

A Guide to Managing Stress

 Total Cardiology | Rehabilitation



This guide will discuss how the heart and mind are connected. It is divided into three sections – understanding stress; coping with stress, anxiety, and depression; and sleeping well. This guide will increase your understanding about emotional aspects of your recovery and how to get back on track.

SECTION 1: UNDERSTANDING STRESS

This section outlines normal emotional responses to a heart event, and how stress can affect the heart.

SECTION 2: COPING WITH STRESS, ANXIETY, AND DEPRESSION

This section reviews some tools for dealing with stressful situations and when to seek help.

SECTION 3: SLEEPING WELL

This section outlines strategies to improve sleep for physical and psychological health.

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

A Guide to Managing Stress – Section 1

Understanding Stress

EMOTIONAL HEALTH AFTER A HEART EVENT

People are faced with some of the biggest stressors of their lives after the diagnosis and treatment of a heart condition. These are some *normal* reactions to a heart event:

- Shock, fear, or worry
- Gratitude or relief
- Denial or feeling numb
- Anger or frustration
- Guilty feelings
- Sadness
- Loss of interest in things you normally enjoy
- Not wanting to see other people
- Being easily tearful
- Thoughts about having another heart event
- Thoughts about dying
- Changes in appetite
- Being very aware of your bodily sensations
- Trouble concentrating or remembering things
- Feeling unsure about the future
- Changes in sex drive
- Sleep problems

TASK

Review the list of common emotional reactions above. Are there reactions you can relate to? Some emotional changes are noticed by family members or close friends before you notice them yourself. Recognizing your feelings and openly discussing them can make it easier to cope with a heart condition.

Most people experience at least some emotional changes after leaving hospital. You might find some emotions difficult or uncomfortable. It is important to know that most people feel better emotionally within two or three months after a heart event (but there is no exact time frame that applies to everyone).

WHAT IS STRESS?

One important part of getting back on track physically and emotionally is to have healthy strategies for coping with stress.

Stress is the tension you feel when you see something as a challenge, pressure, or demand. Stress is a normal part of life that everyone experiences from time to time.

Stressors are the actual situations in your life that you see as a challenge. Stress is your reaction to them.

Short-term stress usually does not cause a problem. Intense or long-term stress, called *chronic stress*, can increase the chance of health problems including a poorer recovery from heart disease.

Your body has an automatic reaction to stressors called the *fight or flight response*. It provides you with a surge of energy to fight off danger or flee to safety. When feeling stressed, for example, you breathe faster, your blood pressure and heart rate go up, you start to sweat, and sugar is sent into your bloodstream.

The fight or flight response is useful when you come across short-term physical stressors and emergencies. Once the situation is over, your fight or flight system gets turned off and your stress levels go back down.

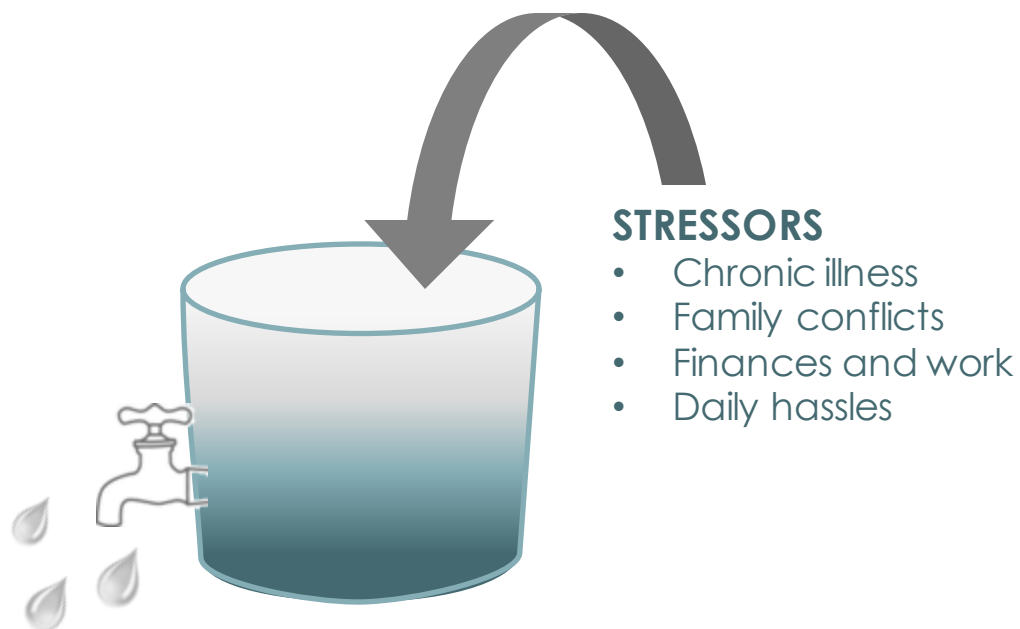
If a stressful situation keeps coming back or does not go away, your body tries to stay in high alert. Eventually, your body can't keep up. You might also find that when dealing with long-term stress, it is hard to eat well, exercise regularly, or stick to healthy habits. This is why long-term stress can cause wear-and-tear on our body and increase the chances of developing heart disease or other health issues.

