

Emotional Recovery

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Recovery following a heart attack or heart surgery is an emotional as well as a physical process. In this chapter common feelings experienced during your recovery and suggestions for how to cope will be presented.

SECTION 1

♥ **Common Emotions**

Feelings of fear, anger, and sadness are common when a person has been diagnosed with heart disease. It is normal to worry that your body will not be the same or to have fears of the future.

You may feel helpless as family members become what you consider overprotective. This may cause you to feel put down or feel like a cripple. Remember they too have been through a frightening time. Try to understand one another and share what you are feeling.

How you deal with these emotions is one of the most important parts of your recovery. Thinking positive thoughts will help you to overcome difficult times and to regain confidence. The first step is to accept the fact that you have heart disease. Then find out what you can do to make positive lifestyle changes in order to gain control of heart healthy living.

SECTION 2

♥ Feelings

Sometimes people find it difficult to identify their feelings. This can cause frustration when you are trying to communicate with your loved one. The charts below are provided to assist you and your significant other to identify your current feelings.

My Feelings (patient)

☐ Concerned
☐ Angry
☐ Inadequate
☐ Useless
☐ Restless
☐ Nervous
☐ Irritable
☐ Foolish
☐ Old
☐ Hurt
☐ Worthwhile
☐ Desirable
☐ Relieved
☐ Loved
☐ Hopeful
☐ Afraid
☐ Anxious
☐ Frightened
☐ Trapped
☐ Uptight
☐ Harassed
☐ Worried
☐ Tense
☐ Uncomfortable
☐ Disgusted
☐ Guilty
☐ Embarrassed
☐ Empty
☐ Wrung-out
☐ Exhausted
☐ Sad
☐ Confused
☐ Helpless

My Feelings (significant other)

☐ Concerned
☐ Angry
☐ Inadequate
☐ Useless
☐ Restless
☐ Nervous
☐ Irritable
☐ Foolish
☐ Old
☐ Hurt
☐ Worthwhile
☐ Desirable
☐ Relieved
☐ Loved
☐ Hopeful
☐ Afraid
☐ Anxious
☐ Frightened
☐ Trapped
☐ Uptight
☐ Harassed
☐ Worried
☐ Tense
☐ Uncomfortable
☐ Disgusted
☐ Guilty
☐ Embarrassed
☐ Empty
☐ Wrung-out
☐ Exhausted
☐ Sad
☐ Confused
☐ Helpless

SECTION 3

♥ **Role Reversal**

Prior to this event, most patients led very busy lives with long work hours, meetings, and travel. Your level of activity will be limited initially. Role reversal becomes an issue as other family members come and go, assuming temporarily the duties that once belonged to you.

This reversal of roles may cause you to feel guilty and useless. Hospital bills and lack of income may cause you to feel hopeless. You might even wonder if the world would be better without you. While these feelings are normal and natural, they are temporary. It is also normal to move past feeling this way as you begin to resume your usual activities.

The healing period may seem to pass slowly, but once healing has occurred, you can gradually resume your normal routine. Hopefully you will have made healthy changes in your routine that make heart healthy living your daily choice. Every step you can take to lessen your risks is a positive step toward controlling your future wellness and happiness.

SECTION 4

♥ **Intimacy & Communication**

Acknowledging and admitting the feelings that you are experiencing is the place to begin. Communication is extremely important at this time.

Close, intimate relationships are built on the open sharing of feelings. This openness can be lost with the stress and worry going

on in your life. Spend time listening to one another.



Take turns talking. Be honest and hear each other's concerns.

Do not interrupt or criticize.

Remember this is a difficult emotional time for everyone; you, your family, and your friends.

Talker/Listener TIPS

1. Choose a time and place to talk.
2. As the talker, share three feelings; starting with "I feel..."
3. As the listener; concentrate on verbal and nonverbal messages.
4. As the listener; concentrate on what is being said, not on what you are going to say.
5. When the talker is finished; count to five.
6. Listener then shares their understanding of what was said.
7. Reverse the roles.

