

A Guide to Managing Stress

 Total Cardiology | Rehabilitation



This guide will help you learn about some of the most common emotional responses that can arise with heart disease. The guide provides information about how to identify these emotional states, as well as useful tools for coping with them.

The guide is divided into three parts – managing stress; coping with depression, anxiety and anger; and sleeping well. These sections can be reviewed in order or you can focus on the section(s) you believe will be of most use to you. You can always return to previous sections later.

PART 1: MANAGING STRESS

This section will outline ways to identify stress and your reaction to stressful situations.

PART 2: COPING WITH DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND ANGER

Feeling depressed, anxious, or angry is common. This section outlines some tools for coping and managing these emotions.

STEP 3: SLEEPING WELL

This section outlines some strategies for helping to optimize sleep for physical and psychological health.

If you have any questions or concerns about your stress, speak to a member of your healthcare team.

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A Guide to Managing Stress – Part 1

Managing Stress

Being diagnosed with and living with a heart condition is an emotional experience, not just a physical one. It is normal to feel a range of emotions. **It is important to know that the strong emotions that you may be experiencing usually resolve over time.**

A mix of feelings you might experience include:

- Shock
- Fear or worry
- Gratitude
- Anger
- Relief
- Numbness
- Sadness or tearfulness
- Sleep problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Distressing thoughts about future health

What Is Stress

Stress is a set of physical and emotional responses you experience when you perceive a situation to be threatening or challenging. Experiencing a heart event is an example of a challenging situation that can bring about several strong emotions.

Stress is a normal part of life and is often thought of as useful. The physical and emotional changes that happen under stress are meant to prepare us to deal with the situation at hand. While stress usually does not cause a problem, intense or persistent stress can contribute to psychological and physical problems, including heart disease.

The Flight or Fight Response

When you sense a stressful situation your body responds with the “fight” or “flight response, which is meant to give you a surge of energy to “fight” off danger or “flight” for safety.

This response is helpful when you encounter a short-term physical stressor, like a grizzly bear on a hike. Stress, through its fight or flight response, helps us to deal with short-term challenging situations.

Long-term (chronic) stress results in similar responses (fight or flight) as short-term stress, but it tends to last longer. This stress can build up over time causing our body to remain in high alert for long periods of time. This can lead to physical wear and tear.

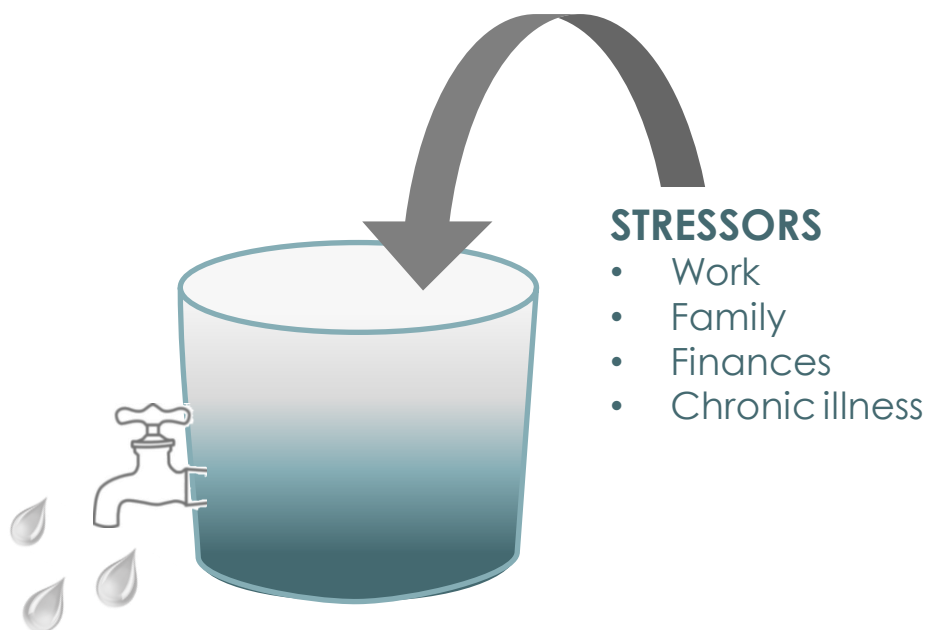
Examples of chronic stress you might be faced with include:

- Job pressures
- Finances
- Relationship conflicts
- Chronic stress related to managing heart health:
 - Taking medications
 - Making lifestyle changes related to diet, exercise or quitting smoking
 - Fears about future health issues

Is Your “Stress Bucket” Full? Short-Term Vs. Long-Term Stress

In short-term stress, the bucket of water fills up quickly, but the water level goes back down once the short-term stress (e.g. grizzly encounter) is over.

