



## NATIONAL CENTER FOR POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

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## Acute Stress Disorder: A Brief Description

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### What is acute stress disorder?

Acute stress disorder (ASD) is a psychiatric diagnosis that can be given to individuals in the first month following a traumatic event. The symptoms that define ASD overlap with those for PTSD, although there are a greater number of dissociative symptoms for ASD, such as not knowing where you are or feeling as if you are outside of your body.

### How common is ASD?

Because ASD is a relatively new diagnosis, research on the disorder is in the early stages. Rates range from 6% to 33% depending on the type of trauma:

Motor vehicle accidents: Rates of ASD range from approximately 13% <sup>1, 2</sup> to 21% <sup>3</sup>.

Typhoon: A study of survivors of a typhoon yielded an ASD rate of 7% <sup>4</sup>.

Industrial accident: One study found a rate of 6% in survivors of an industrial accident <sup>5</sup>.

Violent assault: A rate of 19% was found in survivors of violent assault <sup>6</sup>, and a rate of 13% was found among a mixed group consisting of survivors of assaults, burns, and industrial accidents <sup>7</sup>. A recent study of victims of robbery and assault found that 25% met criteria for ASD <sup>8</sup>, and a study of victims of a mass shooting found that 33% met criteria for ASD <sup>9</sup>.

### Who is at risk for ASD as a result of trauma?

A few studies have examined factors that place individuals at risk for developing ASD.

One study found that individuals who (1) had experienced other traumatic events, (2) had PTSD previously, and (3) had prior psychological problems were all more likely to develop ASD as the result of a new traumatic stressor <sup>10</sup>.

A study of motor vehicle accident survivors found that those individuals (1) with depression symptoms, (2) who had previous mental health treatment, and (3) who had been in other motor vehicle accidents were more likely to have more severe ASD <sup>11</sup>.

A final study suggests that people who dissociate when confronted with traumatic stressors may be more likely to develop ASD <sup>12</sup>.

### How predictive of PTSD is ASD?

A diagnosis of ASD appears to be a strong predictor of subsequent PTSD. In one study, more than three quarters of the individuals who were in motor vehicle accidents and met criteria for ASD went on to develop PTSD <sup>1</sup>. This finding

is consistent with other studies that found that over 80% of people with ASD developed PTSD by the time they were assessed six months later [6](#), [13](#).

## Are there effective treatments for ASD?

### Cognitive-behavioral interventions

At present, cognitive-behavioral interventions during the acute aftermath of trauma exposure have yielded the most consistently positive results in terms of preventing subsequent posttraumatic psychopathology [14](#), [15](#), [16](#), [17](#).

### Psychological debriefing?

Psychological debriefing is an early intervention that was originally developed for rescue workers but has been widely applied in the acute aftermath of potentially traumatic events. It has received much attention in the wake of 9/11. However, there is little evidence to support the continued use of debriefing with acutely traumatized individuals.

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