



Acute Reaction to Stress

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Anxiety symptoms sometimes develop quickly as a reaction to stress. Symptoms often go quickly, and you may not need any treatment. Sometimes a beta-blocker medicine, diazepam, or other treatments are helpful.

What is an acute reaction to stress?

Acute reaction to stress is when anxiety and other symptoms develop due to a stressful event. 'Acute' means the symptoms develop quickly, but do not usually last long. Acute reactions to stress typically occur after an unexpected 'life crisis' such as an accident, bereavement, family problem, bad news, etc.

Sometimes symptoms occur before a known, but difficult, situation such as an exam, air travel, concert performance, etc. This is called situational anxiety.

What are the symptoms of an acute reaction to stress?

Symptoms usually develop quickly over minutes or hours 'reacting' to the stressful event. Symptoms usually settle fairly quickly, but can sometimes last for several days or weeks. Symptoms include some of the following:

- Psychological symptoms such as anxiety, low mood, irritability, emotional ups and downs, poor sleep, poor concentration, wanting to be alone.
- Physical symptoms such as palpitations, feeling sick, chest pain, headaches, stomach pains, a 'knot in the stomach', and breathing difficulties.

The physical symptoms are caused by stress hormones (such as adrenaline) which are released into the bloodstream, and by overactivity of nervous impulses to various parts of the body.

What are the treatments for acute reaction to stress?

No treatment may be needed as symptoms usually go once a stressful event is over or 'come to terms with'. Understanding the cause of symptoms, and talking things over with a friend or family member may help. However, some people have more severe or prolonged symptoms. One or more of the following may then help.

- **Learning to relax**

Leaflets, books, tapes, videos, etc, on relaxation and combating stress are commonly available. They teach simple deep breathing techniques and other stress relieving measures which may help you to relax and ease symptoms.

- **Counselling**

Counselling (if available) may be an option if symptoms are persistent or severe. Counselling helps you to explore ways of dealing with stress and stress symptoms.

- **Anxiety management courses**

Anxiety management courses may be available locally. Some people prefer to be in a group course rather than have individual counselling. These may be particularly useful if you regularly get situational stress symptoms. For example, if you are a musician or lecturer and develop symptoms prior to each performance or lecture.

- **Beta-blocker medicine**

A beta-blocker medicine is an option. These ease anxiety and some physical symptoms such as trembling which are caused by a stress reaction. They are particularly useful for situational anxiety.

For example, some musicians who become stressed take a beta-blocker to ease shakiness before a concert. Beta-blockers are not addictive, are not tranquillisers, and do not cause drowsiness or affect 'performance'. You can take them 'as required'.

- **Diazepam**

Diazepam is an option if symptoms are severe. Diazepam is a benzodiazepine tranquilliser. It works well to ease anxiety. The problem is, it is addictive and can lose its effect if you take it for more than a few weeks. This is why diazepam or other benzodiazepines are not advised for long-term anxiety problems. However, a short course may be useful if you have acute and severe episodes of stress related anxiety symptoms. In particular, it may be useful where the cause of the stress is likely to go, or ease quickly.

- **Advice**

Advice from agencies such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, housing office, Relate (for relationship problems), patient support groups (for advice on specific medical illnesses), welfare agencies, etc, may help depending on the cause of the stress.

Alcohol and stress

Although alcohol may give short term relief of symptoms, don't be fooled that drinking helps with stress. In the long run, it does not. Drinking alcohol to 'calm nerves' is often a slippery slope to heavier and problem drinking. Be aware of this.

Further help and advice

National Phobics Society

Zion Community Resource Centre
339 Stretford Road, Hulme
Manchester M15 4ZY
Telephone 0870 122 2325
www.phobics-society.org.uk

A leading UK charity for anxiety disorders.

NO PANIC (National Organisation For Phobias, Anxiety, Neuroses, Information & Care)

93 Brands Farm Way, Randlay
Telford, Shropshire TF3 2JQ
Helpline 0808 808 0545
www.nopanic.org.uk

For people with panic attacks, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, and related disorders.

Anxiety Care

Cardinal Heenan Centre,
326 High Road, Ilford, Essex IG1 1QP
Telephone 020 8478 3400
www.anxietycare.org.uk

First Steps to Freedom

1 Taylor Close, Kenilworth
Warwickshire CV8 2LW
Helpline 0845 120 2916
www.first-steps.org

For people with general anxiety, phobias, obsessional compulsive disorder, panic attacks, anorexia and bulimia, and those who wish to come off tranquillisers.

Services include, telephone self-help groups, leaflets, booklets, videos, audio tapes including relaxation audio tapes.



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