

Facts

Adjustment disorders are unusual reactions to stressful events or situations. A stressor may be a single event, such as the end of a romantic relationship or loss of a job; or there may be additional stressors at once, such as business difficulties and marital problems. A stressor may be recurring, as with seasonal crises in business, or continuous, such as living in a high crime neighborhood. A stressor may come with specific developmental events, such as going to school, leaving the parental home, getting married, becoming a parent, failing to attain work goals, or retiring.

An Adjustment Disorder generally begins within three months of the stressful event and usually lasts no longer than six months after the stressor or its consequences has stopped. The person may or may not be aware of the stressor causing the disturbance.

Adjustment disorders are common; 5-20% of people in outpatient treatment have a principal diagnosis of Adjustment Disorder. Anyone can be affected, regardless of sex, age, race, or circumstance, but people with disadvantaged living circumstances may be at increased risk, due to the number of stressors they experience.

Adjustment Disorder is not to be confused with Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, which usually involves a more severe stressor. When the reaction is an expectable response to the death of a loved one, bereavement is usually diagnosed instead of Adjustment Disorder.

Signs & Symptoms

Main symptoms or behaviors are:

- Marked distress that is in excess of what would be expected from exposure to the stressor.

- Significant impairment in social or work functioning

Other signs and symptoms may include:

- hopelessness
- frequent crying
- depressed mood affecting work and relationships
- agitation
- trembling or twitching
- palpitations
- conduct disturbances
- physical complaints
- withdrawal
- anxiety, stress and tensions

Causes

An adjustment disorder occurs when a person cannot cope with a psychological stressor. Everyone reacts differently to a situation depending on the importance and intensity of the event, the personality and temperament of the person, and the person's age and well-being. One event may be sufficient to cause an adjustment disorder.

Treatment

Adjustment Disorders are generally treated with psychotherapy which focuses on finding solutions to deal more effectively with the specific life problem. Many times the therapist acts as a partner in therapy, helping guide the person toward new coping mechanisms or a better understanding of issues in his life.

Treatment may emphasize the importance of social support in the person's life, help identify alternative activities to explore, reach other better ways of dealing with stress, etc. If stress is an issue, therapy might include relaxation techniques or identify methods for reducing stress.

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Family therapy, behavior therapy, and self-help groups can also be very beneficial in helping the person adapt. Medications are generally not used to treat this disorder, but when they are used, it is usually in addition to other forms of treatment.

Helping Yourself

You may benefit from attending group meetings with people who have similar problems. These meetings could be divorce groups, cancer support groups, groups to deal with job loss, etc. The social support felt from sharing information and experiences with others in these groups often proves vital to better and quicker recovery.

Stress reducing techniques also can be very helpful. Walking, meditation, deep breathing, yoga, proper eating and regular sleep are beneficial for lessening symptoms.

Helping Someone Else

It is important to be patient and accepting. You can be supportive by encouraging the person to seek treatment. Then be supportive of his or her treatment plans. In addition, encourage the person to maintain contact with friends and relatives and continue to participate in life. You also might seek the help of a trained family therapist and/or join an educational support group.

Sources:

Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition

Mental Health Net

ADHD Living Guide - Health-Center.com

Healthy Way Library

For more information contact

Northern Lakes Community Mental Health
1-800-492-5742
(231) 922-4850

National Alliance on Mental Illness
www.nami.org
(800) 950-6264

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov
(800) 421-4211 (depression info)
(888) 826-9438 (anxiety info)
(301) 443-4513 (other info)

Mental Health America
www.nmha.org
(800) 969-6642

The Center for Mental Health Services
www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs/