

# Coping with Heart Disease



It is normal to feel stress when you have heart disease and are working with your cardiac care team on a treatment plan. How well you are able to cope with the disease and the changes it causes is an important part of your recovery.

Use these tips and resources and talk to your care team about your symptoms of stress, anxiety, and/or depression.

## Stress

Stress is how you respond to a perceived demand on your mind, body, or emotions. This demand may be:

- Internal – This is pressure you put on yourself, such as feeling like you need to get everything on your “to do” list completed.
- External – This is pressure that may be from an outside source, such as a deadline at work.



Stress is a normal part of life, and there are both positive and negative sources of stress. How you handle the stress is what is important.

Signs of stress include:

- Muscle tension
- Racing heart
- Chest pain
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Insomnia
- Anxiety and/or depression

## How to Manage Stress

You will naturally develop ways to deal with the things that cause you stress, called coping strategies. Sometimes these are not healthy for us in different ways.

Poor coping strategies include:

- Avoiding people or activities
- Focusing on the negatives
- Overeating
- Overuse of alcohol or drugs
- Getting into arguments
- Sleeping a lot

Unhealthy coping strategies don't work well and may make you feel worse. They can cause you to feel isolated and develop unhealthy habits that can create more problems.



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**Healthy coping strategies include:**

- **Exercise**, such as:
  - Cardiovascular (cardio) exercise, such as walking or biking
  - Strength training
  - Yoga
- **Paced breathing**
- **Talking** with family and friends for support
- **Keeping a journal**
- **Relaxation strategies**, such as:
  - Listening to music
  - Focusing on your breath
  - Body scan – focus on your breath while doing progressive muscle relaxation (focus on 1 part of the body or a group of muscles and mentally release any physical tension you have there, working your way down your body from your head to your toes)
  - Guided imagery – think of a time and place when you felt safe and comfortable and bring those smells, sounds, and feelings back with you to the here and now
  - Mindfulness – while sitting comfortably and focusing on your breathing, bring your attention to the present moment (notice things with your 5 senses)
  - Movement – yoga, tai chi, or qigong



Try different coping strategies to see which ones work well for you and that you enjoy. Pick 1 or more strategies to practice daily to reduce your feelings of stress and to benefit your recovery.

If you need help with ideas, ask your care team for resources or visit Integrative Health for free recordings: [wexnermedical.osu.edu/integrative-health/resources](https://wexnermedical.osu.edu/integrative-health/resources).

## Depression and anxiety

Depression and anxiety are two of the most common reactions to having and treating heart disease. In fact, research shows that depression and/or anxiety can be risk factors for heart disease.

Learning to cope with depression and anxiety is just as important as making lifestyle changes that involve taking your medicine, following a heart healthy diet, stopping smoking, and exercising.

### Depression

Symptoms of depression include feeling sad, becoming tearful, feeling like you have no energy to do the things you usually enjoy, or even becoming angry or more irritable. If you are usually a very active person and your doctor has restricted your activity, boredom or not being active can also add to feeling down.

#### Common symptoms of depression include:

- Loss of interest in activities or hobbies
- Isolating yourself from family and friends
- Changes in your sleep pattern or sleep quality
- Increase or decrease in appetite or weight
- Loss of energy or fatigue

**If you have symptoms of depression, talk with your cardiac care team.** There are treatments for depression that are very effective. They may also recommend that you:

- Increase your activity, which is one of the best ways to cope with depression. If you notice that your mood is improved after a cardiac rehab appointment, this might be a sign that you are having some degree of depression and exercise brought your mood closer to normal. Your care team can help you figure out what activities are safe for you to resume and help you find new activities to help with your recovery.
- Actively engage in things that you enjoy or that fill you with a sense of accomplishment. Focus on your progress rather than on things that you are not yet able to do.



**If your depression becomes more disabling or if you have thoughts of harming yourself or others, call your care team or go to the nearest emergency department.**

## Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal reaction to something you are afraid of or to the unknown. Becoming anxious about a change in your health is normal. Some people worry more, while others may become so anxious that they have panic attacks. To some people, the panic attack feels like a heart attack or even like they are dying, when this is not the case.

