

# Adjustment Disorders: what are they ?

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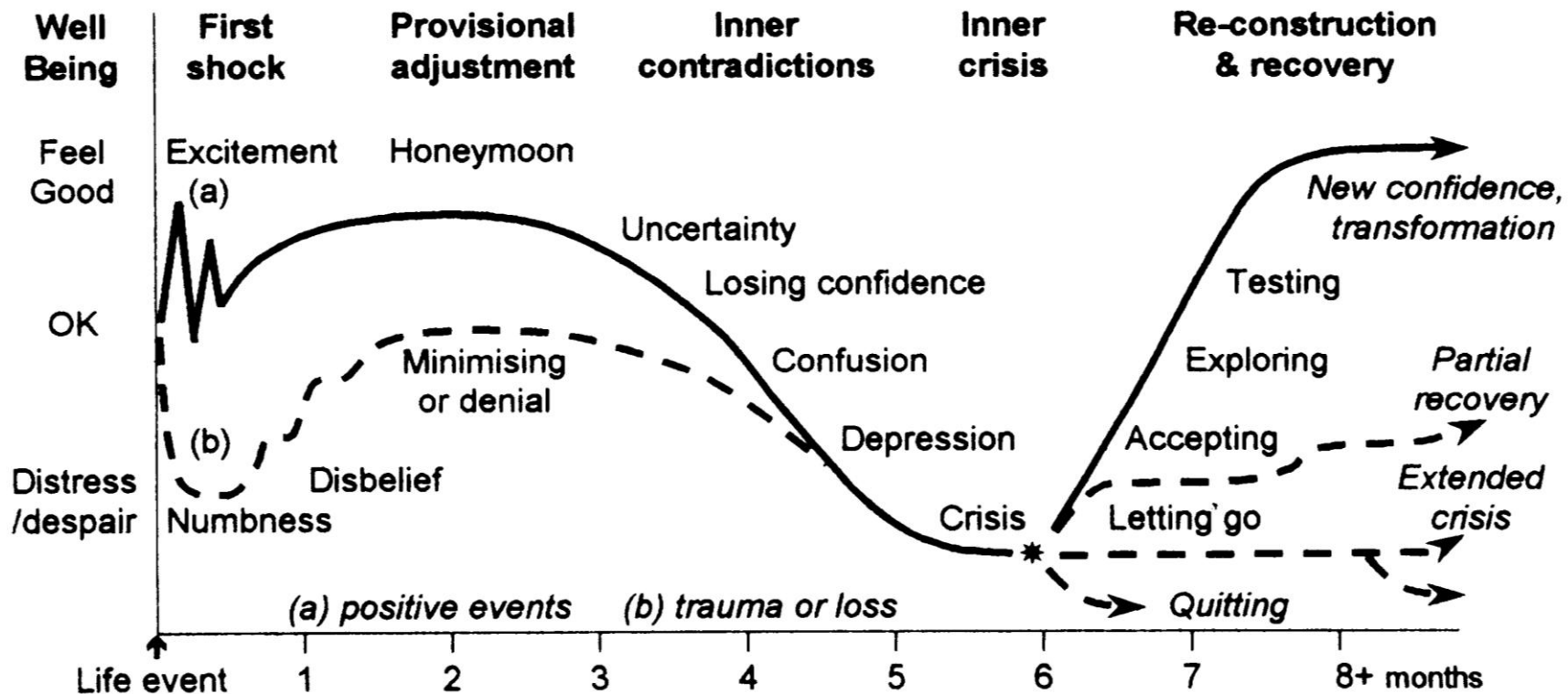
Jacqui says “What have I got to adjust to??”

# Stress

- Definition of stress (attributed to Richard S. Lazarus)
- *Stress is experienced when a person feels that “the demands placed on them exceed the personal resources they are able to mobilize.”*

