

Signs and Symptoms of Adjustment Disorder

A qualified mental health professional makes a diagnosis of adjustment disorder by taking a careful personal history from the person experiencing the problem. It is important for the clinician to learn the details surrounding the stressful events in that person's life. Professionals do not need to conduct laboratory tests to make a diagnosis of adjustment disorder, and the person with the problem does not need to meet any criteria for physical conditions. However, it is very important that the clinician does not overlook a physical illness that might mimic or contribute to a psychological disorder. If there is any question about whether the person might have a physical problem, the clinician should recommend a complete physical examination by a medical doctor. Laboratory tests then may be necessary.

For a diagnosis of adjustment disorder, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition text revision (DSM-IV-TR) requires that a person develop emotional or behavioral symptoms in response to identifiable stressors within three months of the onset of those stressors. The symptoms produce either:

- Distress in excess of what would be expected from exposure to the stressor.
- Significant impairment in social, occupational or educational functioning.

A person with an adjustment disorder also meets these additional criteria:

- The symptoms are not caused by bereavement.
- The stress-related disturbance does not meet the criteria for another specific disorder (such as a personality disorder, anxiety disorder not otherwise specified or similar disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, acute stress disorder, psychological factors affecting medical condition, bereavement or nonpathological reactions to stress).
- Abatement of the symptoms within six months or less after the stressor is resolved.

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.

Associated features may include:

- depressed mood

- physical symptoms or sexual dysfunction
- guilt or obsession
- increased risks of suicide attempts and completing suicide

Resources

American Psychiatric Association
www.psych.org

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

National Mental Health Association
www.nmha.org

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

By Chris E. Stout, PsyD, MBA
© 2002 Achieve Solutions