Acute Stress Disorder

Code: 308.3 (F43.0)

Diagnostic Criteria 308.3 (F43.0)

A. Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violation in one (or more) of the following ways:
1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others.
3. Learning that the event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. Note: In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.
4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains, police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse).
Note: This does not apply to exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures, unless this exposure is work related.
B. Presence of nine (or more) of the following symptoms from any of the five categories of intrusion, negative mood, dissociation, avoidance, and arousal, beginning or worsening after the traumatic event(s) occurred:
Intrusion Symptoms
1. Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s). Note: In children, repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the traumatic event(s) are expressed.

2. Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or affect of the dream are related to the event(s). Note: In children, there may be frightening dreams without recognizable content.
3. Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. (Such reactions may occur on a continuum, with the most extreme expression being a complete loss of awareness of present surroundings.) Note: In children, trauma-specific reenactment may occur in play.
4. Intense or prolonged psychological distress or marked physiological reactions in response to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s).
Negative Mood
5. Persistent inability to experience positive emotions (e.g., inability to experience happiness, satisfaction, or loving feelings).
Dissociative Symptoms
6. An altered sense of the reality of one's surroundings or oneself (e.g., seeing oneself from another's perspective, being in a daze, time slowing).
7. Inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event(s) (typically due to dissociative amnesia and not to other factors such as head injury, alcohol, or drugs).
Avoidance Symptoms
8. Efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).
9. Efforts to avoid external reminders (people, places, conversations, activities, objects, situations) that arouse distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s).
Arousal Symptoms
10. Sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty falling or staying asleep, restless sleep).
11. Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation), typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects.
12. Hypervigilance.
13. Problems with concentration.
14. Exaggerated startle response.
C. Duration of the disturbance (symptoms in Criterion B) is 3 days to 1 month after trauma exposure.
Note: Symptoms typically begin immediately after the trauma, but persistence for at least 3 days and up to a month is needed to meet disorder criteria.
D. The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
E. The disturbance is not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance (e.g., medication or alcohol) or another medical condition (e.g., mild traumatic brain injury) and is not better explained by brief psychotic disorder.

Diagnostic Features

The essential feature of acute stress disorder is the development of characteristic symptoms lasting from 3 days to 1 month following exposure to one or more traumatic events. Traumatic events that are experienced directly include, but are not limited to, exposure to war as a combatant or civilian, threatened or actual violent personal assault (e.g., sexual

violence, physical attack, active combat, mugging, childhood physical and/or sexual violence, being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture), natural or human-made disasters (e.g., earthquake, hurricane, airplane crash), and severe accident (e.g., severe motor vehicle, industrial accident). For children, sexually traumatic events may include inappropriate sexual experiences without violence or injury. A life-threatening illness or debilitating medical condition is not necessarily considered a traumatic event. Medical incidents that qualify as traumatic events involve sudden, catastrophic events (e.g., waking during surgery, anaphylactic shock). Stressful events that do not possess the severe and traumatic components of events encompassed by Criterion A may lead to an adjustment disorder but not to acute stress disorder.
The clinical presentation of acute stress disorder may vary by individual but typically involves an anxiety response that includes some form of reexperiencing of or reactivity to the traumatic event. In some individuals, a dissociative or detached presentation can predominate, although these individuals typically will also display strong emotional or physiological reactivity in response to trauma reminders. In other individuals, there can be a strong anger response in which reactivity is characterized by irritable or possibly aggressive responses. The full symptom picture must be present for at least 3 days after the traumatic event and can be diagnosed only up to 1 month after the event. Symptoms that occur immediately after the event but resolve in less than 3 days would not meet criteria for acute stress disorder.
Witnessed events include, but are not limited to, observing threatened or serious injury, unnatural death, physical or sexual violence inflicted on another individual as a result of violent assault, severe domestic violence, severe accident, war, and disaster; it may also include witnessing a medical catastrophe (e.g., a life-threatening hemorrhage) involving one's child. Events experienced indirectly through learning about the event are limited to close relatives or close friends. Such events must have been violent or accidental—death due to natural causes does not qualify—and include violent personal assault, suicide, serious accident, or serious injury. The disorder may be especially severe when the stressor is interpersonal and intentional (e.g., torture, rape). The likelihood of developing this disorder may increase as the intensity of and physical proximity to the stressor increase.
The traumatic event can be reexperienced in various ways. Commonly, the individual has recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event (Criterion B1). The recollections are spontaneous or triggered recurrent memories of the event that usually occur in response to a stimulus that is reminiscent of the traumatic experience (e.g., the sound of a backfiring car triggering memories of gunshots). These intrusive memories often include sensory (e.g., sensing the intense heat that was perceived in a house fire), emotional (e.g., experiencing the fear of believing that one was about to be stabbed), or physiological (e.g., experiencing the shortness of breath that one suffered during a near-drowning) components. Distressing dreams may contain themes that are representative of or thematically related to the major threats involved in the traumatic event. (For example, in the case of a motor vehicle accident survivor, the distressing dreams may involve crashing cars generally; in the case of a combat soldier, the distressing dreams may involve being harmed in ways other than combat.)
Dissociative states may last from a few seconds to several hours, or even days, during which components of the event are relived and the individual behaves as though experiencing the event at that moment. While dissociative responses are common during a traumatic event, only dissociative responses that persist beyond 3 days after trauma exposure are considered for the diagnosis of acute stress disorder. For young children, reenactment of events related to trauma may appear in play and may include dissociative moments (e.g., a child who survives a motor vehicle accident may repeatedly crash toy cars during play in a focused and distressing manner). These episodes, often referred to as flashbacks, are typically brief but involve a sense that the traumatic event is occurring in the present rather than being remembered in the past and are associated with significant distress.

