

Curriculum: Stress, Depression and Heart Disease

What types of mental health problems can contribute to heart disease?

Summary

- For women with no history of heart or blood vessel problems, being depressed puts a person at much greater risk of dying from heart disease
- Many studies show that being depressed increases your risk of having a heart attack, whether or not you have heart disease
- Phobias, or fears that are either irrational or excessive (such as fear of heights) are linked to an increased risk of dying from heart disease for men, but it's not clear if this is true for women
- Having few friends and family for social and emotional support is associated with increased heart disease risk and a greater likelihood of dying after a heart attack
- Poverty increases the risk of heart attack and death in both heart disease patients and otherwise healthy people
- Type A personality was originally thought to increase a person's risk of heart disease, but now it appears that hostility is more important
- Hostility may double a woman's risk of having a heart attack
- Workplace stress may be associated with increased risk of heart disease in both men and women
- Women in high-powered jobs have an increased risk of heart disease compared with women who have little control over their work; the opposite is true for men
- Marital stress may increase the risk of a second heart attack or chest pain in women with heart disease
- Caring for a spouse increases a woman's risk of developing and dying from heart disease, especially if the woman is unhappy about her caregiving duties
- Various relaxation techniques and exercise can help you cope with stress and depression; licensed therapists are available for additional support
- Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs – drugs such as Zoloft and Paxil) are often used to treat depression and have been found to be safe and effective for people who have had heart attacks

I. What types of mental health problems can contribute to heart disease?

The mental health problems that can play a role in heart disease are usually broken down into 2 categories: emotional factors, including depression, anxiety, and hostility; and chronic stressors, including low social support, the strain of being a caregiver, and work stress

What is depression?

A person is considered to be clinically depressed if they have a depressed mood and a lack of interest in activities that used to be enjoyable, lasting for at least 2 weeks, and accompanied by at least one of the following: changes in appetite, sleep disturbance,

fatigue, agitation, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, problems concentrating, and suicidal thoughts.⁶⁻⁸

II. Symptoms of Depression⁶

National Institute of Mental Health

- Persistent sad, anxious, or empty mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Insomnia, waking up early, or oversleeping
- Loss of appetite and weight loss, or overeating and weight gain
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain

III. How does depression affect my risk of heart disease?

Depression affects heart health in many ways, though more research is needed to understand exactly how. Depression can alter your heart's ability to beat properly; it can increase the buildup of fatty plaques in your blood vessels; and it has been linked to poor eating and exercise habits.^{7, 8, 11-15}

Many studies have shown that being depressed increases your risk of having a heart attack, whether or not you already have heart disease. Depression also increases the chance of having another heart attack in people who have already had one. The more depressed you are, the higher your risk of having heart troubles.^{7, 8, 16} It is less clear, however, if depression makes a person more likely to die of heart disease.¹⁷⁻¹⁹

.What is hostility?

A hostile person commonly feels negatively towards personal relationships and is often angry, cynical, and mistrusting.⁷ Hostile people reportedly smoke more and consume more alcohol and animal fat.³² They are also more likely to have high cholesterol than mild-mannered people.³³ Some, but not all, studies in healthy people have shown a link between hostility and higher risks of heart disease and dying young.^{7, 32}

IV. What is stress?

Stress is a mentally or emotionally disruptive condition that occurs in response to outside influences. It is usually characterized by a faster heart rate, a rise in blood pressure, tensing of the muscles, irritability, and depression.

V. Can stress affect my risk of heart disease?

Yes. However, when researchers talk about the effects of stress, they speak specifically to the kinds of events that trigger this response. Many of these triggers are short term, such as experiencing a death in the family or surviving a car crash. However, stressors that are likely to affect your risk of heart disease are more long term. They are often called chronic stressors. Chronic stressors include those discussed below.

VI. Lack of Social Support

Social support is the friendship, encouragement, and companionship that family and friends provide. People with fewer connections to friends and family have a higher risk of heart disease and heart attack.⁴¹⁻⁴⁵

While living alone has been shown to increase the risk of heart disease in men,⁴⁷ the same has not been seen in women because women are more likely than men to develop close friendships outside of marriage.⁴⁸

VII. Work-related Stress

The relationship between work stress and heart disease is still up for discussion.

VIII. Marital Stress

Marital stress may be a greater risk for women who already have some form of heart disease than for those with healthy hearts. One all-female report found that severe stress in a marriage or live-in relationship can triple a woman's risk of a second heart attack or angina.⁵⁷ Marital stress may also affect risk factors for heart disease.

IX. Caregiver Strain

Caring for people who are elderly, ill, or disabled is burdensome and stressful for many families and may lead to depression.⁵⁹ Studies have shown that female caregivers are less likely to take care of their own health⁶⁰ and their blood pressure tends to rise when they are in the presence of the person they care for.⁶¹

Caring for a family member or spouse isn't always bad for your health. The risks are not due to the act of caregiving alone, but occur only when the act is viewed as stressful.⁵⁹

HOW CAN STRESS AND DEPRESSION BE TREATED?

There are many things you can do to combat depression and stress. Finding social support either from friends and family or through a support group can be helpful. Managing your stress can also help combat depression.

There are also several different types of treatments available for women who are under a lot of stress—the key is to find the method that is right for you.