



SA Federation for
Mental Health

TRAUMA AND STRESSOR RELATED DISORDERS

ACUTE STRESS DISORDER

What it is:

In acute stress disorder, a specific set of mental and emotional symptoms develop, that last between three days and one month, following one or more traumatic experiences. The traumatic event experienced can range from war, as a combatant or a civilian, physical attack or assault, sexual violence, childhood physical or sexual abuse, natural disasters or a severe car accident. The traumatic events do not have to be experienced first-hand, acute stress disorder can also develop as a result of witnessing a traumatic event, or through indirect exposure – when a traumatic event happens to a close friend or relative.

Acute stress disorder's symptoms can vary depending on the individual, but can include anxiety, re-experiencing the trauma in some way (in dreams or memories), disassociation, hypervigilance, irritability or aggression. The individual may also avoid situations, people or activities that remind them of the traumatic event. Acute stress disorder cannot be diagnosed until three days after the traumatic experience, and may progress to posttraumatic stress disorder if the symptoms persist for longer than one month. However not all cases of acute stress disorder progress to PTSD.

Common Symptoms:

The following symptoms must be associated with one or more traumatic events the individual has experienced, witnessed or been indirectly exposed to.

1. Recurring and distressing memories of the event
2. Recurring and distressing dreams relating to the event
3. Dissociative reactions, such as flashbacks, in which the individual may feel or act as if the traumatic event were taking place again
4. Intense psychological distress when exposed to anything that symbolises or resembles the traumatic event
5. Inability to experience positive emotions
6. Effort to avoid memories, thoughts or feelings relating to the event
7. Efforts to avoid people, places, situations or activities that resemble or remind the individual of the event
8. Hypervigilance
9. Difficulty falling or staying asleep

10. Exaggerated response to being startled



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Causes:

There are a number of traumatic events and experiences that can lead to the development of acute stress disorder. However there are certain factors that can make an individual more susceptible to developing the disorder. Risk factors include prior mental health disorders, high levels of negative affectivity, and an avoidant coping style. An exaggerated assessment of the level of trauma involved in the experience, as well as exaggerated appraisals of future danger and personal guilt, are all strongly predicative of acute stress disorder.