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### **'I feel a lot stronger at 56 than I did at 36'; Singer-songwriter Dan Hill on living with diabetes**

My dad died of diabetes complications. It was really painful to see him die that way. He suffered through three amputations and I was diabetic as he was dying. My dad was an incredibly bright and powerful man. You know the way you kind of look at your father like he's omnipotent, larger than life? My father was a very powerful guy in every manner of speaking and [it was hard] to see him reduced to being so helpless and to realize a lot of it was because he didn't take care of himself.

He suffered through an era when diabetes was thought of as a stigma or weakness. Because my dad was so proud, he insisted we keep his diabetes a secret. That made it worse because by not saying he was diabetic, he was inhibited in behaving in health-conscious ways.

I'm 56 years of age; I've had diabetes since at least 1994. I was diagnosed in '96, but I didn't know I had it for two years before. A lot of people are diabetic without knowing. I witnessed first-hand the slow deterioration of my father and suffered when I first had diabetes, because it was more psychological. I didn't want people to suffer the way my dad suffered, and I realized that a lot is preventable. I wanted to somehow be a voice so people could say: "Well this guy is diabetic and he's coping reasonably well because he's following the protocols, which really aren't that hard."

I'm not saying I'm a perfect role model, because I'm not, but I'm a really active guy. I run 10 miles a day; I write books; I write articles; I put out records; I'm touring all the time. Frankly, I feel a lot stronger and healthier with a lot more energy at 56 than I did at 36. If you follow the rules, you can have an exceptionally healthy life. A lot of the rules you should follow are the healthy things we all should be doing anyway.

I was a competitive track athlete as a kid, so I knew a lot of the tricks to training, but seeing my dad lose his legs scared me so much that I started running way more. It literally made me celebrate my legs because I didn't want to lose them. Running made me realize all those things we take for granted. We take our health for granted until it's taken away from us. As I saw it taken away from my dad, I felt it was taken away from me. To fight back, I embraced exercise and a good diet.

Stress is really bad for diabetes. It's bad for all of us, of course. Some stresses are unavoidable -- it's just part of life. One of the things I do to avoid stress is not work with people that I don't really like or that drive me crazy. I don't care if they're the biggest artists in the world. If I get asked to fly to L.A. to write with someone I don't like and I know is a real pain in the ass, then I won't do it. You make choices and maybe because I've worked for so long, I have the right to say I'm not going to do this. I don't get caught up in the drama; you have a choice.

While I'm touring, I make sure I'm staying in a hotel that has a really good workout room. I very often pack diabetic-friendly food. I'll pack a whole whack of almonds and oatmeal. Everyone teases me because I have so much stuff, but there's no way around it. I'm really careful about not eating quick sugars unless my body needs them.

The key is to take it one day at a time, slowly evolve, and not get down on yourself if you slip -- and I slip. Last night, I had too much banana cake. So I don't want to act like I'm this perfect person that doesn't slip, because we all slip. You can't beat yourself up for it and you just say: "Well that was yesterday and today's today."

- Dan Hill is the goodwill ambassador for the Canadian Diabetes Association ( [diabetes.ca](http://diabetes.ca)). As told to Brittany Mahaney,