

The Right Diagnosis: Is It Adjustment Disorder or Something Else?

Diagnosing a person with an adjustment disorder requires careful deliberation by a mental health professional. Some other disorders involve symptoms similar to or identical to those experienced by people with adjustment disorder. Clinicians must determine which disorders should be ruled out to establish a precise diagnosis. These may include:

- personality disorders
- various mood or anxiety disorders
- posttraumatic stress disorder
- acute stress disorder
- psychological factors affecting a medical condition
- bereavement
- nonpathological reactions to stress

Clinicians also need to rule out medications, caffeine, alcohol and other substance use that may cause the symptoms.

If a person is experiencing a “hidden” stressor, such as problems with an abusive spouse or exacerbation of an undisclosed illness, others may regard her behavior as emotionally or behaviorally inappropriate. This lack of understanding could lead to a misdiagnosis. For example, a person who develops adjustment disorder with depressed mood as a result of worsening multiple sclerosis may be diagnosed with major depression, which could lead to inappropriate treatment and a misuse of medications.

It is also important to note that the symptoms associated with adjustment difficulties usually subside within about six months after the stressful event. 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 caused by an illness, a difficult relationship or worsening financial problems.

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