

EVENT REPORT



THE SOUND OF DIABETES

ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES FACED
BY YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING WITH TYPE 1 DIABETES

An event designed by young people, for young people, and with young people, to discuss the mental health challenges faced by young people living with Type 1 Diabetes.



Hosted by MEP Peter Agius
(EPP, Malta), Member of the MMD Group

European Parliament, Brussels,
12 November, 8:00-9:30 (MEP Salon 4)

INTRODUCTION

On 12 November 2025, IDF Europe organised an event titled “The Sound of Diabetes” at the European Parliament, from 08:00 to 09:30. Hosted by MMD Champion, MEP Peter Agius (EPP, Malta), the event followed the Youth Policy Dialogue on Diabetes held on 2 July with MEP Peter Agius, European Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare, Oliver Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport, Glen Micallef, and diabetes advocates from IDF Europe’s YOURAH Network, all living with Type 1 Diabetes (T1D).

“The Sound of Diabetes” was IDF Europe’s first youth-led event to mark World Diabetes Day. Entirely co-created and designed by young people living with T1D, the event sought to highlight the mental health challenges faced by young people living with the condition. It aimed to be an event by young people, for young people and with young people.

The concept for the event emerged during the IDF Europe Youth Leadership Camp 2025 in Parma (July 2025), where a dedicated working group was tasked with developing the event, both in terms of content and practical arrangements.



ABOUT THE EVENT

The event aimed to bring together young people living with T1D, experts and policymakers around three themes chosen by young people themselves and central to their daily lives:

- The need for mental health and psychological support
- The impact of diabetes on school, university and working life, including stigma and discrimination
- The role of sport in supporting both mental and physical health

SPEAKERS



Kristinn Reynisson

Moderator
Diabetes Advocate
Iceland



Uroš Bogdanović

IDF Europe Board Member
Representative of the Youth
Diabetes Advocate – Serbia

PANEL 1 BEYOND BLOOD GLUCOSE: INTEGRATING MENTAL HEALTH INTO DIABETES CARE



Coralie Alabert

Diabetes Advocate
France



Calum Skye

Diabetes Advocate
United Kingdom



François Pouwer

Expert – PhD, Southern
Denmark



MEP Peter Agius

MEP, EPP, Malta
MMD Group Member
Host of the event

PANEL 2 BREAKING BARRIERS: TACKLING STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION IN SCHOOLS AND WORKPLACES



Cameron Keighron

Diabetes Advocate
Ireland



Thomas Fuëhrer

Diabetes Advocate
Austria



Aisling White

Expert - Diabetes
Advocate & School
Teacher - Ireland



MEP Estelle Ceulemans

MEP, S&D, Belgium

CASE STUDY | BEYOND PHYSICAL HEALTH: THE ROLE OF SPORT IN MENTAL WELL-BEING FOR PEOPLE WITH TYPE 1 DIABETES



**Thorhildur
Kristbjörnsdóttir**

Diabetes Advocate
Iceland



Anamarjia Runtic

Diabetes Advocate &
High-Level Athlete
Croatia



Maartje Roskams

Diabetes Advocate
Diabetes Specialist Nurse
UZ Gent; Member of
Diabetes Liga, Belgium



Georg Haeusler

Director for Culture,
Creativity and Sport in
the European
Commission (DG EAC)

The event took the form of a breakfast meeting. To offer participants an immersive glimpse into life with T1D, various items were placed on the tables, including:

- food items illustrating the constant need for carbohydrate counting, accompanied by carb information for each item
- a one-pager with key data on mental health and T1D
- an insulin guide
- medical devices



OPENING REMARKS

Kristinn opened the event by thanking the speakers, participants and audience, with a special acknowledgement for MEP Peter Agius of the MMD Group. He briefly introduced the event and presented the video teaser, created by young people living with T1D during IDF Europe's YOURAH Youth Leadership Camp in July 2025.



MEP Peter Agius underlined the essential role of youth inclusion in policymaking. He noted that this event not only marked World Diabetes Day but also aimed to improve the quality of life of people living with diabetes (PwD). With diabetes affecting 32 million people in the EU, he reflected on his interactions with families in Malta and stressed the urgency to do more. He also highlighted the pressure created by social media's standards of perfection and the importance of organisations such as IDF Europe. He recalled the Youth Policy Dialogue organised in July with Commissioners Micallef and Várhelyi, noting how impressed he was by the personal experiences shared by young advocates. He concluded by stressing the need to maintain both awareness and political momentum.