SECTION 5

♥ Depression

It's a natural reaction during your recovery to feel down occasionally. Feeling unhappy is a normal reaction to loss or other unpleasant experiences. But when these feelings are severe or keep coming back, depression may be present. Depression is an illness that can affect a person's body as well as the mind. It affects the way you feel, think, and act.

Common Signs of Depression

- ✓ Feel empty, worthless, hopeless
- ✓ Unable to find pleasure in anything
- ✓ Loss of warm feelings for family and friends
- ✓ Difficulty concentrating
- ✓ Change in appetite
- ✓ Cry easily
- ✓ Irritability about matters once taken in stride
- ✓ Change in sleep pattern
- ✓ Suicidal thoughts

Depressed people try to pretend that nothing is wrong, because they don't understand what's going on inside them. It is important to talk about your feelings to a family member or friend. Depression is not a sign of weakness or lack of self-control. It is an illness that can be treated so that you can experience the fullness and joy of life.

SECTION 6

♥ Stress

Stress is about how you react to the events that cause changes in your life. Stress, also, is a natural reaction of the body to any demands placed upon it. These demands may be pleasant (such as the birth of a baby) or unpleasant (like losing your checkbook). Although physical demands such as removing yourself from danger are certainly "stressors", psychological demands (worry, embarrassment, deadlines, getting a promotion) are seen as the major stressors of modern times. How successfully we deal with our daily stress determines to a large part our general health and happiness.

To manage stress, you need to know what causes your stress and how it makes you feel. When under stress, adrenaline flows, breathing speeds up, the heart rate increases, blood pressure rises, and blood-clotting mechanisms are activated to protect the body against possible injury.

The first step in managing stress is identifying the stressors in your life. What is stressful to one person, may be relaxing to another. Each person's stressors are unique to that individual.

Possible stressors include:

- ✓ Computers
- ✓ Traffic or trains
- ✓ New job or loss of job

- ✓ Parenting issues
- ✓ Running late
- ✓ Retirement
- ✓ Disorganization
- ✓ Illness
- ✓ Over-scheduling
- ✓ Telemarketers
- ✓ Car trouble

The next step in stress management is changing your response to a stressful event. Situations are rarely stressful in and of themselves. Stress is something we create in our minds by how we perceive a situation. An example of this follows:

Amy was leaving work one afternoon to go to a dentist appointment. When she got to her car she found that she had a flat tire.

Response #1: Amy was angry that this had happened. Now she wouldn't be able to get to the appointment on time and she didn't know how to change a tire, so she had to call someone to do it for her. Her husband was out of the office when she called for his assistance. Amy yelled at him when he got home from work that evening about his whereabouts. She then yelled at her son about why he could not do his homework himself as she slammed the refrigerator door closed.

Response #2: Amy was not happy that she had a flat tire, however she was relieved that the car was in the parking lot and that she wasn't stranded on the side of the road. Also in

assessing her situation, she was glad that it was a nice sunny day, and thank goodness it wasn't raining. She also thought about the missed dental appointment and realized that she didn't want to have her teeth cleaned that day anyway. She called her husband at work for assistance but he was out of the office. "Oh, well," Amy shrugged, "work requires him to be out of the office a lot." She went back to work and found a co-worker who was happy to change the tire for her. That evening when her son asked for help with his homework, Amy gave him a hug and said, "I had trouble with this too when I was in school. Let's see if we can figure it out."

Obviously, you can tell that Response #2 was a much healthier and less stressful response to that particular situation. Amy's anger was misdirected. She was letting her response to a stressful situation ruin both her and her family's evening.

Stress Management Coping Skills

- ✓ Do something you enjoy every day
- ✓ Exercise
- ✓ Take one day at a time
- ✓ Balance work and relaxation
- ✓ Learn to say "no"
- ✓ Be a positive thinker
- ✓ Lower your expectation
- ✓ Set realistic goals
- ✓ Get adequate sleep

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Changing behaviors is a process that takes time and lots of practice. You may not be able to control all the events in your life but you can change your emotional response!