With long-term stress, multiple stressors can build up over time, slowly filling the bucket. As the water begins to overflow, one often feels overwhelmed by the physical and mental symptoms of stress.



TASK

Take some time to recognize some of your signs of stress and develop some strategies to ‘empty’ your bucket. This can help you manage stress before it becomes overwhelming.

The following sections, **Pay Attention to your Stress**’ and **‘Managing your Stress**, can help you work through this exercise.

Recognize your Stress Symptoms

Knowing your personal pattern of stress symptoms can help prevent stress from becoming a problem. The table below shows four categories of stress symptoms. If you notice changes to these, it may be a sign you need to take action to cope with your stress.

STRESS SYMPTOMS	EXAMPLES
Emotional Changes	Anxiety, worry, anger, or irritability
Physical Changes	Exhaustion, elevated heartbeat, rapid breathing, chest pain or tightness
Behavioural Changes	Eating more than usual, changes in sleep habits, crying more often
Thinking (Cognitive) Changes	Trouble concentrating, indecisive, worry about the future

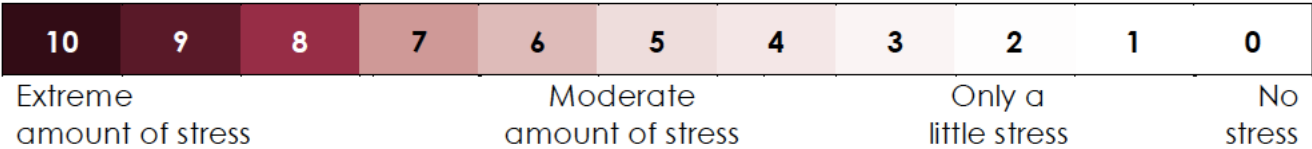
Now it is your turn to identify your symptoms of stress! Think about any challenging situations you experienced in the last week. Did you notice any symptoms of stress? Identify if these symptoms were emotional, physical, behavioural, or cognitive and write them down.

STRESS SYMPTOMS	EXAMPLES
Emotional Changes	
Physical Changes	
Behavioural Changes	
Thinking (Cognitive) Changes	

Noticing any of these symptoms might signal that you need to cope with stress. The next few sections will guide through some basic but effective strategies you can use to deal with your stress.

Managing Your Stress

The following pages outline a few strategies for coping with stress that can help you get back on track emotionally, as well as physically.

Track Your Stress Response	<p>Schedule 1-2 times a day to ask yourself “How much stress am I currently feeling?” This can help you realize when stress too much and you need to actively cope with it. Use the stress scale below to track your responses.</p> <p>If your stress is 5 or above, it might be worthwhile to consider some stress management strategies</p>
 <p>10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0</p> <p>Extreme amount of stress Moderate amount of stress Only a little stress No stress</p>	

Identify + Eliminate Your Stressors	<p>Dealing with controllable problems in practical ways can help reduce the sources of stress in our lives. Situations that trigger stress are called “stressors”.</p> <p>Task: write down your stressors to determine if you can change the situation. Ask yourself: Do I have any control over the situation? Can I change/improve it in any way <u>right now</u>?</p> <p>You might notice that your stress response involves overreacting to minor hassles; in these cases, can you work to change your reaction?</p>
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**Identify +
Eliminate
Your
Stressors
(cont'd)**

When identifying your stressors you will notice that sometimes you will be able to solve/deal with your stressor(s). If this is the case, brainstorm possible solutions or plans of action to deal with the stressor. Select the best solution based on your available resources and likelihood that your solution will be the most effective.

Listing your stressors will also highlight when you have no or little control over them. If this is the case, you should consider coping (not solving) with your stressors. When you cope with your stressors you minimize their negative effect on you (see next strategies to manage or cope with stress).

