

STAGES OF ACCEPTING ILLNESS

The Training and Education Center Network
Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Handout-R97
Chapter 8-8

STAGES OF ACCEPTING ILLNESS

I. SHOCK/DENIAL:

“It can’t be true!! I don’t believe it!! That wouldn’t happen to us!!”

II. ANGER:

“Why me? Why did this have to happen to my family? How can he keep doing this? Why doesn’t the doctor do something?!”

III. BARGAINING:

Making deals with God or sacrifices that are unlikely to work...

“If I spend enough money on the best doctor, Johnny will get better. I’ll even give up my job and spend more time with him to get him back on the right track.”

IV. DEPRESSION:

A. Past Losses: “Johnny has lost so much... all his jobs, his old friends have stopped coming around. I’ve lost a lot too... I don’t care anymore about my old interests. Since he’s gotten sick, my husband and I don’t go out or really talk the way we used to.”

B. Impending Losses: “I know I’ll have to give up my dream that Johnny will get back on track and do all the things we used to take for granted. He’ll probably never go to college, get married, or have children. I doubt he’ll even be able to ever hold a job.”

C. Guilt: “If I would have done some things differently, maybe this wouldn’t be happening to Johnny.”

V. ACCEPTANCE:

A. Some people never reach this stage. Their lives become permanently sidetracked by the other stages (e.g., denial, anger, bargaining, depression).

B. However, others do reach acceptance, at least for some period of time. They are not happy about the fact that their family has been affected by mental illness, but they adjust their expectations and get on with their lives. Mental illness no longer has “center stage” in their lives. It is just one of many aspects of their lives.

- C. Steps toward acceptance:
1. Learning that some behaviors are symptoms of an illness or attempts to cope with an illness.
 2. Learning that you do not have the power to make an adult do something s/he really does not want to do.
 3. Learning that trying to protect, fix or rescue your relative may be more your need than your relative's need.
 4. Learning to accept your relative as s/he is now, not as you wish or thought s/he would be.
- D. What acceptance does NOT mean:
1. Tolerating behavior that is dangerous, too disruptive, or unacceptable to you or others in your family.
 2. Abandoning your relative.
 3. Giving up hope.
- E. Acceptance could help you to:
1. Be more empathetic toward your relative.
 2. Be appropriately involved, but not over involved.
 3. Be less intense.
 4. Set limits so your needs (and other family members' needs) are not neglected.