The following list is for you to identify your own personal stress symptoms. As you become more aware of how you react to stress, you will then be able to identify stressful situations earlier. Stress management skills can then be utilized.

My Stress Symptoms

- ___ Restlessness, fidgeting
- ___ Feeling exhausted, fatigued
- ___ Nailbiting
- ___ Withdrawal from people
- ___ Anger, irritable, resentful
- ___ Aggression
- ___ Can't concentrate
- ___ Sleeping too much, or not enough
- ___ Grind teeth
- ___ Back tightens up or aches
- ___ Headaches
- ___ Face feels hot, flushed
- ___ Neck, shoulders tighten, ache
- ___ Heart beats faster
- ___ Stomach upset, nausea
- ___ Legs get shaky or tight
- ___ Head or feet feel cold or sweaty
- ___ Tapping fingers, feet
- ___ Crying
- ___ Undereating; overeating
- ___ Chain smoking
- ___ Hair twisting; tossing
- ___ Desire to run away
- ___ Decreased productivity

50 Proven Stress Busters

1. **Get up 15 minutes** earlier in the morning to avoid the morning mishaps that start your day with stress.
2. **Don't put up with something that doesn't work right.** If your toaster or shoelaces are a source of constant aggravation, fix them or get a new one!
3. **Simplify**, simplify, simplify!
4. **Schedule a realistic day.** Allow plenty of "breathing time" between appointments.
5. **Forget about counting to 10.** Count to 100 before doing something or saying anything that could make matters worse.
6. **Prepare for the morning the evening before.** Save time by preparing lunches, or laying out your clothes.
7. **Be prepared to wait.** A magazine can make a wait for a train or an appointment much more pleasant.
8. **Make friends with non-worriers.** Nothing can get you into the habit of worrying faster than associating with worriers.
9. **Take a refreshing bath or shower** to relieve tension.
10. **Stand up and stretch now and then** if you have to sit for a long period of time.
11. **Select an environment (work, home, leisure)** that matches your personal needs. If you hate desk jobs, don't accept a job that requires you to sit at a desk all day.

If you hate to talk politics, don't associate with people who love the subject.

12. **Learn to live** one day at a time.
13. **Eliminate destructive talk!** "I'm too old to....", or "I'm too fat to...."
14. **Be flexible.** Some things are worth not doing perfectly, and some issues are best resolved with compromise.
15. **Have a forgiving view of things.** Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world.
16. **Be optimistic.** Most people are doing the best they can.
17. **Don't rely on your memory.** Writing a note only takes a moment.
18. **Make duplicates of all keys.** (And label them!) Bury a house key in a secret spot and carry an extra car key in your wallet.
19. **Relax your standards.** The world will not come to an end if the grass doesn't get mowed this weekend.
20. **Count your blessings.** For every one thing that goes wrong, there are probably 50 to 100 blessings.
21. **Wear earplugs.** If you need to find some quiet and junior needs to practice his tuba, pop in some earplugs....and smile.
22. **Get enough sleep!** "Sometimes I wake up grumpy, and sometimes I let him sleep."
23. **Organize your things** so that you always know exactly where things are.
24. **Every day do something** you really enjoy.



25. Add an ounce of love to everything you do.
26. **Talk it out.** Discussing a problem with a trusted friend can clear confusion.
27. **Use your weekend time for a change of pace.** If your work week is fast-paced and full of people and deadlines, seek peace and solitude during your days off.
28. **Take care of today the best you can,** and the tomorrows and yesterdays will take care of themselves.
29. **Do one thing at a time.** When you are busy with a project, concentrate on doing that project, and forget everything else you have to do.
30. **Allow yourself time,** every day, for privacy, quiet and thinking.
31. **If an unpleasant task faces you,** do it early in the day and get it over with.
32. **Learn to delegate** responsibilities to others.