**Common symptoms of anxiety include:**

- Feeling nervous, restless, or on edge
- Racing heart
- Upset stomach
- Becoming short of breath or hyperventilating
- Worry
- Irritability
- Trouble concentrating
- Fidgeting

**Because anxiety causes your heart rate and breathing to increase, you may:**

- Focus on your heart rate or other symptoms more
- Worry whether your heart is working like it should
- Avoid activities that you fear will be too strenuous, even if your care team has encouraged you to do them
- Ask for reassurance from others even though you know that your symptoms are normal

Ask yourself how your anxiety is affecting you and share this with your care team. Take notes about what to expect with your recovery to help reduce your anxiety.

Remember, some stress is good. However, if you are becoming so stressed that your usual coping strategies are no longer working, talk to your care team. They can help you find local resources.

## Resources for Stress and Anxiety

There are many resources to help you deal with stress.

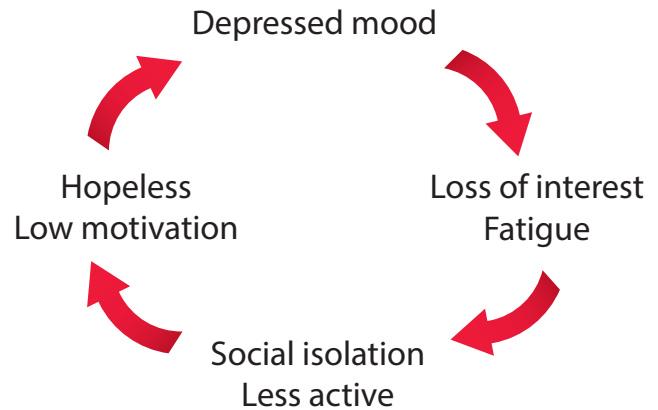
- Ohio State Integrative Health offers complementary resource guides and recordings. Visit [wexnermedical.osu.edu/integrative-health/resources](https://wexnermedical.osu.edu/integrative-health/resources) for more information.

- You may also find mental health apps, like Calm, Headspace, and Insight Timer, helpful. Go to your mobile device's app store to download.
- Join a support group, like Healing Hearts of Central Ohio, where you can meet others who have heart disease and can share similar experiences. Visit [healingheartscentralohio.org](http://healingheartscentralohio.org).

## Self talk

What you say to yourself – your thoughts – can add to your anxiety or depression. Negative statements can make your recovery seem like an even greater uphill battle where small bumps in the road become overwhelming obstacles.

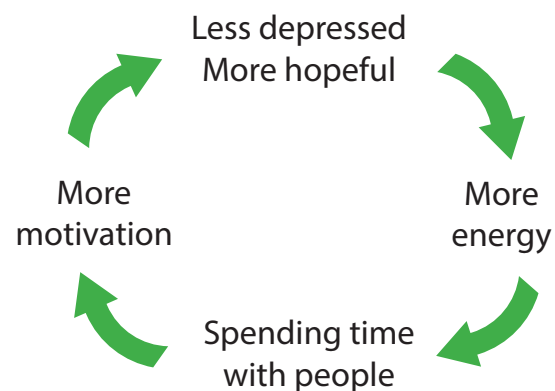
If you catch yourself saying things like, “I’m never going to get better,” you may put yourself in a cycle that looks like this:



### Ask yourself these questions:

- How can you challenge or change that thought?
- Do the facts support what you are telling yourself?
- Do you feel the same as you did when you were first diagnosed with a heart problem?
- Has your doctor told you there are no treatments for your condition or are you now getting treatment, such as medicine?
- Are you following the instructions from your care team, such as watching your diet, losing weight, or eating less salt?
- Have you noticed a change in your fitness?

If the facts support that you are working on making changes, then it is likely that you can challenge those negative thoughts. This can result in a cycle that looks like this:



Pushing yourself to do more activities you enjoy, or used to enjoy, as well as doing things that allow you to feel a sense of accomplishment can have a positive effect. Those behaviors help to reinforce the ways you can challenge your depressed mood with facts rather than relying solely on how you are feeling.

