

Acute stress disorder



What is acute stress disorder?

Acute stress disorder, sometimes also referred to as acute reaction to stress or acute stress reaction, is a sudden reaction following a potentially traumatic or intensely stressful or emotionally upsetting event such as a serious injury or accident, the loss of a loved one or being involved in a natural disaster. Such events trigger a wide range of transient emotional, cognitive, behavioural and somatic reactions. Although acute stress disorder is the most common type of stress and most reactions are self-limiting, it can sometimes be a precursor to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹

Common signs and symptoms of acute stress disorder

With acute stress disorder, the symptoms develop quickly within hours or days of the event but are usually self-limiting (one month or less). Symptoms can include any of the following:

Intrusive

- recurring or intrusive memories or flashbacks of the event
- disturbing dreams or nightmares of the event

Avoidance

- avoidance of people, places or things that are reminders of the event
- avoidance of memories or thoughts of the traumatic event
- social withdrawal

Dissociative

- feeling unresponsive or detached from your surroundings

Arousal symptoms

- problems with memory and concentration
- anxiety (rapid heart rate, sweating, flushing)
- hyperventilation
- irritability or anger
- insomnia or restless sleep
- exaggerated responses to sudden or loud noises

¹ What is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)? In: Patients and families [website]. Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association; 2023 (<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>, accessed 14 June 2023).

Emotional

- feeling numb or detached from your emotions
- sadness or despair.

Common signs and symptoms of acute stress disorder in children and adolescents

In children, responses to stressful events can include somatic symptoms (e.g. stomach aches or headaches), disruptive or oppositional behaviour, increased clinginess, bedwetting, hyperactivity, tantrums, concentration problems, irritability, social withdrawal and sleep disturbances. In adolescents, responses can include substance use and various forms of acting out or risk-taking behaviours.

What causes acute stress disorder?

Acute stress disorder is usually caused by a traumatic event, such as the following:

- the sudden death of a loved one
- being involved in an accident, such as an automobile accident
- physical assault, or the threat of serious injury
- natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes
- receiving a life-threatening medical diagnosis
- sexual/domestic violence.

When to seek help for acute stress disorder

Symptoms of acute stress disorder usually last anything from three days to one month. If your symptoms are particularly upsetting and are affecting your health and well-being or are disrupting your ability to function, leading to difficulties in your job or in your relationships, you should seek help from a mental health professional.

Treating acute stress disorder

Proper support and care, including understanding, empathy, and being provided with the opportunity to describe their experience, helps people to recover from acute stress disorder. Treatment can help to reduce distressing symptoms, improve self-esteem and enable the individual to move forward in their recovery process. The following can be useful in the treatment of acute stress disorder:

Psychosocial interventions. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is an effective and common intervention used to help an individual deal with a traumatic event and learn how to avoid triggers that can cause symptoms.

Medications. Medications can be prescribed for acute stress disorder to support recovery by reducing symptoms associated with depression, anxiety and overall mood dysregulation. Some of the medications most commonly prescribed for acute stress disorder include antidepressants, benzodiazepines and beta blockers.

How can you help yourself if you are diagnosed with acute stress disorder?

- Feeling safe is important if you are suffering from acute stress disorder. Surround yourself with trusted loved ones who will make you feel safe and comforted.
- Eating a good diet, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep and talking with friends and family are often good ways to cope with acute stress disorder.
- It is important to avoid alcohol, recreational drugs and smoking.
- Practise relaxation techniques such as mindfulness, meditation, yoga, progressive muscle relaxation and breathing exercises.
- Keep a journal/diary to record your feelings, write/draw or use any other form of art to express your emotions.
- If your symptoms are interrupting your daily life, call your health care provider for information or seek help from a mental health professional.

How can you help a friend or family member who has acute stress disorder?

Acute stress disorder often makes a person feel vulnerable. One of the best ways of helping a loved one who has been diagnosed with the disorder is by being a supportive listener and offering a safe space for them to share their feelings on a continuing basis. Do not push if the person is not willing or able to discuss the trauma. Sometimes just letting them know that you are available is enough for them to feel safe or to reach out.

Resources

Stress: questions and answers

Self-Help Plus (SH+)

Mental health and psychosocial support

Healthy diet

Dealing with stress

Doing what matters in times of stress

Yoga for stress relief

Mental health professionals by country

This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the Regional Office's website at: <https://www.emro.who.int/mnh/publications/mental-health-disorders.html>.