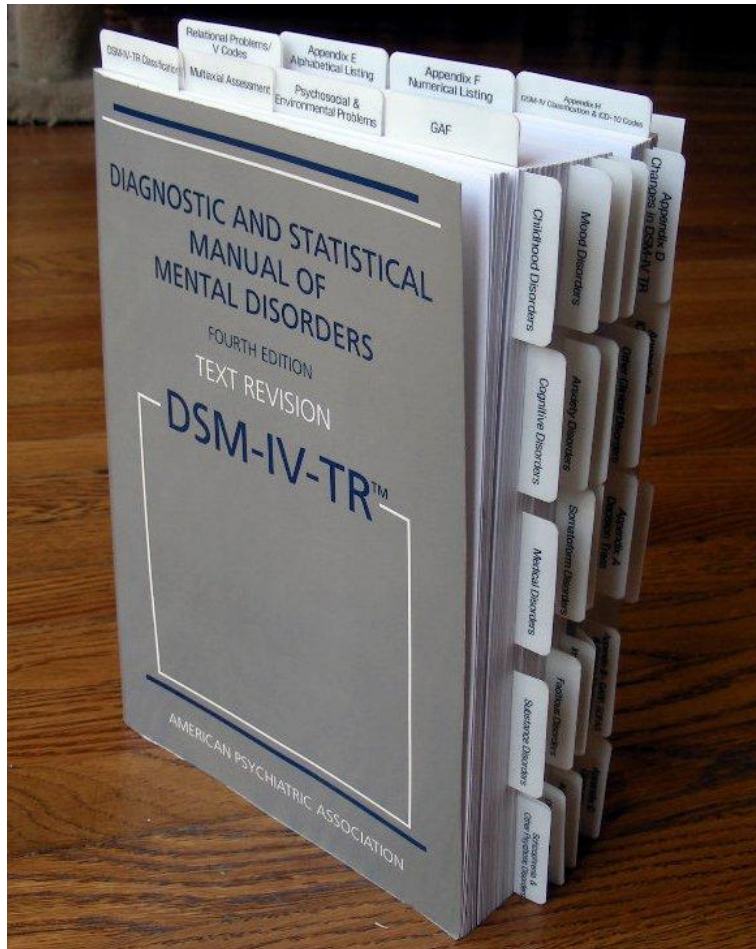
# Holmes Rahe Stress Scale

- Death of spouse **100** Divorce **73** Marital separation **65** Jail term **63** Death of close family member **63**, Personal injury or illness **53** Marriage **50** Fired at work **47** Marital reconciliation **45** Retirement **45** Change in health of family member **44** Pregnancy **40** Sex difficulties **39** Gain of new family member **39** Business readjustment **39** Change in financial state **38** Death of close friend **37** Change to a different line of work **36** Change in number of arguments with spouse **35** A large mortgage or loan **31** Foreclosure of mortgage or loan **30** Change in responsibilities at work **29** Son or daughter leaving home **29** Trouble with in-laws **29** Outstanding personal achievement **28** Spouse begins or stops work **26**





# The DSM



- The psychiatrist's bible
- Cookbook approach
- Fourth version
- Currently the “text revision”

*Q. How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb?*

*A1 "How long have you been having this phantasy?"*

*A2 "Why does the light bulb necessarily have to change?"*

*A3 One, but he must consult the DSM-IV.*

# DSM IV TR Diagnostic Criteria (1)

- A. The development of symptoms in response to an identifiable stressor occurring within 3 months of the onset of the stressor.
- B. These symptoms are clinically significant as evidenced by either of the following:
  - (1) marked distress that is **in excess** of what would be expected from exposure to the stressor.
  - (2) **significant impairment** in social or occupational functioning.



## DSM IV TR Diagnostic Criteria (2)

- C. The stress-related disturbance does not meet the criteria for another specific Axis I disorder and is not merely an exacerbation of a preexisting Axis I or Axis II disorder.
- D. The symptoms do not represent Bereavement.
- E. Once the stressor (or its consequences) has terminated, the symptoms do not persist for more than an additional 6 months.

# DSM IV TR Diagnostic Criteria (3)

309.0 With Depressed Mood

309.24 With Anxiety

309.28 With Mixed Anxiety and Depressed Mood

309.3 With Disturbance of Conduct (antisocial)

309.4 With Mixed Disturbance of Emotions and  
Conduct (.28 + .3)



# Edvard Munch

- Born in Norway 1863
- 5yo when mother died of TB
- 14yo when sister died of TB
- 26yo when father died
- Another sister spent most of her life in an asylum
- Only brother died of pneumonia when 30yo
- Drinking became out of control
- 45yo, admitted to private sanitarium
- Died 81yo

# Quote from Munch

- *When I cast off on the voyage of my life, I felt like a ship made from old rotten material sent out into a stormy sea by its maker with the words: If you are wrecked it is your own fault and then you will be burnt in the eternal fires of Hell.*

# Key Points

- Defined by the cause rather than the symptom profile
- Must be distinguished from the normal reaction to a stressor
- It is a common misconception that adjustment disorders are mild
- When a more specific DSM disorder (eg major depression) is precipitated by the stressor, that disorder is diagnosed and not an adjustment disorder
- Strictly the symptoms must start within 3 months of the stressor



# Workplace Stress



# Workplace Stress

- Performance Management “my boss told me I wasn’t good at my job, I’m not taking that and I went straight home and now I’m scared to go back”
- Dismissal “I know I’ve been struggling at work but he sacked me and that’s not fair”
- Bullying and Harassment “He said he’d cut my legs off if I was late to work again”
- Work Conditions “They’ve changed me from two days, two nights and two days off to two days off, two nights, two days – they’re singling me out”
- Failed Advancement “I was acting in that job for nine months but they didn’t give it to me at interview – how could they”

