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Adjustment disorders

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Overview

Adjustment disorders are excessive reactions to stress that involve negative thoughts, strong emotions and changes in behavior. The reaction to a stressful change or event is much more intense than would typically be expected. This can cause a lot of problems in getting along with others, as well as at work or school.

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Work problems, going away to school, an illness or any number of life changes can cause stress. Most of the time, people get used to such changes within a few months. But if you have an adjustment disorder, you continue to have emotional or behavioral responses that can make you feel more anxious or depressed.

Treatment can help you regain your emotional well-being.

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Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the type of adjustment disorder. These symptoms can vary from person to person. You experience more stress than would generally be expected in response to a trying event, and this stress causes a lot of problems in your life.

Adjustment disorders affect how you feel and think about yourself and the world. They also may affect your actions or behavior.

Some examples include:

- Feeling sad, hopeless or not enjoying things you used to enjoy.

- Crying often.
- Worrying, or feeling anxious, nervous, jittery or stressed out.
- Feeling irritable or like you can't handle anything and don't know where to start.
- Having trouble sleeping.
- Not eating enough.
- Having difficulty concentrating.
- Having difficulty with daily activities.
- Withdrawing from family and friends who support you socially.
- Not doing important things, such as going to work or paying bills.
- Thinking about suicide or acting on those thoughts.

Symptoms of an adjustment disorder start within three months of a stressful event. These symptoms last no longer than six months after the end of the stressful event. But constant or lasting adjustment disorders can continue for more than six months. This is especially true if the stressful event is ongoing, such as being unemployed.

When to see a doctor

Stressors are usually temporary. You learn to cope with them over time. Symptoms of adjustment disorder usually get better when the stress eases. But sometimes the stressful event continues to be a part of your life. Or a new stressful situation comes up, and you face the same emotional struggles all over again.

Talk to your doctor or a mental health professional if you continue to struggle or if you're having trouble getting through each day. You can get treatment to help you cope better with stressful events and feel better about life again.

If you have concerns about your child's behavior, talk with your child's doctor.

Suicidal thoughts or behavior

The risk of suicide can be higher in people who have adjustment disorders. If you're thinking about suicide, contact a hotline for counseling:

- In the U.S., call or text 988 to reach the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#). It's available 24 hours a day, every day. Or use the [Lifeline Chat](#). Services are free and private.
- U.S. veterans or service members who are in crisis can call 988 and then press "1" for the [Veterans Crisis Line](#). Or text 838255. Or [chat online](#).
- The Suicide & Crisis Lifeline in the U.S. has a Spanish-language phone line at [1-888-628-9454](#) (toll-free).

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Causes

Adjustment disorders are caused by major changes or stressors in your life. Genetics, your life experiences and your temperament may make it more likely that an adjustment disorder happens.

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Risk factors

Stressful life events and experiences — positive and negative — may put you at risk of having an adjustment disorder. Examples include:

- Major stress as a child, such as bullying or difficulties with school.
- Divorce or marriage problems.
- Relationship problems or trouble getting along with others.

- Major changes in life, such as retirement, having a baby or moving away.
- Bad experiences, such as losing a job, loss of a loved one or having money problems.
- Problems in school or at work.
- Life-threatening experiences, such as physical assault, combat or natural disaster.
- Ongoing stressors, such as having a medical illness or living in a neighborhood that has a lot of crime.
- More than one major change or bad experience happening at the same time.
- Other mental health conditions, such as major depression, intense anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Complications

If adjustment disorders do not resolve, they eventually can lead to more-serious mental health conditions such as anxiety, major depression, or misuse of drugs or alcohol.

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Prevention

There are no guaranteed ways to prevent adjustment disorders. But social support, healthy coping skills and learning to recover quickly from hard times may help you during times of high stress.

If you know that a stressful situation is coming up, such as a move or retirement, plan ahead. In advance, increase your healthy habits and ask your friends and family for support. Remind yourself that stressful situations pass in time and that you can get through them. Also, consider checking in with your health care

team or mental health professional to review healthy ways to manage your stress.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

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