

COMMON REACTIONS TO A DIAGNOSIS OF TYPE 1 DIABETES

Learning that your child has type 1 diabetes can be a stressful time for your family. Each family member may have different feelings about diabetes and may react differently to the diagnosis. Some people will need to talk about their feelings, while others cope in a private way. It is important to understand that there are a range of feelings and to remember, **these emotions are normal and you are not alone.**

In fact, you can expect to move through several emotional stages after being diagnosed such as shock, sadness, fear, anger, and blame. These stages may or may not be linear and it is common for people to revisit stages over time. It may be helpful to become familiar with the stages of grief so you can recognize what you or your family may be experiencing.

Disbelief and shock are common first reactions.

- You may have an urgent need for certainty. Is the doctor sure? Can the tests be done again?
- Feeling "numb" or in disbelief is a natural way the body protects us from becoming overwhelmed by powerful emotions.

Dismay and sadness often follow confirmation of the diagnosis.

- Parents may ask themselves, *Why my child? Why my family? Grieving the life you shared before the diagnosis and the permanency of the disease can bring a sense of loss or a deep sadness.*
- As you learn about diabetes management: insulin, blood glucose monitoring, meal-planning, you may worry about the consequences for your child and wonder how you will adjust.
- As families move through this stage they begin to realize the dreams and hopes they had for their future do not have to change despite diabetes being part of their future experiences.

Fear and anxiety about the future is common when we are forced into a new situation with which we have little experience.

- Many parents feel anxious about their child's health, worry they will not be able to manage the complex tasks, and wonder what the future will hold.
- It is important to recognize that how you cope with these fears will impact your child's ability to cope.

Common Reactions to a Diagnosis of Type 1 Diabetes (continued)

- With time, practice, and support your family will move to a place of confidence and will be better able to cope with the challenges of diabetes.

Anger and resentment are natural feelings associated with diagnosis.

- Children often will ask, why me? Parents may feel resentful about the extra tasks that diabetes will demand of them.
- Anger can be a powerful motivator for families to take control over their lives and not allow diabetes to have power over them.
- Your diabetes education team will provide you and your family with the knowledge and support you need to successfully manage diabetes.

Guilt and blame are powerful feelings which can occur when we are faced with a crisis.

- What did I/we do wrong? If only I/we had... If only I/we had not... Remember, there is nothing that you could have done or that you could have avoided which would have prevented your child from developing type 1 diabetes.
- It surprises some parents to learn that children and youth often feel guilty for being diagnosed with diabetes and responsible for the emotional and/or financial strain that diabetes can have on the family. Guilt can be managed by refocusing on those things within your control, such as treatment and future health.

Coming to terms with diabetes and acceptance is possible and may best be viewed as an ongoing process. You may feel overwhelmed at first and remembering to take it one day at a time can help. As time goes on you will feel more confident in your knowledge about the disease and your ability to manage.

Talking about emotional reactions and learning to manage your feelings can help families adjust to life with diabetes. During these early stages accessing support from the diabetes team is very important. They can provide immediate crisis management as well as ongoing support to your child and family.

Grieving is a very individual process, unique to each person in terms of severity and duration. It is important to allow yourself time to adjust to this very difficult change for your family.

If you find your feelings have become unmanageable or you have not been able to process through one of the stages, you may require additional supports. If you would like further information or assistance regarding a diagnosis of type 1 diabetes please contact the BCCH Diabetes Program Social Worker at 604-875-2345, local 7091.

See also our handout [*Managing Stress Associated with Type 1 Diabetes*](#).