

Acute Stress Disorder: Re-experiencing the Trauma

If you have an acute stress disorder, you probably have many dissociative experiences. You also will re-experience or relive the traumatic event in at least one of the following ways:

- 1 You may not be able to get pictures of the event out of your mind. The image of the rapist's face, the car careening towards you, the water rushing in, or the fire consuming your house may replay again and again in your mind.
- 2 Over and over again, you may think about what you did and what you should have done and wonder why this happened to you. Your thoughts may be circular, like the movement of clothes in a dryer.
- 3 In this preoccupied, dazed state, the objects or people around you may momentarily appear to be the objects and people in the trauma. You are not hallucinating because there is something or someone there in front of you, but you mistake one for the other. This is called an illusion. Any reminder of the trauma may also kick up great distress.
- 4 A sound or scene may trigger a flashback episode during which you actually feel like you are reliving part of a videotape of the event.
- 5 When you sleep, you may have the same nightmare of the event several times each night, awakening with your teeth clenched and your body drenched in sweat.

Avoiding recollections

Understandably, if you have an acute stress disorder, you try to avoid or escape anything that arouses recollections of the trauma. If you were in an automobile accident, for example, you might stay at home or stop driving. You might start taking buses and keeping your eyes closed while imagining being on vacation so you don't have to look at the traffic. When people ask about the accident, you might change the topic of conversation. You might stop seeing or calling a friend who was in the car with you. It might become hard to watch television or you might surf channels for sports or westerns. Much of your time might be spent avoiding thoughts, feelings, conversations, activities, people and places associated with the trauma.

The impact of an acute stress disorder on a person's life should not be underestimated. If you have the disorder, it can disrupt your work, your home life or both. You probably feel distressed much of the time and find it hard to get important things done in one or more areas of your life. Many victims of rape or other trauma can drag themselves through life, but they may not be able to take care of some necessary task such as seeking legal recourse, applying for financial aid or even telling family members about the trauma.

There are things that you can do for yourself, and there are effective treatments for acute stress disorder so seek professional help.

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