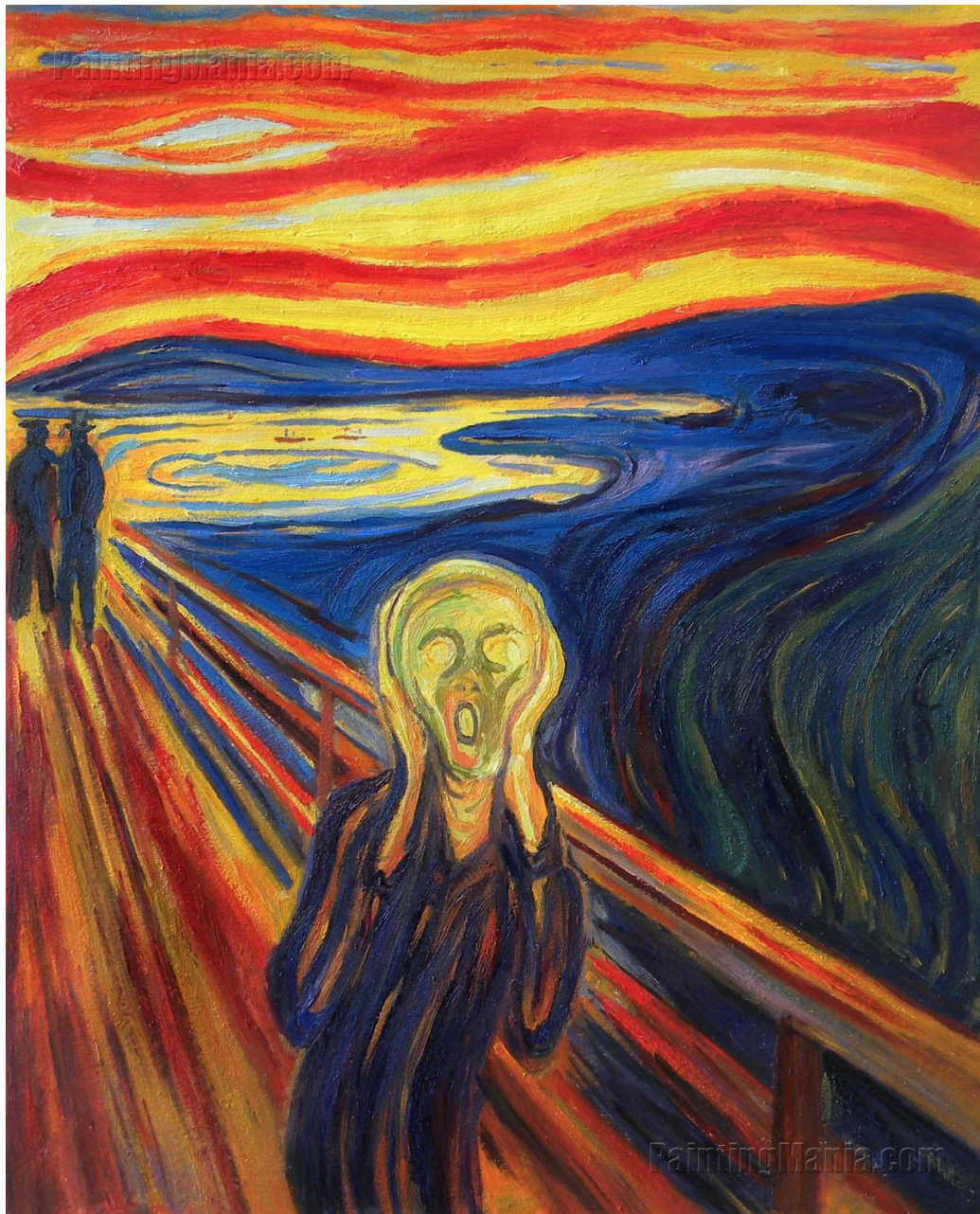
# Treatment

- based on psychotherapy
- help patient put his rage into words
- enhance coping with the stressor
- establish support strategies to maximize adaption to the stressor
- minimize or avoid the stressor

# Treatment

- Important treatment variables (biceps)
- Brevity
- Immediacy
- Centrality
- Expectance
- Proximity
- Simplicity





*Should **drugs** be used in the  
treatment of adjustment  
disorders?*

Treatment



# Treatment

- Be cautious and delay the use of drugs
- There is little evidence of a role for medication in adjustment disorders
- Being on a drug is not proof the patient has an significant illness
- Patients in medico-legal settings may “want” a drug treatment

# Tips for case managers

- We all react to work place issues but we are not all mentally ill
- An adjustment disorder is a short term illness that most often settles with time and counselling
- It usually does not indicate severe life long illness; if severe illness is the picture – it probably isn't an adjustment disorder
- Total change to the work environment is not often needed and may be counter-therapeutic (promote avoidances)

# SUMMARY

- An adjustment disorder involves an **abnormal reaction** to a life event
- A **normal reaction** to a stressor is **not a psychiatric illness**
- An adjustment disorder can include a range of symptoms and degrees of severity
- An adjustment disorder should only be diagnosed when a more specific diagnosis cannot be made