PANEL 1 BEYOND BLOOD GLUCOSE: INTEGRATING MENTAL HEALTH INTO DIABETES CARE

Topic of the panel: Health is not only physical but also mental. For people living with T1D the healthcare system—whether through primary care or hospital settings—is the first point of contact. Yet, within these settings, mental health is frequently overlooked, with the focus placed almost exclusively on physical health. Addressing the psychological dimension of diabetes management is as essential as addressing the physical one. In this panel, PwD shared their experiences with the lack of mental health support and care within healthcare systems and diabetes care. PwD, psychologist and policymakers discussed how to co-create more integrated healthcare systems that give equal consideration to physical and mental health.

Coralie Alabert – PwD testimonial

Coralie shed light on the aloneness she experienced after her diagnosis, noting that she had to navigate much of her condition on her own. She spoke of the anxiety she faced during the first semester of her Erasmus exchange, when she was diagnosed with depression and anxiety disorders. She explained that, although she received strong support abroad, this was lacking upon her return to France. She highlighted that while the French system focuses on carbohydrate counting and disease management, it overlooks the mental health burden. This gap encouraged her to seek support through social media and peer-to-peer communities. She also referred to data from the IDF Global Survey:

- 77% of people with diabetes experience depression or anxiety
- 83% fear complications
- 73% struggle with day-to-day management
- 78% of people with T1D fear stigma and discrimination

She concluded that mental health support must be as continuous as the condition itself.

Calum Skye - PwD testimonial

Calum was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes at fourteen, after an emergency hospital admission, and had no prior knowledge of the condition. The weeks following his diagnosis were overwhelming, as he had to abandon his dream of joining the Royal Navy and rapidly learn to manage his condition. His relationship with food became a major challenge, as carbohydrate counting and insulin calculations turned eating into a source of stress, sometimes leading him to skip meals. The focus was placed entirely on blood glucose levels, with no attention to mental health. Early psychological support would have made a significant difference. Returning to school, he became "Calum with Diabetes", requiring a care plan and facing significant social difficulties, including mood swings, misunderstanding and isolation from peers. This led to a severe decline in his mental health, including depression and suicidal thoughts, highlighting the need for mental health support from the moment of diagnosis. Timely psychological care, combined with family support, helped him recover and improved his diabetes management. He concluded by underscoring the crucial importance of peer support, which helped him realise that he was not alone and that life with diabetes remains a life with possibilities.

40% of people with diabetes experience high levels of diabetes distress, and the risk of depression is doubled in people with T1D

The need for mental health support tailored to young people with chronic conditions from paediatric to young adult care

François Pouwer - Expert perspective

Professor Pouwer outlined major advancements in diabetes treatment while stressing the persistent psychological burden of living with a condition that requires 24/7 management. He highlighted that 40% of people with diabetes experience high levels of diabetes distress, and that the risk of depression is doubled in people with T1D. He described how depression is linked to lower quality of life, higher HbA1c levels and increased risk of complications, alongside challenges such as disordered eating and poor sleep. He introduced potential solutions, including diabetergestemd.nl, an online platform providing therapy for depression and diabetes distress, and presented ongoing initiatives funded by Breakthrough T1D such as DiaBetterMood.

The key advantages of these online platforms include:

- wide availability of evidence-based psychological care
- tailored interventions for people with diabetes and depression
- affordability and accessibility
- no need to travel
- self-paced treatment
- support from an online coach

"If we aim to optimise diabetes outcomes and quality of life, we need to address the key psychological barriers, including depression, diabetes distress, poor sleep quality and disordered eating."

François Pouwer



MEP Peter Agius – Policymaker perspective

MEP Agius noted that mental health is becoming increasingly prominent on the EU agenda, reflecting a broader recognition of its impact on young people and on those living with chronic conditions such as diabetes. He stressed the need to build stronger, more resilient networks that can provide continuous support, particularly through peer-to-peer initiatives, which he described as essential for reducing isolation and improving day-to-day wellbeing. He highlighted the persistent disparities in access to mental health and diabetes care across Member States, warning that these gaps risk deepening existing inequalities. He also shared concerns raised by diabetes nurses in Malta, who report working with limited resources and insufficient support structures. He emphasised that addressing these issues requires coordinated action at both national and EU level to ensure that healthcare professionals are equipped to provide comprehensive, high-quality care.

