

What is Acute Stress Disorder?

Most people who experience trauma will have some kind of psychological reaction, such as feelings of fear, sadness, guilt or anger. However, in the first few weeks after a trauma some people experience more intense reactions that cause them a lot of distress and begin to interfere with their lives. These reactions are known as acute stress reactions and when many of these are experienced together they may be diagnosed as Acute Stress Disorder.

Individuals who are experiencing Acute Stress Disorder will experience a number of symptoms from some of the following categories:

Re-living the traumatic event through unwanted memories, nightmares or flashbacks that leave the person feeling that they are being confronted by the trauma on a regular basis. They may also notice intense physical or emotional distress whenever they are reminded of the event.

Changes in mood that make it difficult to experience positive feelings.

Feeling some alteration in reality, such that it feels like time has slowed down, like they're living in a daze or even watching themselves from outside their own body.

Attempts to avoid reminders of the traumatic event, either by attempting to restrict thoughts, feelings and conversations about the event, or attempting to stay away from people, places and situations that remind them of the trauma.

Feeling hyper-alert and ready for danger such that they may experience difficulty sleeping or concentrating, be more irritable or snappy than normal or notice that they are unusually jumpy and easily startled.

Acute Stress Disorder is only diagnosed when these symptoms are causing distress **during the first month following a trauma.**

It is important to note that all of these reactions are quite normal and are commonly experienced shortly after a trauma. For most people, the reactions will start to improve naturally within the initial weeks.

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