

# Coping with Acute Stress Disorder

## What is acute stress disorder?

Acute stress disorder involves common mental and physical reactions that typically occur within one month of a traumatic event. Problems that last longer than one month may be a sign of posttraumatic stress disorder.

People with acute stress disorder may have feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror after the traumatic event. They may feel anxious, nervous, irritable, or restless. They might have trouble sleeping or concentrating. They may have bad dreams about the event or feel as if it were happening again. They might try to avoid places and people that remind them of it. They may also feel like they are in a daze or that the event wasn't real.

## What causes it?

Acute stress disorder can happen after someone experiences or witnesses a traumatic event, such as actual or threatened death or serious injury, or after they learn about an unexpected or violent death, serious injury, or illness of a close family member or friend. Common events that may cause acute stress disorder include military combat, sexual assault, robbery, work-related injuries, natural disasters, and suddenly and unexpectedly hearing bad news (such as a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness or a death of a loved one).

## How is acute stress disorder treated?

The most effective treatments involve counseling. A type of counseling called cognitive behavior therapy has been shown to help people whose anxiety does not improve after several weeks. It is a relatively short-term treatment that involves discussing your feelings and thoughts about the event so that you learn to think differently about it. Some people may be prescribed medicine for a short time to help with pain, sleep problems, or depression.

## What should I do if I experience a traumatic event?

The first thing you need to do is realize that these symptoms are common reactions to trauma, and that they usually go away over time. After a trauma, it is important to seek safety and ensure that your immediate needs are being met. These include learning how to calm yourself and finding ways to cope with the event, obtaining information about the situation, and connecting with family, social, and community support networks. You should not feel pressured to talk about your feelings if you do not feel ready. Talk to your doctor if you are worried about how you are coping with the event.



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# Coping with Acute Stress Disorder *(continued)*

## Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

American Psychological Association

Web site: <http://www.apa.org/topics/anxiety/index.aspx>

National Center for Posttraumatic Stress  
Disorder

Web site: <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/acute-stress-disorder.asp>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
Web site: <http://www.nctsn.org/>

National Institute of Mental Health

Web site: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>

## Notes:

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**This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.**

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