

## Adjustment Disorders

People with adjustment disorder suffer from feelings of depression, anxiety or a combination of those symptoms in response to particular psychosocial stressors. As the definitive diagnostic reference for mental health professionals in the United States, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition text revision (*DSM-IV-TR*), provides valuable information about adjustment disorders. According to the *DSM-IV-TR*, the conditions associated with adjustment disorder develop within three months of the onset of the stressor and usually last three to six months.

If a person continues to experience severe symptoms six months after a stressful event, mental health professionals should consider diagnosing another illness such as a mood disorder, anxiety disorder or personality disorder. Exceptions to this rule may occur, however, if a person suffers from chronic stress such as that caused by an illness, a difficult relationship or worsening financial problems.

### What causes adjustment disorder?

Many people have difficulty adjusting to stressful events such as starting a new job, ending an important relationship or handling conflicts with work colleagues. Some stressors may be ongoing, such as living in a dangerous area. Others may be recurrent, such as a seasonal business crisis or starting school. And while certain events, such as marriage or parenthood, for example, may not seem particularly stressful for many people, others may find them extremely stressful. As a result, a person dealing with a stressful event may experience difficulty with mood and behavior for several months afterward.

### Types of adjustment disorders

Different people exhibit different responses to stressful events. Some people may be more sad or irritable than usual and feel somewhat hopeless. Other people become more nervous and worried. Still others experience combinations of those two emotional patterns. In some cases, a person with an adjustment disorder also becomes reckless and has difficulty following societal rules.

An adjustment disorder falls into one of six different subtypes depending on the predominant symptoms:

- **Adjustment disorder with depressed mood.** A person with this type of adjustment disorder may mostly experience a depressed mood, hopeless feelings and crying spells.
- **Adjustment disorder with anxiety.** A person with this type of disorder experiences anxious feelings, nervousness and worry.
- **Adjustment disorder with mixed anxiety and depressed mood.** In these cases a person experiences a mixture of anxious and depressed feelings.
- **Adjustment disorder with disturbance of conduct.** A person with this disorder acts out inappropriately—against society, for example, or by skipping school or getting in trouble with the police.
- **Adjustment disorder with mixed disturbance of emotions and conduct.** A person with this disorder experiences a mixture of emotional and conduct problems.
- **Adjustment disorder unspecified.** In these cases a person's symptoms are vague and undefined.

Some people with adjustment disorders may begin to suffer from physical illness. That is, some individuals with an adjustment disorder may, as a result, begin to experience physical problems—such as headaches or stomach/gastric distress, or other psychosomatic concerns. For people already dealing with a medical illness, the condition may worsen during the time they experience adjustment disorder. People

with adjustment disorders often begin to show a decline in performance at school or at work and experience more difficulty in close personal relationships. It also is important to note that people with an adjustment disorder have increased risks of attempting suicide and completing suicide.

### **How common are adjustment disorders?**

Adjustment disorders can occur at any age, but people seem to be particularly vulnerable during normal transitional periods such as adolescence, midlife and late life. Current research indicates that adjustment disorders are very common in the United States. A U.S. Surgeon General's Report notes that the one-year prevalence for all anxiety disorders for adults between the ages of 18 and 54 exceeds 16 percent. Equal numbers of males and females experience adjustment disorder. These numbers can vary as a function of the populations studied. In general community settings the range is 2 percent to 8 percent. In outpatient behavioral health care settings the frequency is at the 10 percent to 30 percent range.

### **Resources**

American Psychiatric Association  
[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)

American Psychological Association  
[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)

National Institute of Mental Health  
[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

National Mental Health Association  
[www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)

*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR).*  
American Psychiatric Association, 1999.

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