The same method for challenging depression-related thoughts also works for dealing with anxiety-based thoughts. These are some examples of ways to begin to challenge anxious thoughts:

**Negative thought:** “I had a heart attack a few weeks ago. I think I still have chest pain. I could have another heart attack.”

**Look at the facts:**

- While another heart attack is possible, what is the likelihood?
- What did your cardiologist tell you about the results of your procedure?
- Are your coronary arteries still blocked?
- What are the chances that your focus is on any and every symptom?
- When you are being monitored at cardiac rehab, has anyone told you your EKG is abnormal?

**Negative thought:** “I have heart failure. Even the name scares me! It feels like I’ve been given a death sentence.”

**Look at the facts:**

- The name of the diagnosis “heart failure” is frightening. However, it is just a name. What the diagnosis means does not imply that your heart has stopped working.
- Ask yourself if now that you are diagnosed, has your doctor started you on medicines that are helping you to feel better?
- Are you actively following the instructions you have been given about limiting your fluid and salt intake and weighing yourself regularly?
- Is this truly a death sentence or is it a condition you need to learn how to manage for life?

Learning how to challenge negative thoughts to see a situation more clearly is a part of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) or talk therapy. There are trained mental health therapists at Ohio State Wexner Medical Center as well as in the community who specialize in this form of psychotherapy. Talk to your care team for a referral.

## Role of your family and friends

Out of concern over your health, family members and friends may be having their own anxiety and/or depression along with you. This is especially the case if your loved ones are not well informed about your heart disease and treatment. Your loved ones may also become frustrated if you are often asking for reassurance from them.

**Tips to help:**

- Explain what you know about your condition and treatment. This helps your loved ones know what to expect.
- Tell your loved ones what you need, so they can be more supportive and encourage your recovery process.



## Resources at Ohio State

Your cardiac care team has a variety of resources to help you manage the different aspects of your heart disease. Let your care team know if you'd like more information about any of these resources or to get a referral.

- **Behavioral Cardiology**

This program helps heart patients deal with depression, anxiety, and other problems related to their condition. It helps people cope with lifestyle changes related to their heart disease, such as diet or fluid restrictions. The faculty in this program are trained in cognitive behavior therapy. Talk to your care team about a referral or call for more information.

- **Mental and Behavioral Health Outpatient Care**

This department has psychologists, psychiatrists, and therapists who are trained in cognitive behavior therapy or medicine management of conditions, such as depression and anxiety. If you would like to see a provider, talk to your care team about a referral or call for information.

- **Social Work**

This department has social workers who can answer questions about insurance, finances, outpatient cardiac rehabilitation, support groups, and getting to clinic appointments. They can also help you contact agencies in your area for resources. Talk to your care team for information.

- **Preventive Cardiology**

This team can help you set, track, and reach your cardiac health goals to reduce your risk of heart problems happening again. They support you as you make lifelong behavior changes and learn how to manage your medicines. Positive changes like losing extra weight, managing cholesterol and blood pressure, or quitting smoking can help you see improvements in your overall health. Talk to your care team about a referral or call for more information.

- **Cardiac Rehabilitation Program**

Ask your care team for a referral to the Cardiac Rehabilitation Program for help during your recovery. This program reduces your risk of heart problems happening again and can help you regain your independence. It focuses on exercise, nutrition and diet, weight, management of cholesterol and triglycerides, blood pressure, diabetes, smoking/tobacco cessation, and stress. The program is a positive environment to learn and try new health behaviors.

- **Other Community Resources:**

- Your primary care doctor
- Local hospital community education programs
- Local American Heart Association
- Healing Hearts of Central Ohio
- Home health nursing
- Adult education programs
- Community mental health clinics
- Churches, synagogues, or other places of worship

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**Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.**

For more health information, go to [wexnermedical.osu.edu/patiented](https://wexnermedical.osu.edu/patiented) or contact the Library for Health Information at 614-293-3707 or [health-info@osu.edu](mailto:health-info@osu.edu).