

Adjustment Disorder with Anxiety

What is an adjustment disorder with anxiety?

Adjustment disorder with anxiety is when you continue to feel nervous, worried, or afraid after a stressful event. The symptoms of anxiety can last from 3 to 6 months after the event has passed.

We all have times in life when bad things happen which make us anxious. Financial problems, ending a relationship, a car accident, or the loss of a job are examples of events which might make anyone nervous or fearful for a while. The stressor may even be a happy event like marriage or the birth of a child. Feeling some stress, worry, and fear is normal. However, if your symptoms continue for months, or are more severe than what most people usually have, then it is called an adjustment disorder.

How does it occur?

Symptoms of adjustment disorders usually begin shortly after the stressful event. Anyone under stress can develop an adjustment disorder at any time in life. If you have had anxiety before, then you are more likely to have an adjustment disorder. Adjustment disorders are as common in men as women, and can develop at any age.

There are different types of adjustment disorders. For example, you might have adjustment disorder with depressed mood, or with both anxiety and depressed mood.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms are:

- feeling tense, jittery, and nervous
- worrying more
- being more emotional
- wanting to run away or escape
- feeling overwhelmed
- having trouble sleeping
- having a change in appetite
- having trouble concentrating or remembering things.

Trying to deal with a lot of anxiety during or after a stressful event is very common. Symptoms may last longer than 6 months but usually get better with support and time.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider or a mental health therapist can tell you if you have symptoms of an adjustment disorder. He or she will ask about your symptoms, any other medical problems and any drug or alcohol use. You may be asked to have some lab tests to rule out medical problems such as hormone imbalances and heart problems. There are no lab tests which directly diagnose adjustment disorders with anxiety.

How is it treated?

Adjustment Disorder with Anxiety

Anxiety can be successfully treated with psychotherapy, medicine, or both. Psychotherapy or short-term use of medicine can be very helpful with an adjustment disorder. Discuss treatment with your health care provider or therapist.

Medicines

Several medicines can help treat anxiety. Your health care provider will carefully select the best one for you. Some medicines are:

- antianxiety medicines such as lorazepam (Ativan), diazepam (Valium), alprazolam (Xanax), clonazepam (Klonopin), and buspirone (BuSpar)
- selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as citalopram (Celexa), fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), paroxetine (Paxil) and several other antidepressants

Psychotherapy

Seeing a therapist can help. Therapy may last weeks to months. There are several kinds of therapy that can help a person with an adjustment disorder with anxiety.

You may be seen alone, with family members, or you may choose to participate in a support group.

Natural and Alternative Treatments

- **Herbs and Supplements.** Many herbal and dietary products are said to help anxiety. Among the herbs touted as helpful are kava root, chamomile, and valerian. No herb or dietary supplement has strong research supporting use for anxiety. Since some herbal products can interact with prescription medicines, it is important to inform your health care provider about any herbal products you are taking.
- **Biofeedback.** With biofeedback you learn to control body functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, or brain wave patterns. Biofeedback can help reduce tension and anxiety. Biofeedback techniques use special machines to help you learn how to control certain nervous system responses.
- **Massage Therapy.** Massage therapy may help lower stress and muscle tension. This may be very helpful with some anxiety disorders.
- **Relaxation Therapies.** Learning special relaxation methods can help with anxiety. Yoga and meditation may also be helpful.
- **Hypnotherapy.** Self hypnosis can be useful in learning to control anxiety symptoms and environmental events that trigger your anxiety.
- **Art and Music Therapies.** Some people find art, music, or movement therapy helpful in controlling anxiety.

How long will the effects last?

Once the stressful event is gone, the symptoms of anxiety usually go away in a few weeks or months. If symptoms go on longer than 6 months, you may want to see a therapist for evaluation.

What can I do to help myself or my loved one?

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is important. To help manage anxiety:

- Exercise for at least 20 minutes every day, for example a brisk walk.

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- Learn which activities make you feel better and do them often.
- Talk to your family and friends.
- Stay socially active.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Drink less caffeine.
- Do not abuse alcohol or drugs.
- Learn ways to lower stress, such as breathing and muscle relaxation exercises.

Many towns and cities have support groups that may help you. Some groups help with specific stress events like divorce, sexual assault, or financial problems. Look in the telephone book under Support Groups or ask your therapist or your local community mental health center.

When should I seek help?

Seek professional help for yourself or a loved one if the symptoms don't go away after a few weeks, if the symptoms get worse, or if the symptoms keep you from being able to function as usual.

When should I seek immediate help?

Get emergency care if you or a loved one has serious thoughts of suicide, violence, or harming others. Also seek immediate help if you have severe chest pain or trouble breathing.

For more information, contact the National Mental Health Association (NMHA). NMHA's toll-free Information Center number is 1-800-969-NMHA. Its Web site address is <http://www.NMHA.org>.

Developed for Clinical Reference Systems.

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