

Anger

With time, your denial may give way to anger. Although anger is a natural part of the process, you may find that it's directed at those closest to you – your child, your spouse, your friend or at the world in general. You may also feel resentment toward parents of typical children. Your anger may come out in different ways – snapping at people, overreacting to small things, even screaming and yelling. Anger is normal. It is a healthy and expected reaction to feelings of loss and stress that come with this diagnosis. Expressing your anger releases tension. It is an attempt to tell the people around you that you hurt and are outraged that this diagnosis has happened to your child.

"I felt angry when a child at my son's school was diagnosed with Leukemia around the time our son was diagnosed with autism. Everyone sent cards and cooked dinners for them. They didn't know I needed that kind of help too. When I let people know I needed help they came through for me."

Bargaining

This stage involves the hope that the diagnosis can be undone. The feeling of helplessness you may be experiencing might create a need to regain control of the situation. Many parents will ask themselves questions like: What if we had gotten our child in to the doctor earlier? What if it was caused by something we did? You may also question the diagnosis or search for another doctor hoping that he or she might tell you something different.

Sadness or Grief

Many parents must mourn the loss of some of the hopes and dreams they had for their child before they can move on. There will probably be many times when you feel extremely sad. Friends may refer to this as being "depressed," which can sound frightening. There is, however, a difference between sadness and depression. Depression often stands in the way

of moving forward. Allowing yourself to feel sadness can help you grow. You have every right to feel sad and to express it in ways that are comfortable. Crying can help release some of the tension that builds up when you try to hold in sadness. A good cry can get you over one hurdle and help you face the next. If you find that your sadness is interfering with your ability to cope or you show other symptoms of depression, such as weight loss, social withdrawal, suicidal thoughts, sleep difficulties, low self-esteem or loss of interest in daily activities, consult your family physician who can recommend treatment.

"My husband had a harder time accepting our son's diagnosis at first. When Max began making progress in his ABA program, everything changed for the better. For a while, I was the one holding everything together for all of us."

Acceptance

Ultimately, you may feel a sense of acceptance. It's helpful to distinguish between accepting that your child has been diagnosed with autism and accepting autism. Accepting the diagnosis simply means that you are ready to advocate for your child. The period following an autism diagnosis can be very challenging, even for the most harmonious families. Although the child with autism may never experience the negative emotions associated with the diagnosis, parents, siblings and extended family members may each process the diagnosis in different ways, and at different rates. Give yourself time to adjust. Be patient with yourself. It will take some time to understand your child's disorder and the impact it has on you and your family. Difficult emotions may resurface from time to time. There may be times when you feel helpless and angry that autism has resulted in a life that is much different than you had planned. But you will also experience feelings of hope as your child begins to make progress.