel a responsibility to educate themselves to reduce the burden on healthcare systems and their families. However, the narratives also reveal gaps in public knowledge, suggesting the need for more accessible and tailored educational resources for diabetes patients in China.

Third, the theme of lifestyle modifications reveals the intricate interplay between personal agency and cultural norms. Dietary adjustments, regular exercise, and weight monitoring were described as vital strategies for managing diabetes. These actions were often framed as deliberate choices, emphasizing the participants' sense of control and agency. Yet, they also reflect broader societal expectations regarding health and discipline. For instance, the emphasis on structured portion control and physical activity aligns with Confucian ideals of self-discipline and moderation. These cultural scripts may provide a supportive framework for some patients but may also create additional pressures for others who struggle to meet these expectations.

Fourth, the importance of social support and community engagement highlights the relational dimension of living with diabetes. Participants frequently drew on family relationships and peer interactions within the forum to sustain their emotional well-being and motivation. The forum itself served as a "virtual support group", enabling users to share experiences, exchange practical advice, and find encouragement. This aligns with prior research on online health communities, which highlights their role in fostering a sense of belonging and reducing the stigma associated with chronic illnesses (Hookway, 2008). However, the reliance on family and community support also reflects a collectivist cultural context, where interdependence and communal care are valued. This raises questions about the experiences of individuals who lack access to such support networks and how they navigate their diabetes journey in relative isolation.

The findings also reveal a broader tension between individual agency and systemic factors. While participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness, their narratives also pointed to external barriers, such as limited public education about diabetes and societal stigma surrounding chronic illnesses. These systemic issues suggest that while personal and communal efforts are essential, structural changes are equally necessary to create an environment that supports diabetes patients. For instance, integrating diabetes education into public health initiatives and addressing workplace stigma could significantly improve the quality of life for individuals with diabetes.

Finally, the study's focus on narratives highlights the role of storytelling as a coping mechanism. By sharing their experiences in the forum, participants not only make sense of their challenges but also transform them into opportunities for growth and connection. This process mirrors Frank's (1995) concept of the "wounded storyteller", where individuals use narrative to reclaim agency and reconstruct their identities. For diabetes patients, the act of storytelling serves both as an emotional outlet and as a means of fostering collective resilience within the community.

6. Conclusion

The findings have several implications for diabetes care and public health policy. First, healthcare providers should prioritize psychological support alongside medical treatment, recognizing that self-acceptance and mental resilience are integral to effective diabetes management. Second, public health initiatives should focus on closing the knowledge gap by providing accessible and culturally sensitive educational resources.

Third, creating spaces for community engagement, both online and offline, can enhance social support for diabetes patients.

At the same time, the study highlights the importance of addressing systemic barriers to diabetes management. Policymakers should consider integrating diabetes education into school curricula, workplace policies, and community health programs. By addressing both personal and structural factors, it is possible to create a more supportive environment for individuals living with diabetes.

This study has a few limitations. First, while the narratives were sourced from the largest online diabetes community in China, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other populations, as the data was drawn from a single online forum. Second, despite the anonymity offered by online communities, which encourages participants to share their experiences, many individuals with diabetes do not have access to such platforms, meaning their perspectives may be underrepresented. Consequently, our results may not fully capture the experiences of these individuals. Future studies could consider including interviews with individuals who have not participated in online peer support forums to broaden the understanding of diabetes management. Lastly, interviewing participants from online communities and integrating their feedback into the analysis could enhance the reliability of the results.

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