Helping Patients with Diabetes Make Life-Saving Behavioral Changes

Practitioner Profile: Amy Walters, PhD

Amy Walters wasn’t looking for a career change when she agreed to volunteer at a week-long camp for young Idahoans with Type 1 diabetes more than a decade ago. “Living in Idaho and being into outdoor rec, I just thought it sounded like a good opportunity,” she says. But what she found up in the Sawtooth Mountains was a whole new passion.

“I hadn’t been exposed to chronic illness before,” says Walters, who found herself impressed by the resilience of the 100 teenaged campers but also moved by their emotional pain. “It struck me how chronic illness impacts not only the body but the human spirit as well.”

Walters didn’t just keep volunteering at Camp Hodia every summer. Today she’s also director of behavioral health services at Humphreys Diabetes Center in Boise, which provides education in diabetes prevention and self-management to children and adults with Type 1 and 2 diabetes. And she has gained first-hand experience of just how difficult chronic illness can be. Four years after Walters began volunteering at the camp, her infant daughter was diagnosed with diabetes.

Following her passion

The daughter of an Idaho psychologist, Walters set out to be a generalist. She earned a doctorate in combined professional-scientific psychology from Utah State University in 1996, plus certification in school psychology. A 60-hour-a-week job as director of psychological services at a counseling center proved impossible for maintaining a good balance between work life and home. She quit to launch a private practice and work part-time as a school psychologist.

Then doctors and nurses from Camp Hodia started referring patients to her. “But despite all these referrals, they wouldn’t show up,” says Walters. “I’d talk to these kids at the camp in the summers, and they’d say, I’m not crazy. I don’t need a shrink. I just have diabetes.” What was needed, Walters was convinced, was to “normalize” psychological services by integrating them into routine health care.

That’s exactly what Walters did. One of her fellow camp volunteers was the medical director of the Humphreys Center, and she approached him with the idea of adding a behavioral health component to the center’s offerings. By the time Walters contacted the center’s executive director, the seed was already planted. In 2008, she began working at the center one day a week and has increased her hours since then.

“Especially raising a daughter with diabetes, I have realized how significant psychosocial factors are in treatment compliance,” says Walters, who closed her private practice but still works part-time in two elementary schools. “I really wanted to provide some support to the community.”

Focusing on behavior change

Now Walters is helping patients with Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes ranging in age from two to ninety. Her goal? To help them make the behavioral changes they need to stay healthy.

“Patients will say, ‘I know what I’m supposed to do, but I’m just not able to do it,’” Walters explains. “Compliance is difficult for patients asked to take a 10-day antibiotic, let alone when they’re asked to test blood sugar and take insulin shots four to six times per day for the rest of their lives.”

In individual therapy, typically short-term, Walters helps patients overcome whatever is holding them back, whether it’s lack of motivation, inadequate stress management or poor coping skills. People with diabetes are at higher risk for anxiety and depression, so she also helps patients work through those issues.

Adolescents can be especially challenging. “Normal adolescence involves testing limits and becoming more independent, but that can have a detrimental impact on diabetes,” says Walters. “It can become a power struggle with parents, and the result is often kids not taking care of their diabetes and ending up in the hospital.”

An innovative new program Walters developed called Walk-n-Talk will bring patients together for an hour-long discussion of barriers to good diet and exercise habits each week, fol-
lowed by a 30-minute walk. The idea is to give patients social support and help them start building good habits together.

Working as part of a health care team is key, says Walters, who provides consultation and training to the nurse educators and other center staff. Her monthly in-service trainings, for instance, have focused on motivational interviewing, stress management and depression. And staff members often pop into her office for advice on cases they’re struggling with.

“Initially they were thinking, ‘OK, if I have an anxious or depressed patient, I’ll refer them,’” says Walters. “Now they understand that my services are for everyday patients who need assistance in making behavioral changes or coping emotionally with having a chronic illness.”

Walters plans to keep increasing the services she offers and the hours she spends at the center. “As we build the client and referral base, they’re definitely interested in me expanding my time here,” she says.

Educating the public

Staff and patients at the Humphreys Center aren’t the only audiences Walters is intent on educating about how to manage chronic disease.

Active in the Idaho Psychological Association, she was surprised to learn there was no chair to coordinate the state’s participation in the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Public Education Campaign (PEC) and promptly volunteered.

“My goal as PEC Coordinator is to help educate the public about the key role psychologists can play in health care; this message is perfectly aligned with my work at the diabetes center,” she says. Walters will be helping APA develop a new workshop on disease management to be offered through YMCAs.

“Our country is having a health and wellness crisis,” says Walters, citing skyrocketing obesity rates as just one example. “It’s all about changing behavior—a challenge psychologists are perfectly suited to face.”

Interested in treating individuals with diabetes? Amy Walters, PhD, recommends the following resources: