

# Stages of Dealing with Mental Illness for Families and Friends



Capital Health

If a family member or friend has been diagnosed with a mental illness, it is important for you to know about the stages you may go through. These stages are similar to the stages of grief and they slowly lead to acceptance. You may go through some of these stages.

- **Stage of Transition**

During this time, you are facing your family member's mental illness and behaviour changes that worry you.

- **Stage of Denial**

During this time, you may find it difficult to believe the diagnosis is true. You may be frightened to admit the problem exists because then you have to accept that your loved one's life and your own may be quite different than it was.

- **Stage of Anxiety**

You may feel a constant sense of foreboding or apprehension as well as feeling worried and upset.

- **Stage of Seeking Explanations**

It is normal for you to seek answers and explanations and you are encouraged to do so. Some people blame themselves, the person with the illness, or a certain event as the cause of the illness. This is not a good idea and is counter productive.

- **Stage of Changing Emotions**

You may have a wide range of emotions from anger, resentment, fear, guilt and grief to sadness and frustration. Talk about your emotions and share your concerns with friends and your loved one's doctor. Try not to express your distressing emotions with your loved one who is ill, but show him/her you love them.

- **Stage of Acceptance**

Reaching this stage is not easy. You will have many ups and downs before coming to terms with the illness. Most people eventually come to terms with it. Accepting the illness does not mean you have given up. When you are at this stage, you will see that there are things you can do to help. Mental illness is not the end of the world.

*Adapted from: NAMI Support and Guidelines (2002) by: Susan Charlton RN, BScN & Elizabeth Emberly RN, BScN (CDMHP, 2003)*

*Approved by: Catherine Thibeault, RN, MN, PhD(c), Clinical Nurse Specialist, Acute Care Capital District Mental Health Program, NS WM85-0755 Revised 09/2011*