Some individuals with the disorder do not have intrusive memories of the event itself, but instead experience intense psychological distress or physiological reactivity when they are exposed to triggering events that resemble or symbolize an aspect of the traumatic event (e.g., windy days for children after a hurricane, entering an elevator for a male or female who was raped in an elevator, seeing someone who resembles one's perpetrator). The triggering cue could be a physical sensation (e.g., a sense of heat for a burn victim, dizziness for survivors of head trauma), particularly for individuals with highly somatic presentations. The individual may have a persistent inability to feel positive emotions (e.g., happiness, joy, satisfaction, or emotions associated with intimacy, tenderness, or sexuality) but can experience negative emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, guilt, or shame. Alterations in awareness can include depersonalization, a detached sense of oneself (e.g., seeing oneself from the other side of the room), or derealization, having a distorted view of one's surroundings (e.g., perceiving that things are moving in slow motion, seeing things in a daze, not being aware of events that one would normally encode). Some individuals also report an inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event that was presumably encoded. This symptom is attributable to dissociative amnesia and is not attributable to head injury, alcohol, or drugs.
Stimuli associated with the trauma are persistently avoided. The individual may refuse to discuss the traumatic experience or may engage in avoidance strategies to minimize awareness of emotional reactions (e.g., excessive alcohol use when reminded of the experience). This behavioral avoidance may include avoiding watching news coverage of the traumatic experience, refusing to return to a workplace where the trauma occurred, or avoiding interacting with others who shared the same traumatic experience.
It is very common for individuals with acute stress disorder to experience problems with sleep onset and maintenance, which may be associated with nightmares or with generalized elevated arousal that prevents adequate sleep. Individuals with acute stress disorder may be quick tempered and may even engage in aggressive verbal and/or physical behavior with little provocation. Acute stress disorder is often characterized by a heightened sensitivity to potential threats, including those that are related to the traumatic experience (e.g., a motor vehicle accident victim may be especially sensitive to the threat potentially caused by any cars or trucks) or those not related to the traumatic event (e.g., fear of having a heart attack). Concentration difficulties, including difficulty remembering daily events (e.g., forgetting one's telephone number) or attending to focused tasks (e.g., following a conversation for a sustained period of time), are commonly reported. Individuals with acute stress disorder may be very reactive to unexpected stimuli, displaying a heightened startle response or jumpiness to loud noises or unexpected movements (e.g., the individual may jump markedly in the response to a telephone ringing).

