

How Do I Know if I Have Acute Stress Disorder?

If you have faced a traumatic event during the last month, you are at risk for acute stress disorder. Were you the victim of a situation where your life was threatened? Did you suffer a serious injury that disabled you or threatened your life? Did you witness a murder or someone's death? Were you told that a close friend or family member died or suffered in one of these events? Were you or your family in a natural disaster such as a hurricane, tornado, flood or fire?

If so, you may have experienced a trauma. For children, inappropriate sexual events do not have to involve threatened or actual violence, physical abuse or injury to be considered traumatic.

What was your response to the trauma? Did you experience intense fear, helplessness or horror? If you are a parent, did your child have one of these responses or did your child's behavior become repetitive, age inappropriate, disorganized or agitated? If so, you and/or your child are at risk for acute stress disorder.

Among those people who have faced a trauma and responded in one or more of these ways, not everyone has an acute stress disorder. For example, research has shown the following rates of prevalence of acute stress disorder:

- 1 4 percent among victims of a natural disaster
- 2 13 percent among car accident survivors
- 3 19 percent among victims of physical attack
- 4 25 percent to 33 percent among survivors of fires, serious earthquakes, robberies and assaults
- 5 33 percent among bystanders to a mass shooting
- 6 50 percent among prisoners of war and concentration camp survivors

Some events that are traumatic enough to cause an acute stress disorder may surprise you. British psychologists found that up to three percent of mothers may suffer acute stress disorder after labor and childbirth, and as many as 10 percent of women have the disorder after a spontaneous abortion.

Symptoms

If you feel intense fear, helplessness or horror after an event, it may be traumatic enough to be followed by an acute stress disorder. If you have an acute stress disorder, you probably will feel very strange and distant from yourself and the world you knew before the trauma. For example, you may feel like you are in a fog or a daze:

- 1 It seems as though you can hear what people are saying but their voices may sound very far away and the words may seem lifeless.
- 2 Things seem less colorful and vivid; your surroundings are like props and backdrops in a play rather than the real world.
- 3 Food may be bland and tasteless to you; you barely smell odors and fragrances and they seem flat.
- 4 You may touch things but really not feel them the way you did before the trauma.

The acute stress may leave you feeling as if you are just going through the motions of living. It is as if you are in someone else's body even though you know it is your own. In this condition, you just don't feel like you are the same person you were before the trauma.

You may forget an important aspect of the traumatic event. For example, when you retell what happened, parts of the story are missing. If someone fills in some details, they may seem strangely familiar but you just can't recall them.

Another common feature of acute stress disorder is the lack of strong feelings. You may feel numb, almost anesthetized to your feelings. Rather than being hot with anger toward the person who threatened your life, you may feel apathetic and cold. Your feelings may seem a thousand miles away or you may feel nothing at all. This lack of emotional responsiveness is not only a reaction to the perpetrator if you were a victim, but to those you care about as well. It is hard for you to laugh or cry, love or hate.

If you think you have acute stress disorder, talk to your doctor for an evaluation because there are effective treatments.

By Ronald G. Nathan, PhD
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