Use the following table to identify and eliminate or begin solving current controllable stressor. Circle best possible solution or plan of action.

Stressor	Is it Controllable?	Possible Solutions
		- - -
		- - -
		- - -

Engage in Regular Exercise

Regular exercise is a very helpful way to cope with stress. Exercise helps reduce the physical fight-or-flight response you experience when you are stressed, limiting the wear-and-tear on your heart.

Exercise can also help improve your self-esteem and provide a distraction from daily worries and hassles.

Challenge Unhelpful Thinking

Often something is stressful because of the way we think about that situation. Unfortunately, the way we think about stressors might not be completely accurate or true. Because of this we should examine the accuracy of our thoughts about stressful events and situations. This could help us cope and minimize the negative symptoms of stress.

Three steps can help challenge unhelpful or inaccurate thoughts:

1. Identify the unhelpful thought. Check your thoughts right when you start feeling stressed. Ask yourself "what did I say to myself right before I started to feel this way?"
2. Evaluate whether the thought is realistic. Ask yourself questions that test whether or not the thought is really true. Is it true all the time? Are you ignoring any strengths or positives? Are you using extreme words like "never" or "always"?
3. Identify a more realistic thought. Based on the evidence for and against your thought, substitute the unhelpful thought with a thought that serves you better.

Challenge Unhelpful Thinking (cont'd)

Examples of turning unhelpful thoughts into alternative and realistic/accurate thoughts:

“My life is over now”

More realistic thought: A heart problem is *not* a death sentence. This is why there are cardiac rehabilitation programs that work. Many people with heart disease live long and healthy lives, and so can I.

“My heart is worn out”

More realistic thought: I can strengthen my heart by attending cardiac rehabilitation and by making healthy changes in my life.

The goal of challenging unhelpful thoughts is not to make your thinking positive. Instead, we want to make our thoughts as realistic and accurate as possible. Doing this will be helpful by allowing us to see the stressor for what it and what, if anything, we could do to solve or improve the stressor.

Use Relaxation Techniques

People who successfully manage their stress often say they set aside a time each day to relax. Relaxation involves specific skills you can learn to reduce or cope with symptoms of stress. These techniques have been found to lower muscle tension, angina, and blood pressure, reduce anxiety and worry, and improve sleep and mood.

The following websites have free relaxation techniques:

- **My Health Alberta:**
<https://myhealth.alberta.ca/alberta/pages/relaxation-audio-tracks.aspx>
- **McMaster University:**
<http://campusmentalhealth.ca/resource/mcmaster-guided-relaxation-cd/>
- **Dartmouth College:**
<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~healthed/relax/downloads.html>

Participate in a Class

Stress management classes teach individuals about stress and effective strategies for coping with it.

Cardiac rehabilitation participants who complete a stress management class tend to have reduced symptoms of heart disease (e.g. angina), improved emotional well-being, and increased chances of returning to work.

Classes are offered by hospitals, rehabilitation programs, and therapists in the community.

Self-Help Books

Explore and work through some research-based self-help books such as:

- Davis et al. (2008). *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* (6th Ed.)
- Greenberger et al (2015). *Mood Over Mind: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think* (2nd Ed.)
- Stahl et al. (2010). *A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook*.

Support Groups

Enhancing social supports is an excellent way to cope with stress and to reduce isolation. Two local support groups for patients with heart problems are:

Heart to Heart Society

Provides support to people with heart disease and their families (www.hearttoheartalberta.com).

Woman to Woman Cardiac Support Group

Addresses specific concerns of women with heart disease (www.womenscardiacsupport.org).

A Guide To Managing Stress – Part 2

Coping with Depression, Anxiety and Anger

It is common to feel depressed, anxious, or angry after the diagnosis and treatment of a heart condition. Managing these emotional changes early on is important.

Keep in mind: These emotions often become less intense after a few months and once you return to your normal routine and start feeling like your usual self.

Coping with Depression

Depression occurs in about 1 and 5 patients diagnosed with heart disease.

It not only increases your risk of developing heart disease; depression can also result in poor recovery in people with heart disease.

Depression involves feelings of sadness but is different from normal sadness that occurs for a short period of time after a stressful situation. Depression is a longer-term health condition that affects people's day-to-day function.

