



3900 WEST BROWN DEER ROAD, SUITE 200  
BROWN DEER, WI 53209  
PHONE: 414.540.2170 • FAX: 414.540.2171  
WWW.SHOREHAVENBHI.COM

## Overview of Adjustment Disorders: Reactions to Life's Common Problems(c)

Don Rosenberg  
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For 2500 years, one of the most common philosophical statements has been that everything is subject to change. Everything is filled with impermanence. The expectation things will just always stay the same and stay predictable is considered actually to be a source of distress.

**Adaptation to change.** We are built for adaptation to change. We're born with a brain ready to absorb everything it needs to absorb in order to be effective in the environment and culture into which it is we are born.

**You cannot step into the same river twice. The water is in constant motion. Nothing stays the same.**

Throughout life, we are exposed to more and more and wider and wider an array of new challenges. The child moves from its home environment eventually to a school environment then to a high school, then to

a college. Each of these is a bigger and broader world. Then hopefully to some self-sufficiency in employment and then to our relationship with a partner and then perhaps to having children and to travel to other places.

**Adaptive capacities** that we have accumulated in our life contribute to our ability to be effective in facing all of these changes. But that adaptive capacity is finite. Sometimes, our childhood's did not prepare us sufficiently well.

We can be overwhelmed by too many changes. Research shows that an accumulation of changes, especially negative events such as a loss of a job, financial distress, break up of a relationship, or a death in the family, strain our adaptive capacity. When too many of these experiences pile up or one of them is highly challenging for us, our adaptive capacity may



be depleted. In that case, we are likely to have some kind of mental, psychological, or physical symptoms.

So, many medical problems that we face are precipitated by some sort of a change that has been difficult for us to adapt to.

**Defenses.** As we grow up, we learn various ways to make those adaptations. Some of these are called defense mechanisms. They protect us from a too high a level of anxiety. As we grow up, we become more mature in how we manage those anxieties. Hopefully, we reach the point at which we can use humor, wisdom, acceptance of life as it is, plus effective communication of our emotions. All these contribute to our ability to adapt in the best way.



Flowers come, but they go. Joy happens, but it may go. New demands require we cross a bridge and hope we are prepared for what may come. It is not all flowers.

But that isn't always the case. Some of us maintain a more immature defenses, such as blaming or acting on our emotions without inhibiting our actions in a more tactful way. We also are prone to many ineffective thinking strategies.

**Coping.** Another group of skills are called coping skills, the things we do when we're feeling negative arousal. Do we know how to self-soothe? Do we know how to distract ourselves when we need to? Do we know how to step it up and take care of what needs to be taking care of and manage what

needs to be managed and decide what needs to be decided?

As you can imagine, all of us are prone to having some vulnerabilities. We all have some coping skills or defenses that are not at the absolute optimal level. We all have some areas in which we could grow and do better as a result.

New changes that come along can deplete our coping capacity and our adaptive capacity. They just demand too much from us or there's been too much of an accumulation. And as a result, we become depleted, anxious or depressed.

**Crisis.** We go into a crisis state. A crisis state is marked by difficulties with decisions, unremitting anxiety, discomfort, or depression lasting a number of days or weeks. But

always it begins with some *precipitating event*. Those events sometimes are developmentally common. For example, when your last child starts school, graduating, taking on a mortgage. These are challenges because they expose us to new adaptive demands. Some precipitating events are not age-related, but universal, meaning they could happen to anyone, such as, a fire in one's house, a tornado, the flood, a political event such as the death of a leader.

So change is inevitable. Those changes can cause us to have an adaptive demand beyond what we are ready for or are able to manage That is when we develop and adjustment disorder. Sometimes we develop something even more serious, such as major depressive disorder, a panic attacks a drinking problem. But let's take a look at the adjustment disorders.

*Example. Alice and John developed marital problems after a miscarriage in the 5<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy. That was the event that demanded more of them than they were able to adapt to. John has been an only child due to his mother's early death. Alice had a disabled sister and worried about having a healthy child. All their anxiety came to a head when she miscarried. They began to argue. The therapist asked, "What is this problem doing to you?" For Alice, it was a case of high anxiety over having children and she felt John had not been there for her. For John, it was a depressive reaction, like another bout of grief. He didn't feel Alice understood. So, we saw two adjust reactions.*

**Adjustment disorders** are stress-related conditions that arise when an individual struggles to cope with a significant life change or stressor. Recognized within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), these disorders manifest through emotional and behavioral symptoms. They significantly impact one's daily functioning.

### **Types of Adjustment Disorders**

#### 1. Adjustment Disorder with Depressed Mood

Description: Individuals experiencing this type of adjustment disorder primarily exhibit symptoms of depression, such as persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a lack of enjoyment in activities once found pleasurable. These symptoms occur in response to an identifiable stressor. This may last from a few weeks to a few months.