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

Think of stress like a bucket of water, where the water level is how much stress you feel from all situations in your life. The size of the bucket is how much stress you can handle before feeling overwhelmed. People are born with buckets of different sizes, and the size of your bucket can change day-to-day.

- During short-term stressors, the water level rises but drains quickly once the stressor is gone. For example, if a grizzly bear crossed your path, you would feel sudden symptoms of stress like fear, a racing heart, and a rush of energy to escape. When the bear walks away, your feelings of stress would decrease.
- During chronic stressors, the water level can stay high and overflow your bucket. Most difficulties in modern life involve chronic stress rather than short-lived stress (like fleeing from bears and other physical threats to our safety). The pressures from managing a health condition, relationship difficulties, financial and job demands, and daily hassles can add up to make your stress bucket spill over.

The good news is our stress bucket has a release valve. Using healthy coping strategies on a regular basis can “release” your stress to keep it from impacting important aspects of your life.



Symptoms of Stress

There are common symptoms that tell you when stress levels are building. However, people usually do not pay attention to how they are feeling until things are overwhelming. Being aware of your stress symptoms can be uncomfortable at first but, with practice, this skill can help you respond to stress in a more balanced way. The table below shows four categories of stress symptoms.

STRESS SYMPTOMS	EXAMPLES
Emotional Changes	Anxiety, worry, sadness, anger, irritability
Physical Changes	Muscle tension, elevated heartbeat, rapid breathing, headaches, fatigue
Behavioural Changes	Eating more/less than usual, changes in sleep, crying, procrastinating, using alcohol or other substances, fidgeting
Cognitive (Thought) Changes	Trouble concentrating, indecisiveness, “what if” thoughts, focusing on negative parts of a situation

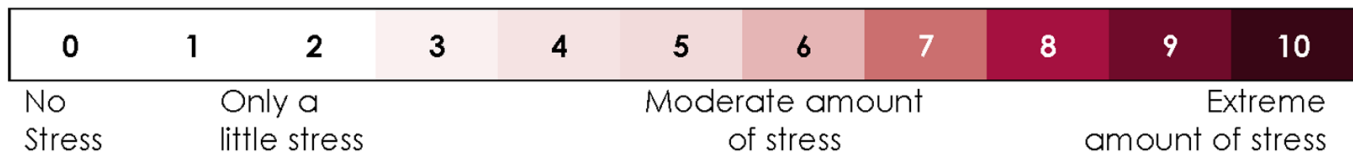
TASK

Write down how you typically experience stress. What stress symptoms do you usually have: How do you feel emotionally? What do you notice in your body? How do you act? What goes through your mind? Categorize your symptoms to see if your stress tends to show itself in certain ways more than others.

Monitoring Your Stress Level

Emotional health is as important as “physical” risk factors for heart disease. Just like you might monitor your blood pressure, weight, or cholesterol levels, you can monitor your level of stress.

One useful strategy is to schedule a few times each day to check how you are feeling. You can use a stress scale, like the one below. Note that stress levels are not fixed. How you feel will change throughout the day, and over time, depending what you are doing, what you are thinking, and what is happening around you.



TASK

What number best describes how much stress you are feeling in this moment? If you are feeling a moderate amount of stress or higher (5+), what is one healthy strategy you could use to bring your stress level down? If you're feeling calm or only a little stress (<5), what are you doing to manage stress in healthy ways? You might also look ahead to upcoming pressures in your life to plan what you will do when your stress levels start to rise.

The next section will go through some ideas for how to bring stress levels down, and how to seek help if stress becomes a problem.

A Guide To Managing Stress – Section 2

Coping with Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Managing stress can involve *adding in* healthy behaviours and *reducing* unhealthy behaviours. Unhealthy behaviours often lower stress in the short-run but make us feel worse in the long-run; for example, laying in bed all day when feeling down, avoiding situations when feeling nervous, being short-tempered with others, or drinking alcohol.

The table below describes some healthy ways people can handle stress and unpleasant emotions.

