

Heart and mind

Emotional health affects our hearts

By Dr. Viral Mehta, MD, FACC, FSCAI

Every year, approximately 1.5 million Americans experience a heart attack – some of them had no clue something was wrong with their heart. While common cardiac risk factors, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and smoking, do contribute to the problem of heart disease, they are not the sole culprits. Research has shown that in some patients, poor emotional health is associated with heart disease, and it runs a more aggressive and recurring course in these patients. Individuals who frequently experience hostility, cynicism, anger and depression are particularly susceptible to poor cardiovascular health. Individuals who feel emotionally and socially isolated also perceive the world to be a very hostile place, contributing to their chronic stress.

Type A personalities can also be at an increased risk of heart disease. Type A behavior is often fiercely competitive, overly self-critical, easily wound up and more prone to hostility and anger. Not surprisingly, Type A's experience chronic stress that makes them more vulnerable to cardiovascular problems. Recent research has also suggested that individuals who exhibit Type D personality traits are also more prone to developing coronary heart disease. They not only tend to experience negative emotions, but they suppress their emotions and avoid social contact with others.

How do emotions affect heart health?

There are two major ways emotions can affect heart health: biologically and behaviorally. When people get emotionally overwhelmed, they tend to indulge in unhealthy behaviors like overeating, smoking and drinking. Obviously, if emotional issues remain unresolved and become chronic, unhealthy lifestyle becomes the norm with all the adverse health consequences.

The biological effects of poor emotional health are even more damaging. Chronic stress leads to increased levels of various stress hormones including cortisol, epinephrine, insulin and several others known to cause serious damage to the heart. Other consequences

include vascular inflammation, damaged endothelium (lining of blood vessels), increased blood pressure, and tendency to form blood clots triggering heart attacks and strokes. Individuals with chronic stress also have lower levels of "good" cholesterol (HDL) and tend to develop more blockages in their arteries.

What steps can I take to improve emotional and, thereby, heart health?

The first crucial step to improving emotional health is simply recognizing our poor emotions and changing the way we respond to them. The source of stress is not our environment, rather it is how we perceive and respond to these "stressful" situations. While we cannot always change the people and the world around us, we can certainly change how we see and react to our world. According to Dr. Dean Ornish, guru of preventive cardiology and a champion of the "Opening Your Heart" program, anything that leads to real intimacy and connection with other human beings has healing effects on the heart. A number of scientific studies have also shown that activities such as support groups, yoga, meditation or

any faith-based prayer activity have long-lasting benefits for the heart. Thus, making conscious efforts to

release all negative emotions and cultivating forgiveness have tremendously positive health benefits for your heart.

—Dr. Viral Mehta specializes in interventional cardiology and is clinical assistant professor of medicine at UCLA.



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