Adult Example: A 45-year-old man loses his job of 20 years due to company downsizing.

Within a few weeks, he begins to show signs of depression, expressing feelings of worthlessness and disinterest in searching for new employment or engaging in activities he once enjoyed. He seems apathetic.

Child Example: A 12-year-old girl moves to a new city with her family, leaving behind her friends and school. She becomes increasingly withdrawn and sad, refusing to engage with peers at her new school or participate in her favorite sports.

## 2. Adjustment Disorder with Anxiety

Description: This category is characterized by symptoms of anxiety, such as excessive worry, nervousness, or fear about everyday situations. The anxiety is more intense than what might be typically expected.

Adult Example: Following a minor car accident, a 30-year-old woman develops an intense fear of driving or being a passenger in a car, leading to avoidance of situations requiring travel and significant distress in her daily life as she tries to compensate for being afraid and becomes more withdrawn.

Child Example: A child who has recently started kindergarten exhibits extreme worry about being separated from parents, leading to stomach aches and tears every morning before school, which is not typical for their age. She never had these symptoms before even when going to pre-school.

## 3. Adjustment Disorder with Mixed Anxiety and Depressed Mood

Description: Individuals with this disorder experience both depressive and anxiety symptoms, neither of which predominates. This mixed presentation can complicate diagnosis and treatment.

Adult Example: After a significant relationship breakup, a 28-year-old experiences bouts of crying, feelings of hopelessness, alongside constant worry about their future romantic prospects and loneliness. He predicts no one will want to be with him.

Adult Example: A 50-year-old woman, after relocating to a new country for a job, experiences general malaise, sleep disturbances, and difficulty concentrating, without a clear predominance of depression or anxiety.

Child Example: A 6-year-old, facing the serious illness of a sibling, begins to have nightmares, refuses to attend school, and cannot articulate his feelings of fear or sadness, showing a general disturbance in emotional regulation.

Child Example: Following the divorce of his parents, a 10-year-old boy shows signs of sadness, loss of interest in playing with friends, coupled with worries about being left alone or his parents not returning home when they leave.

#### 4. Adjustment Disorder with Disturbance of Conduct

Description: This form of adjustment disorder is marked by behavioral changes, usually disagreeable behavior, such as violating social norms or rights of others. Actions may include truancy, vandalism, or reckless driving, significantly diverging from the individual's usual behavior.

Adult Example: A previously law-abiding 22-year-old begins engaging in shoplifting and aggressive confrontations following a significant financial loss, behaviors that are uncharacteristic and directly traceable to their recent stressor. He is irritable and easily angered.

Child Example: A 7-year-old starts showing aggressive behavior at school, hitting peers and defying teachers, shortly after the arrival of a new sibling, reflecting difficulty adjusting to the change in family dynamics.

#### 5. Adjustment Disorder with Mixed Disturbance of Emotions and Conduct

Description: This disorder encompasses both emotional symptoms (depression, anxiety) and behavioral issues (disturbance of conduct), presenting a complex challenge for diagnosis and management.

Adult Example: Following a life-threatening health diagnosis, a 35-year-old exhibits severe anxiety, frequent emotional outbursts of crying and anger, alongside impulsive behaviors like reckless driving and substance use.

Child Example: A 9-year-old, struggling with his parents' contentious divorce, shows signs of sadness and anxiety, as well as bullying at school and lying.



### Conclusion

Adjustment is our reaction after a life change event. Even positive events requires us to adjust. Negative events, such as a death of a close friend or pet, loss of a job, or illness, may lead to a broad spectrum of emotional and behavioral stress responses. These conditions underscore the importance of recognizing the impact of life changes on mental health, for both adults and children. Through understanding the various types of adjustment disorders and their manifestations, we can foster empathy, provide appropriate support, and pursue effective treatments for those affected. Mental health professionals play a crucial role in identifying and managing these disorders, ensuring individuals receive the care and intervention needed to navigate life's challenges and transitions.

The right help to manage life changes can set us on an positive, upward course. Without help, about 1/3 of people are weakened by depleting adaptive demands. We want to come out stronger. Seek the help you may need.

*Shorehaven Behavioral Health is a mental health clinic and training center with therapy offices in Brown Deer, Greenfield, and Mt. Pleasant, and also offering telehealth throughout Wisconsin. We specialize in challenging cases and rapid access to services. In addition to depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, and most other psychological problems, we work extensively with children & families and with substance use problems. Our DBT program has three groups – for younger adolescents, older adolescents, and adults – and has openings. We also accept referrals for substance abuse care from clinicians who are not comfortable with that population. Call 414-540-2170.*

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