IDF EUROPE YOURAH CALL TO ACTION – by Uroš Bogdanović

IDF Europe YOURAH calls on the European Parliament, in its work on the forthcoming INI Report on “A Mental Health Strategy” within the SANT Committee, to urge the European Commission and EU Member States to integrate mental health into NCD management, ensuring specific consideration of diabetes.

PANEL 2|BREAKING BARRIERS: TACKLING STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION IN SCHOOLS AND WORKPLACES

Beyond the healthcare setting, the next points of contact young people have in managing their diabetes are school, educational, workplace, and social environments, including interactions with family and friends. Navigating a chronic condition across these environments significantly influences their mental health. Advocates living with diabetes shared how stigma and discrimination in these spaces have affected them, what they wish people understood, and the strategies that helped them support or improve their mental health. They stressed that better diabetes education can transform the lived experience of people living with the condition across Europe.

Cameron Keighron – PwD testimonial

Cameron, diagnosed at sixteen, reflected on their experiences in both school and the workplace as a young person living with Type 1 Diabetes. They recalled being asked by classmates “what did you do to get T1D?”, highlighting the widespread misconceptions and stigma surrounding the condition. At school, Cameron was not allowed to take insulin in public due to concerns about other pupils imitating the behaviour, which reinforced feelings of exclusion and misunderstanding. They explained that things became even more challenging at university, where they were prevented from checking their blood glucose levels during exams because devices were considered potential tools for cheating. Cameron stressed that what is portrayed in the media often reinforces stigma and misinformation, further complicating young people’s experiences. At work, Cameron faced limitations in accessing the breaks needed to manage diabetes safely. They highlighted that managing a chronic condition while navigating key life transitions—education, travel, employment—can be overwhelming and isolating. Cameron emphasised the essential role of peer-to-peer support and called for much greater awareness and efforts to break stigma across these everyday spaces to improve inclusion and quality of life for young people with T1D.

Thomas Fuërher – PwD testimonial

Thomas noted that around 600,000 people live with diabetes in Austria, 10% of whom have Type 1 Diabetes. He highlighted elements of his personal journey and advocacy work at national level. He recalled moments in school when teachers did not allow him to carry out essential elements of his diabetes management, illustrating how gaps in understanding can directly compromise the safety and wellbeing of young students with T1D.

Aisling White – Expert perspective

Aisling explained that virtually every school in Ireland has at least one student living with T1D. Through her work as a teacher, she observed that effective communication between parents of children living with type 1 diabetes and school staff is often lacking. She highlighted that many teachers feel unprepared or anxious about supporting a student living with diabetes, particularly when facing sudden blood glucose variations, which can generate stress for the entire school environment. She underlined the positive impact of these courses, which significantly increase staff confidence and improve support for students with T1D. She shared the example of a student who had been excluded from football because the staff felt unable to manage the condition; after completing the course, the student was able to participate again, as teachers were equipped with the necessary skills. Aisling stressed that programmes designed by and with people living with T1D are particularly effective and transformative.

To address this, Aisling developed “diabetes awareness courses” for school staff, covering key areas such as:

- What diabetes is
- Types of diabetes
- Medication and treatment awareness
- Hypoglycaemia
- Hyperglycaemia
- Diabetic coma/shock
- Ketoacidosis
- Technology awareness
- Mental health and diabetes
- How to implement personalised care plans in schools

MEP Estelle Ceulemans – Policymaker perspective

MEP Ceulemans emphasised the growing prominence of mental health in EU policy discussions and welcomed participants for their valuable testimonials. She announced that she will serve as rapporteur of an INI report on psychosocial risks in the workplace, where she aims to identify sustainable solutions for people facing mental health challenges at work. She stressed the importance of ensuring sufficient investment in mental health services, noting that psychosocial support teams currently exist in Belgium but are not available across all Member States. She also highlighted the constraints of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), warning that health spending is often absorbed by other political priorities.

IDF EUROPE YOURAH CALL TO ACTION – by Uroš Bogdanović

IDF Europe YOURAH calls on the European Commission and the Member States to:

- integrate the specific needs of young people living with chronic conditions into the current EU Youth Strategy Work Plan 2025–2027 through concrete, measurable actions (stigma prevention in schools/workplaces, reasonable accommodations, youth participation, dedicated indicators); and
- initiate a structured, EU-wide co-creation process in 2026 to prepare the successor framework to the EU Youth Strategy beyond 2027, ensuring chronic conditions and anti-stigma are mainstreamed across objectives, funding, and monitoring.