It can also involve other symptoms like irritability, withdrawal from social situations, feelings of guilt, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, sleep changes, thought of suicide, and/or loss of interest in activities a person usually enjoys.

The good news is depression is treatable.

It is important to talk to your doctor about getting help if you are feeling depressed most of the time, and/or have lost pleasure in your life, and these changes have lasted several weeks.

Coping with Anxiety

Anxiety symptoms can include emotional changes like feeling fearful, worried or panicky. Other symptoms include trouble sleeping, fidgeting, and physical sensations (pounding heart rate, dizziness, sweating).

After your heart event, you may feel anxious for a variety of reasons, including new bodily symptoms, returning to work or daily activities, or what lies ahead in your recovery.

Some anxiety is normal, and even beneficial at times. But, if your symptoms of anxiety are overwhelming, don't hesitate to seek help.

You might benefit from further support if you experience any of the following:

- Intense/ongoing anxiety
- Frequent inability to stop or control worrying
- Anxiety is getting in the way of your daily life (e.g., affecting your sleep, concentration).
- You are generally a nervous person

Overcoming Anger

Anger is a typical reaction to situations that seem unjust. For example, being diagnosed with a heart problem and dealing with all the changes that follow can be a big source of anger for patients. Some patients say anger was an issue long before their heart condition.

Anger is not always bad, but it can be a problem if it occurs all the time, occurs in situations that may be unnecessary, or if it causes conflict in important relationships.

People may think that getting their anger out is helpful, but it can have negative effects on your relationships and your health.

Anger can sometimes trigger angina:

Anger can result in your blood vessels narrowing. This reduces the amount of oxygen and blood reaching your heart and leads to an increase in blood pressure and heart rate → making your heart work harder.

Here are some tips to help you cope with anger:

- Express your angry feelings in a journal
- Leave the situation
- Think about others
- Change your reaction to anger
- Think before you act

A Guide To Managing Stress – Part 3

SLEEPING WELL

It is not uncommon to experience a poor night's sleep, especially during times of worry or stress or after being diagnosed with a heart condition. However, poor sleep can take a toll on physical and psychological well-being.

Many people notice their sleep improves weeks to months after a heart event, and as they adjust to their diagnosis, new medications and lifestyle changes.

Common sleep problems include:

- Trouble falling asleep
- Trouble staying asleep
- Waking up and unable to fall back to sleep

Strategies to Improve Sleep and Sleep Hygiene

Sleep hygiene refers to behaviours, conditions, and practices that surround sleep.

- Go to bed only when sleepy → when you're fighting to stay awake, you're sleepy
- Get out of bed when you can't fall asleep
- Avoid reading or TV in bed
- Establish a nightly routine
- Avoid the use of electronics one to two hours before bedtime
- Set a regular sleep schedule: regular time to go to bed and wake up
- Don't watch the clock
- Avoid stimulants and alcohol
- Complete your workout 3-hours before bedtime
- Improve your sleep environment → dark and quiet bedroom, not too hot or cold
- Avoid daytime napping

Optimal Sleep

The amount of sleep needed varies from person to person. Talk to your doctor or sleep medicine practitioner to develop a sleep plan best for you.

Focus on how you feel after a good night's sleep versus a bad night's sleep. This will allow you to gauge your optimal wake and sleep times, and the number of hours best for you

Sleep Medications and Treatment

Under some circumstances sleep medications may be useful in the short-term (a few times a week for a week), but there are serious risks with long-term use. Talk to your doctor about a plan to lower your dose and/or stop taking them completely.

There are several treatments for sleep problems that are effective and longer lasting than medications, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia.

Specialized Resources for Sleep Issues

If you are looking for help to cope with sleeping difficulties, talk to your doctor. You can ask your doctor to refer you to a treatment program for sleep disorders, such as the Sleep Centre (Foothills Medical Centre) or Centre for Sleep and Human Performance.

Self Help Books for Sleep Difficulties

Self-help books can also help those with sleep difficulties:

- Silberman, S. A. (2009). *The insomnia workbook: A comprehensive guide to getting the sleep you need.* (1 ed.). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Hauri, P., & Linde, S. (1996). *No more sleepless nights.* New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.