HEALTHY BEHAVIOURS TO MANAGE STRESS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take action to improve a stressful situation• Be physically active• Make time for relaxation• Schedule activities you enjoy• Do things you are good at• Spend time with people you like• Share your feelings with a friend or family member• Take things one step at a time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Try to look at things differently• Pray for guidance and strength• Use a day timer• Eat a balanced diet• Follow good sleep habits• Practice self-care• Acknowledge positive qualities in yourself• Learn to say “no” when feeling stretched• Practice time management• Talk to your doctor or therapist

TASK

Try listing 5 – 10 specific ways to manage stress that work for you. How can you incorporate these practices into your daily life? Are there any strategies listed above you want to try? Are there unhealthy coping behaviours you feel ready to reduce?

The following pages describe specific skills for stress management. There is no single approach that works for everyone or in every situation. Trying different strategies can help you find what works best for you.

Problem-Solving	<p>This strategy involves reducing or eliminating the situations that are putting pressure on you. Sometimes it is possible to take action to improve a stressful situation.</p> <p>Examples of this would be asking for an extension for paying bills, seeking medical treatment, or asking for help with household chores. When feeling stressed, you might avoid dealing with problems or have trouble making decisions. Writing down your stressors can help define your problems and possible courses of action.</p> <p>For stressors you can control, brainstorm ways you could improve the situation. For stressors you can't control, consider how you could change your reaction or manage your emotions in healthy ways. To try this strategy, use the table below. Circle the "possible solution" you want to try first.</p>
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Stressor	Is it Controllable?	Possible Solutions
<p>Example:</p> <p>I have not received the information I need from my doctor.</p>	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Invite daughter to come with me to appointments - Change doctors - Make a list of what I want to ask about - Tell doctor I have a hard time understanding what she says

Regular Exercise

Regular physical activity, including exercise, is a very effective way to reduce stress. Exercise helps reduce the fight or flight response, limiting the wear-and-tear on your heart. Exercise can also improve your sense of control over your health, boost feelings of confidence, and provide a distraction from daily worries. If you notice your stress levels rising, going out for even a short walk can be enough to bring your stress symptoms to a more manageable level.

Relaxation Techniques

People who successfully manage their stress often set aside time each day to relax. Relaxation involves techniques to reduce the symptoms of stress by learning to physically calm your body.

Examples include diaphragmatic (deep) breathing, mindfulness meditation, yoga, guided imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation.

These techniques have been found to lower muscle tension, angina, blood pressure, anxiety, and to improve sleep and mood.

Listening to guided audio is a helpful way to learn relaxation techniques. You can access free relaxation audio tracks by clicking the link below.

My Health Alberta:

<https://myhealth.alberta.ca/alberta/pages/relaxation-audio-tracks.aspx>

Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts

Trying to look at a situation differently can change how much stress you feel. Our thoughts constantly run in the background, usually without our awareness. The problem is that certain thought patterns can make your mood worse.

When feeling stressed, you may find your thoughts jump to worst-case scenarios, are overly judgmental, or filter out positive parts of a situation. Three steps can help:

1. Check what is going through your mind when you are feeling stressed. Ask “what did I say to myself right before I started feeling [upset, anxious, sad, angry]?”
2. Check whether your thoughts are realistic. Ask questions like, “Are there other ways of looking at this? What would a friend say? Am I 100% sure this is the case? Am I jumping to conclusions?”
3. Come up with a more realistic thought based on the evidence for and against your thought.

For example, the thought, “Exercising was hard today, this must mean my condition is getting worse”, would lead to feelings of frustration. This thought involves jumping to conclusions without thinking about all possibilities. A more realistic thought could be, “There are a few reasons why exercising felt hard; I didn’t sleep well, and sometimes people just have an off day. I will monitor and talk to my doctor if this continues to happen.”

The goal is *realistic* thinking, not necessarily positive thinking. Paying attention to your thoughts takes practice, but can reduce how much stress you feel.

COPING WITH ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Emotions like fear, anger, and sadness after a heart event usually get less intense over time. However, these normal emotional reactions can become a problem for some people. Difficulties with anxiety and/or depression are common in individuals with heart disease.

Regardless of whether you are concerned about your mood right now, you may find it helpful to read this section to be aware of “red flags” that signal when to seek help. If left untreated, high levels of depression or anxiety can make heart health worse and affect your quality of life.