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33. **Practice preventive maintenance.** Your car, appliances, home and relationships will be less likely to break down “at the worst possible moment.”
34. **Eliminate or restrict** the caffeine and sugar in your diet.
35. **Whatever you want to do tomorrow, do today;** and whatever you want to do today, do now! Procrastination is stressful.
36. **Plan ahead!** Don’t let the gas tank get below one-quarter tank, and don’t wait until you are down to the last stamp to buy more.
37. **Ask questions.** Take a few moments to repeat back directions, or what you think someone wants you to do. This can save you hours!
38. **Say “no” to extra projects,** social activities, and invitations that you know you do not have the time or energy for.
39. **Unplug your phone,** if you want some time without interruption.
40. **Turn “needs” into preferences.** Our basic physical needs are food, water and keeping warm and dry. Everything else is a “preference.” Don’t get attached to preferences.
41. **Check your breathing** throughout the day, and before, during, and after a high-pressure situation. If you find your stomach muscles are knotted and your breathing is shallow, relax all your muscles and take several deep, slow breaths. Note how-when you’re relaxed-both your abdomen and chest expand when you breathe. When feeling stressed, most people breath short, shallow breaths. Stale air is not expelled, oxygen doesn’t get to the tissues, and muscle tension results.
42. **Write down your thoughts and feelings** in a journal. This will help you put things into perspective.
43. **Try the following yoga technique when you feel the need to relax.** Inhale deeply through your nose to the count of eight. Then with lips puckered, exhale slowly through your mouth to the count of sixteen. Concentrate on the long sighing sound and feel the tension dissolve.
44. **Do something for someone else!**
45. **Focus on understanding** rather than on being understood, and loving rather than being loved.
46. **Do something that will improve your appearance.** Looking better can help you feel better.
47. **Accept the fact that you don’t have to own everything you admire!**
48. **Laugh-outloud and often;** this is a great way to lighten your mood.
49. **Break down large jobs** into smaller ones.
50. **Keep a calendar** with everyone’s appointments listed in one place.

Change

Change, whether important or trivial, planned or unplanned, makes demands upon our energy for coping and adapting. When we allow too much change into our lives at one time and we aren’t able to cope with the stress, illness can result. With your recent cardiac event, you may have been asked to

make some changes in your lifestyle. This may cause you some stress. Use the tips below to help you deal with this in a positive way.

- ✓ Give yourself time to bounce back
- ✓ Expect and recognize the anxiety that may accompany change
- ✓ Maintain a normal routine as much as possible
- ✓ Believe that change can be positive
- ✓ Choose to be proactive rather than reactive

Worry

Webster's dictionary defines *worry* as "something you can't do anything about." Whereas, a *concern* is something that you can have an effect on. It is important for you to differentiate the difference between "worry" and "concern".

For example: You are worried that you will be involved in a plane crash. Is there anything that you personally can do to prevent that from happening? Obviously not, so why worry?

On the other hand, what if you are worried about getting cancer. There are many things that you can choose to do to reduce the chances of this happening. Eating right, exercising, and having regular screenings and check-ups from your physician are just a few. With this example, you have switched a *worry* to a *concern*!

If you find yourself frequently worrying, ask yourself the

following questions.

- ✓ Is there anything I can do about this situation?
- ✓ What is the worst thing that could happen?
- ✓ Do I feel guilty?
- ✓ Am I busy worrying and therefore avoiding an unpleasant task?
- ✓ Does worrying make me feel important?
- ✓ Do I feel as if I am accomplishing something?

Use the following tips to help you worry less!

- ✓ Look at the situation as a concern and decide what action you can take
- ✓ Look at the bright side and see humor when possible
- ✓ Believe in a higher power
- ✓ Keep active with hobbies and other interests
- ✓ Think positive

Anger

Keeping anger inside can create many different health problems. However, venting anger can ruin a relationship. If you are prone to "bottling up" or "blowing up", maybe the following tips can help.

- ✓ Make a list of things you are angry at and describe the situation with the injustices and the possible solutions. Reread the list a day or two later and see if it helps you put things into perspective.

