

Adjustment Disorders and Symptoms

By Jeff Dwarshuis LMSW, ACSW

Adjustment Disorders are a common problem caused by experiencing a larger than usual life stressor. Examples of these stressors are relational breakups, a move to another city, job loss, divorce or extended family conflict. Everyone is subject to the possibility of an Adjustment Disorder; however the disorder is more likely if the change is unexpected. Also, individuals may not make the connection between the adjustment issue and the experienced symptoms it creates. Often times being able to make the connection is a cause for relief.

Types of Adjustment Disorders

The diagnosis of a specific Adjustment Disorder (AD) depends on the types of symptoms the individual presents following the stressor. The possible symptoms fall into the three broad categories of mood, anxiety and behavior. An Adjustment Disorder is given one of the specific diagnoses listed below.

AD with depressed mood: Symptoms are that of a minor depression.

AD with anxious mood: Symptoms of anxiety dominate the clinical picture.

AD with mixed anxiety and depressed mood: Symptoms are a combination of depression and anxiety.

AD with disturbance of conduct: Symptoms are demonstrated in behaviors that break societal norms or violate the rights of others.

AD with mixed disturbance of emotions and conduct: Symptoms include combined mood, anxiety and behavior symptoms.

AD NOS: This residual diagnosis is used when a maladaptive reaction that is not classified under other ADs occurs in response to stress.

Emotional Symptoms of Adjustment Disorders

The signs and symptoms of an Adjustment Disorder may affect how you feel and think about yourself or life. The list below represents symptoms of depression and anxiety. These are important signs to watch for in yourself, family or coworkers.

Depression - Sadness, hopelessness, lack of enjoyment, crying spells, thoughts of suicide, trouble sleeping or difficulty concentrating.

Anxiety – Excessive worry, feeling on edge, headaches, tightness in the chest, stomach pain, dizziness, nausea, flashes or chills, pacing or irritation.

Behavioral Symptoms of Adjustment Disorders

Signs and symptoms of an Adjustment Disorder may affect actions or behavior. Again, these are the things to watch for in others.

Fighting, reckless driving, ignoring bills, avoiding family or friends, poor school or work performance, skipping school or vandalism.

Treating Adjustment Disorders

Adjustment Disorders are generally easy to recognize in a clinical setting because the symptoms begin with a specific event. Adjustment Disorders are usually treated with a combination of medication, problem solving and behavioral empowerment strategies. Also, Adjustment Disorders may diminish alone with time. Psychotherapy is suggested however because the Adjustment Disorder may last longer than six months and if it does the diagnosis changes to a more severe mood or anxiety disorder.

Jeff Dwarshuis LMSW, ACSW is a licensed psychotherapist in private practice in Grand Rapids Mi. He specializes in relationships, mental health and EMDR therapy. For questions, consultation or getting on his email list for free clinical information call (616) 443-1425 or send an email to jeffsemdr@tds.net.