CASE STUDY | BEYOND PHYSICAL HEALTH: THE ROLE OF SPORT IN MENTAL WELL-BEING FOR PEOPLE WITH TYPE 1 DIABETES

Thorhildur Kristbjörnsdóttir – PwD testimonial

During her testimonial, Thorhildur highlighted that she was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes at sixteen and recalled wanting to return quickly to her everyday life, especially to the sport she loved. She explained that exercise has always been central to her wellbeing and has become even more important since her diagnosis. She noted that after leaving gymnastics, she turned to CrossFit, which has become a key part of her diabetes management. She stressed that regular physical activity not only improves overall health but also helps stabilise blood glucose levels by enhancing insulin sensitivity and supporting metabolic balance. Thorhildur emphasised the mental health benefits of exercise, describing it as a valuable break from the constant demands of diabetes. She acknowledged that physical activity can be challenging for some due to the risk of hypoglycaemia but stressed that, with guidance and experimentation, it can become a positive and empowering experience. She also highlighted the emotional benefits of progress in training, noting that feeling strong and capable reinforces her sense of health despite living with a chronic condition. She concluded by encouraging all young people with T1D to find a type of physical activity they enjoy and to seek adequate support to engage in it safely, given its significant physical, mental and emotional benefits.



Anamarjia Runtic – PwD testimonial

Anamarjia shared her experience as a young person involved in professional sport, explaining that physical activity played a crucial role in helping her regulate her diabetes. She noted, however, that her doctor had not been supportive of her pursuing competitive sport, which left her feeling uncertain and discouraged at a young age. She added that her coach had limited understanding of diabetes, which meant she felt solely responsible for ensuring her own safety and wellbeing during training and competitions. She stressed that this lack of support often made her feel isolated, yet sport also shaped her mental resilience, helped her build self-confidence and taught her to trust her own judgement. Anamarjia highlighted the need to create safer, more informed sporting environments where young people with diabetes can rely on knowledgeable teams around them rather than managing everything alone.

How sport, with adequate support and greater awareness, can reduce stigma and promote physical, mental and social well-being

Maartje Roskams – Expert perspective

Maartje discussed how sport, when supported by proper education and awareness, can reduce stigma and promote physical, mental and social wellbeing for people living with diabetes. She explained that movement is essential for many people with T1D and highlighted the benefits of yoga and therapeutic exercise in reducing stress and anxiety. She noted that physical activity can ease the mental burden of diabetes by releasing “feel-good hormones”, and shared how it has improved her own sleep, stress management, self-esteem and overall diabetes control. Clinically, she underlined that exercise increases insulin sensitivity, reduces insulin needs and supports cardiovascular health. She also pointed to challenges such as fear of hypoglycaemia, glucose variability and limited education, calling for enhanced training for sports teachers, trainers, and coaches. She concluded by stressing that technology can help make exercise safer and that daily movement should be seen as an integral part of diabetes management.



Georg Haeusler – Policymaker perspective

Georg Haeusler expressed gratitude for the powerful testimonials shared during the panel and noted how impactful it was to hear the lived reality of young people living with diabetes. He highlighted the role of sport programmes as tools not only for improving health but also for fostering social inclusion, particularly for those who may feel isolated due to their condition.

He stressed that mental health remains one of the major challenges at EU level, while also recalling that competence in this area lies largely with the Member States. He emphasised the importance of promoting best practices across the Union and noted the contrast between countries, pointing to Ireland as an example of stronger support structures compared with other Member States, as mentioned earlier by Coralie. He concluded by underlining the European Commission’s commitment to supporting initiatives that help young people with chronic conditions feel included, understood and empowered.

CLOSING REMARKS

MEP Peter Agius

MEP Peter Agius closed the event by thanking the audience and participants, and expressed particular gratitude to the speakers for sharing their powerful testimonies. He noted the calls to action and underlined the crucial role of the SANT Committee in advancing this agenda. He stressed that diabetes must feature across multiple EU files and called for stronger synergies to ensure a true “diabetes-in-all-policies” approach. He concluded by emphasising the importance of empowerment and sustained advocacy to drive meaningful and lasting change.

IDF Europe wishes to thank its YOURAH partners for their invaluable support and for helping make this event a reality.

Medtronic

Lilly