Associated Features Supporting Diagnosis

Individuals with acute stress disorder commonly engage in catastrophic or extremely negative thoughts about their role in the traumatic event, their response to the traumatic experience, or the likelihood of future harm. For example, an individual with acute stress disorder may feel excessively guilty about not having prevented the traumatic event or about not adapting to the experience more successfully. Individuals with acute stress disorder may also interpret their symptoms in a catastrophic manner, such that flashback memories or emotional numbing may be interpreted as a sign of diminished mental capacity. It is common for individuals with acute stress disorder to experience panic attacks in the initial month after trauma exposure that may be triggered by trauma reminders or may apparently occur spontaneously. Additionally, individuals with acute stress disorder may display chaotic or impulsive behavior. For example, individuals may drive recklessly, make irrational decisions, or gamble excessively. In children, there may be significant separation anxiety, possibly manifested by excessive needs for attention from

caregivers. In the case of bereavement following a death that occurred in traumatic circumstances, the symptoms of acute stress disorder can involve acute grief reactions. In such cases, reexperiencing, dissociative, and arousal symptoms may involve reactions to the loss, such as intrusive memories of the circumstances of the individual's death, disbelief that the individual has died, and anger about the death. Postconcussive symptoms (e.g., headaches, dizziness, sensitivity to light or sound, irritability, concentration deficits), which occur frequently following mild traumatic brain injury, are also frequently seen in individuals with acute stress disorder. Postconcussive symptoms are equally common in brain-injured and non–brain-injured populations, and the frequent occurrence of postconcussive symptoms could be attributable to acute stress disorder symptoms.

Prevalence

The prevalence of acute stress disorder in recently trauma-exposed populations (i.e., within 1 month of trauma exposure) varies according to the nature of the event and the context in which it is assessed. In both U.S. and non-U.S. populations, acute stress disorder tends to be identified in less than 20% of cases following traumatic events that do not involve interpersonal assault; 13%–21% of motor vehicle accidents, 14% of mild traumatic brain injury, 19% of assault, 10% of severe burns, and 6%–12% of industrial accidents. Higher rates (i.e., 20%–50%) are reported following interpersonal traumatic events, including assault, rape, and witnessing a mass shooting.

Development and Course

Acute stress disorder cannot be diagnosed until 3 days after a traumatic event. Although acute stress disorder may progress to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after 1 month, it may also be a transient stress response that remits within 1 month of trauma exposure and does not result in PTSD. Approximately half of individuals who eventually develop PTSD initially present with acute stress disorder. Symptom worsening during the initial month can occur, often as a result of ongoing life stressors or further traumatic events.
The forms of reexperiencing can vary across development. Unlike adults or adolescents, young children may report frightening dreams without content that clearly reflects aspects of the trauma (e.g., waking in fright in the aftermath of the trauma but being unable to relate the content of the dream to the traumatic event). Children age 6 years and younger are more likely than older children to express reexperiencing symptoms through play that refers directly or symbolically to the trauma. For example, a very young child who survived a fire may draw pictures of flames. Young children also do not necessarily manifest fearful reactions at the time of the exposure or even during reexperiencing. Parents typically report a range of emotional expressions, such as anger, shame, or withdrawal, and even excessively bright positive affect, in young children who are traumatized. Although children may avoid reminders of the trauma, they sometimes become preoccupied with reminders (e.g., a young child bitten by a dog may talk about dogs constantly yet avoid going outside because of fear of coming into contact with a dog).

Risk and Prognostic Factors

Temperamental. Risk factors include prior mental disorder, high levels of negative affectivity (neuroticism), greater perceived severity of the traumatic event, and an avoidant coping style. Catastrophic appraisals of the traumatic experience, often characterized by exaggerated appraisals of future harm, guilt, or hopelessness, are strongly predictive of acute stress disorder.
Environmental. First and foremost, an individual must be exposed to a traumatic event to be at risk for acute stress disorder. Risk factors for the disorder include a history of prior trauma.

Genetic and physiological. Females are at greater risk for developing acute stress disorder.
Elevated reactivity, as reflected by acoustic startle response, prior to trauma exposure increases the risk for developing acute stress disorder.

Culture-Related Diagnostic Issues

The profile of symptoms of acute stress disorder may vary cross-culturally, particularly with respect to dissociative symptoms, nightmares, avoidance, and somatic symptoms (e.g., dizziness, shortness of breath, heat sensations). Cultural syndromes and idioms of distress shape the local symptom profiles of acute stress disorder. Some cultural groups may display variants of dissociative responses, such as possession or trancelike behaviors in the initial month after trauma exposure. Panic symptoms may be salient in acute stress disorder among Cambodians because of the association of traumatic exposure with panic-like khyâl attacks, and ataque de nervios among Latin Americans may also follow a traumatic exposure.

Gender-Related Diagnostic Issues