



The Heart of the Matter

Why women as well as men need to be vigilant about heart trouble

Until recently, few in the medical profession thought about the connection between emotions and heart disease. The “heart” referred to as the repository of an individual’s deepest feelings and the “heart” that is the body’s most vital organ were viewed as two entirely distinct entities.

Yet emotions play a crucial role in heart health and new research suggests that poor relationships with yourself, your loved ones, and the world around you may be one of the major risk factors for heart disease.

The dangers of depression

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As cardiologist Steven Sinatra states: “Not only does depression make you vulnerable to heart disease, but research shows that patients who suffer from prolonged depression after a heart attack or heart surgery are five times more likely to die from a cardiac event in the ensuing year. Being ill can cause a person to feel ‘down’ in the first place, and many of the drugs prescribed for heart disease are known to cause depression.”

In other words, people need to do more than eat right and exercise to prevent or manage heart disease. They also need to work on avoiding depressive states through proven methods such as cognitive behavioral therapy. More than a dozen double-blind studies have shown that CBT works as well as anti-depressant drugs for moderate depression but with two important differences: there is a lower rate of reoccurrence with cognitive therapy; and, of course, there are no negative side effects.

Escaping unhealthy thinking

CBT helps you change the self-limiting beliefs that lead to emotional stress reactions. According to Dr. David Burns, clinical associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Stanford University School of Medicine, 10 basic forms of “twisted thinking” cause much of our emotional distress.

These unhealthy thinking patterns include:

1. Seeing things in black and white
2. Seeing a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat
3. Rejecting positive experiences by insisting that they don't count
4. Telling yourself things should be the way you hoped or expected them to be

5. Labeling yourself (“I’m a loser”), which is an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking
6. Blowing things out of proportion
7. Minimizing the importance of other things
8. Expecting yourself or others to be perfect
9. Holding yourself personally responsible for an event that is out of your control
10. Blaming other people for your problems

All of these faulty ways of thinking and the resultant emotions can be changed, which can have a tremendous effect on your mental and, in turn, your physical health.

Listen to your heart

The Institute of HeartMath is a non-profit research and education organization whose mission is “to study the physiological mechanisms by which the heart communicates with the brain, and the heart’s influence on information processing, perception, emotions, and health.”

The institute’s scientists have found that negative emotions throw the nervous system out of balance and create jagged heart rhythms. Positive emotions, by contrast, boost the nervous system and produce smooth, harmonious heart rhythms. The institute has taken these discoveries and popularized them through books, tapes, videos, and consultations that teach people how to change their heart waves through emotional regulation.

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One of the main techniques, “freeze framing,” involves recognizing a stressful emotion at any given moment and freeze-framing it by taking a “timeout.” You then shift your mind or emotions to the area around your heart for 10 seconds or more. Next, recall a positive or fun experience, and ask your heart what would be a more efficient or optimal response to the situation you’re experiencing. Listen to -- and follow -- your heart’s answer.

In the end, heeding your heart’s wisdom may prove to be one of the best techniques for both preventing and treating heart disease.