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- ✓ Be aware of the word “should” in your vocabulary. Sometimes we get angry because people don’t act like they “should”. It is unfair to think that everyone should live up to our own personal standards.
- ✓ Exercise!! It is a great way to give the body a physical release.
- ✓ Don’t think of a conflict as a win-lose situation. Focus instead on solving the problem rather than “who is right”.
- ✓ Remember that everyone makes mistakes-even you.
- ✓ Be willing to admit to your own mistakes. Know that you may have unintentionally contributed to the problem.
- ✓ Avoid mentions of the past.
- ✓ Timing is everything! Know when you should postpone your discussion because emotions are getting in the way of good communication.

SECTION 7

♥ Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation techniques can help you manage your stress. They help you learn about your body, how it reacts, and what you can control. Practiced on a daily basis, these techniques can give you increased energy and a sense of well-being.

The following relaxation techniques require a quiet setting. They are best practiced for 10-20 minutes daily. Set aside a regular time during each day for relaxation. Once you recognize your stress warning signs, you can use these techniques to help you calm down. These techniques are also useful prior to an anticipated stressful time.

Relaxed Breathing

1. Sit comfortably in a chair, loosen any restrictive clothing, uncross arms and legs.
2. Close your eyes and relax. Become aware of your breathing. Breathe easily and naturally.
3. Feel your chest and stomach rise and fall with each breath. Say the word “relax” each time you breathe out.
4. If your thoughts drift, have them, and then focus back to your breathing and say “relax” .

Progressive muscle relaxation

1. Sit comfortably in a chair, loosen any restrictive clothing, uncross arms and/or legs.

2. Close your eyes and take a few deep, slow breaths.
3. Beginning with your feet and working up the body, you will be tightening and relaxing muscle groups.
4. Tighten or flex your feet and lower legs, hold the tight feelings for a few seconds and then relax those muscles.
5. Be aware how your muscles feel when tense and relaxed.
6. Continue tensing and relaxing your calves, thighs, back, shoulders, arms, head and neck.
7. This exercise should take about 15-20 minutes.

Guided imagery

The idea behind this exercise is to induce relaxation by visualizing a relaxing scene.

1. Close your eyes and relax, become aware of your breathing, slow and easy.
2. Begin thinking about a relaxing, comforting place. You may be relaxing on a beach and can feel the sun on your body.
3. Let your mind capture the relaxing place.
4. Try to picture what you would see, hear and smell.
5. Let yourself be there and enjoy it.

SECTION 8

♥ Resuming Sexual Activity

Concerns about resuming satisfying sex may include fear of not being able to perform, fear that sex will put too much stress on the heart, even fear of dying. While the fear is real, the incidence of death is not supported in medical research. Incisions following bypass surgery may affect sexual attractiveness or body image. Stress, worry and tiredness can even affect our desire for sex.

Intercourse is only one part of being intimate. Don't push yourself into sex before both of you are ready.

Remember to hug, kiss, and touch first to help you both feel close. Then, once you have shared your concerns and you both feel ready for sex, start slowly.

If you have had heart surgery, know that your incisions won't open and your breastbone won't come apart during intercourse. You should try positions that put less strain on your chest. Avoid twisting movement and positions that use the arms for support for the first 4-6 weeks. Plan at least a 20 minute rest following intercourse.

Physical demands of sexual activity are equal to the energy it takes to climb two flights of stairs. Sexual foreplay in a relaxed place helps you to have a more gradual increase in

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your heart rate and blood pressure. Orgasm, the period during which the heart works hardest, lasts about 15-20 seconds.

Hints

- ✓ Choose a relaxed, quiet place with a comfortable room temperature
 - ✓ Be rested; choose when you wake up in the morning or after a nap
 - ✓ Remember that you don't have anything to prove...take your time.
- ✓ Wait an hour after eating, exercising or bathing
 - ✓ If you have angina; stop and take a nitro. If the angina goes away, you may resume sex.
 - ✓ Do not use Nitroglycerin if you have used any of the erectile dysfunction drugs (i.e. Viagra, Levitra, Cialis). Go to the emergency room if you have angina and have used any of these drugs.

Attitude

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failure, than success, than what other people say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company ... a church ... a home. The remarkable thing is we have choices every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past ... we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react to it.

— *by Chuck Swindoll*