Anxiety

Anxiety symptoms can include feeling afraid, worried, restless, or panicky. Other anxiety symptoms can include trouble sleeping, fidgeting, irritability, a pounding heart, dizziness, or sweating. Some anxiety is normal and beneficial. It is important to talk to your doctor if you notice:

- Intense or ongoing anxiety
- Anxiety prevents you from enjoying life
- Anxiety gets in the way of your heart healthy habits
- Anxiety interferes with your sleep or concentration
- You frequently feel “on edge” or like you’re losing control
- You are a generally nervous person
- You have panic attacks that are distressing to you
- You frequently can’t control your worrying

Depression

The term “depression” is commonly used to describe symptoms of major depressive disorder. Depression is different than normal sadness. It involves feeling profoundly low or losing the ability to enjoy simple things. These mood changes happen most of the time and last for at least two weeks. Depression can affect many aspects of a person’s everyday life.

Depression happens to about 1 in 5 people after a heart event. This compares to about 1 in 20 people in the general community.

It is important to talk to your doctor if you:

- Have intense feelings of sadness most of the time
- Have lost interest or enjoyment in most activities that were previously enjoyable
- Feel too tired or gloomy to exercise
- Feel worthless, guilty, or hopeless
- Have thoughts of suicide or self-harm

HELP IS AVAILABLE

If you feel stuck in negative feelings over time, it is very important to speak with a healthcare provider. If you don’t seek help, problems like depression or anxiety can get worse and affect your heart health.

- Speak to a member of your rehab team. Call 403-571-6950 to book an appointment.
- For immediate support, call the Calgary Distress Centre at 403-266-4357.
- For emergencies, call 911 or visit your local emergency department.

Risk Factors for Anxiety or Depression

It is not possible to perfectly predict who will have problems with anxiety or depression after a heart event. However, there are certain “red flags” that can increase the risk:

- Feeling like your mood is not getting better over time
- Previous experiences with depression, anxiety, or other mental health disorders
- Feeling socially isolated or like you have no one to talk to
- Recent loss such as a divorce or the death of a loved one
- A history of mental health disorders in your family
- Having lots of stressors related to finances or work
- Use of cigarettes, alcohol, or other substances
- Having complications or a more severe heart condition
- Having other health problems like diabetes

Participating in cardiac rehabilitation can lessen the risk for depression and anxiety. Many of the stress management strategies described in this section can also help.

TASK

Review the list above to see if you have any “red flags” that might increase your risk for developing problems with depression or anxiety. Remember, these problems are common and treatable. If you are concerned, talk to your doctor.

A Guide To Managing Stress – Section 3

SLEEPING WELL

SLEEP AND HEART HEALTH

Sleep allows your body to restore itself each night, which is important for both mental health and heart health. Getting enough sleep also helps you take on the day's tasks, including exercise and cardiac rehabilitation.

Sleep Problems

Everyone has a poor night's sleep from time-to-time, especially when feeling stressed. Many people notice their sleep improves weeks to months after a heart event as they adjust to their diagnosis, medications, and lifestyle changes.

However, sleep difficulties can persist for some people. Insomnia and sleep apnea are two sleep problems common in people with heart disease. Both problems are treatable. If you are concerned about your sleep, please speak to your doctor.

Signs of insomnia can include:

- Trouble falling asleep
- Trouble staying asleep
- Problems waking up too early
- Being unhappy with how much sleep you are getting
- Being unhappy with the quality of your sleep

Signs of sleep apnea can include:

- Snoring loudly
- Feeling very sleepy or fatigued during the day
- Having your bed partner tell you that you stop breathing or make choking sounds while you sleep
- Having risk factors like high blood pressure, carrying extra body weight, having a wide neck size, and being male

HEALTHY SLEEP HABITS

There are several practices that can be used to improve sleep. When having sleep difficulties, some people try to change their habits to make up for lost sleep. This may help in the short-run but can make sleep worse in the long-run. It is usually recommended to get 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night, but there is a large range of what is normal. A general guideline is to aim for enough sleep that you do not feel daytime sleepiness.

Helpful Habits	Unhelpful Habits
Going to bed only when sleepy	Going to bed early to “catch up” on sleep
Getting out of bed if you can’t fall asleep	Lying in bed awake worrying and planning
Setting a regular sleep schedule	Napping or sleeping in to “make up” lost sleep
Using your bedroom only for sleep (and sex)	Watching TV or using electronics in bed
Unwinding for at least 1 hour before bedtime	Checking emails or other arousing activities before bedtime
Avoiding naps (or keep naps < 30 minutes before 3:00PM)	Going to bed too early when not sleepy
Exercising during the day (not too close to bedtime)	Drinking alcohol or caffeine before bed

TASK

Review the list above. Which helpful and unhelpful sleep habits do you use? Can you think of other things you do to get a good night’s sleep? What is one thing you could do to build healthier sleep habits into your routine?