Over the past several years, you see more and more in the media about bullying. Many families experience the tragedy everyday and my family is no different. My son, Jean-Paul Bovee, experienced horrible bullying during his school years. He was in a rural school where they still thought “boys will be boys” and you have to learn to stand up for yourself to toughen you up for life. Jean-Paul had gone through elementary school alone and into his own interests and unaware that he was different and then in the 6th grade, the bullies woke him up. He tried to ignore them, but they continued to verbally and physically hurt him. The worst of the bullying ended when he was in high school, but the damage was done. His self-esteem was in shredded pieces. For a year, Jean-Paul talked of committing suicide and was ashamed that he did not have the courage to carry it out. The bullying was over but the healing had only begun.

I have spent most of my adult life working with individuals with autism. Though my Ph.D. is in education, I have found myself counseling individuals on the spectrum because it was needed. From my son’s experiences, my own counseling work and the stories of my friends on the spectrum, I have developed the following tips on the best way to help heal from bullying.
It is important that the individual on the spectrum understand that they don’t need counseling because there is something wrong with them. Life is difficult and it helps to have someone that you feel safe with to talk to. The hard part is sometimes finding the right counselor. It helps if they understand autism. Sometimes it takes time to find the right counselor, you will definitely know when you find the right counselor for you.

Jean-Paul felt he benefited from group counseling. He was truly amazed that others had problems and was proud of himself when he could be supportive and help others out.

A family therapist is trained in viewing all the members of the family as an interactive system. They can improve the communication and help them work as a team to support all the members.

2. Identify your strengths and interests
My son, Jean-Paul, knew his faults and his weaknesses. Letting his strengths shine took his focus off the people that made fun of him. His phenomenal memory helped him to win History Bowl Championships and propelled him into student leadership. His teachers bent some rules to get him into the Honor Society. Also, Jean-Paul used his memory for rock music to become the vocalist in a band.

It can help to find clubs where there are others who share your interest, if not locally, then on the Internet. It can help to find a mentor in your field. A job can increase a person’s feeling of competence, even if it is volunteer work.

3. Disclose or discuss the diagnosis
Many parents avoid telling their child that there is a name for their differences. In many cases, having age appropriate information about autism can relieve some anxiety. Jean-Paul always says, “I am not a broken person. I am a perfectly good person with autism.” I have found that discussing, “What is me and what is my autism?” is very important when I disclose that I have autism.

4. Encourage good nutrition and sleep
You cannot make a person eat right or sleep adequately. However, you can do everything possible to encourage it because it supports physical and mental health.

5. Enjoy nature
There is something about the outdoors that is healing. A young man I was working with was so depressed he had stopped eating and sleeping, so his mental state was getting worse. I took him down by the river and sometimes we talked and sometimes we just walked. After about an hour, he said, “I feel hungry.” By the time we finished eating, he could laugh and life was on the upswing.

6. Always try to problem solve
Many times when you are having problems, you get stuck. Teaching more objective ways to look at your situation can help your attitude. Teaching a problem solving strategy can be life changing. You can find some great strategies in cognitive behavior therapy.
7. Identify a belief system
Jean-Paul says he would not have survived without his faith. Share your beliefs and encourage others to find their spiritual truth. Some people have said that individuals with autism cannot understand religion, but I have found that often times that is not the case because individuals with autism are some of the deepest thinkers and do understand religion.

8. Enjoy music, dance or theatre
Music can be healing for all of us, but we each may choose a different kind. Many individuals on the spectrum are talented in singing or playing music. It is surprising but some individuals on the spectrum learn to act in life by acting on stage. Even those who do not perform may get some healing from performances.

9. Enjoy reading, drawing, and journaling
There are good books on autism by individuals on the spectrum and there are books on people’s experiences with bullying. Sometimes it helps to know that you are not the only one. Some individuals on the spectrum may not write but can draw or dictate their thoughts into a tape recorder.

10. Seek friendships
One friend can make all the difference. Many individuals on the spectrum choose friends who are much younger and who do not make judgments about them as their age peers do. Sometimes an older individual can be helpful too. Also, finding a social group for individuals on the spectrum can be great too. Sometimes an individual may find his first true friends there.

11. Enjoy physical activity
Activity is good for physical and mental health. Jean-Paul loved sports and knew all the facts and statistics. He wanted to join cross-country, so decided not to compete but to make sure he finished the race. Also, he wanted to join the basketball team, so he became the team manager and one year he wore the Tiger suit and was the mascot.

Some individuals gain a lot of self-confidence by training in a martial art. Tai Chi and yoga are ways to gain strength and control. Many individuals may enjoy bike riding, wrestling, or soccer. These activities are also places to build relationships. It is important that people choose an activity that they like.

12. Enjoy relaxation
Allowing your body to relax can be very powerful. Dr. June Groden has a relaxation video and a book on teaching relaxation using a gradual relaxation technique. Individuals on the spectrum can benefit from just learning this skill but it is even better if they can learn techniques to relax themselves when they are in stressful situations. Also, using a biofeedback device is helpful. My family used a device that read the body temperature and as the individual became more relaxed (using relaxation and visualization techniques), the device would quiet till it was silent and the individual was relaxed. Jean-Paul loved it!
13. Join an advocacy group

Jean-Paul began to speak to groups about his autism when he was 18. Sharing his story with others helped his self esteem and his image. He became active on many boards such as the Autism Society of America Chapter, People First and TASH. He was even chosen for the Governor’s Commission on Autism. Jean-Paul says, “He does not want others with disabilities to suffer as he had to while being bullied.”

For my son, the healing was a process. He spent many years working on his feeling of being bullied and trying to deal with himself. Jean-Paul had to adjust to being different in a society that does not value differences. This was a huge challenge and something as a family we had to work through. The moral of the story for Jean-Paul was when those around you traumatize you, it takes time to learn to accept and love who you are and the moral of the story for me as a mom is I realized healing comes from within. We can only offer our love, support and acceptance to our loved ones but the work of the healing starts within and it is a long-term process, so start today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Donnelly, Ph.D., an adjunct associate professor for the University of Missouri where she teaches autism classes in their Masters program in autism. She keynotes conferences, gives presentations, consults and publishes internationally. Julie is the mother of Jean-Paul Bovee, who experiences autism.

REFERENCES

