

Heart Disease: Coping With the Diagnosis

So your doctor has just given you the bad news: You're a heart patient, you're fighting a life-threatening disease and your life is going to change. What's the first thing you should do? Listen carefully and do what the doctor says. Also listen to nurses and other experts who will tell you how to help yourself recover.

Actually *doing* what they say, though, requires motivation and emotional support. It may not be easy to change all those behaviors that helped make you sick and now stand in the way of getting better. You'll need discipline to stay with the treatment, and you'll need the help of others. Your task will be far more difficult if you're depressed, angry or lonely.

So be prepared to deal with the emotional as well as physical threats to your health. Experts advise you to:

- **Avoid isolation.** Newly diagnosed heart disease patients commonly sink into self-absorption. They mull over their physical condition, worry about the future and may even ignore the needs of others. They need to reach out instead. If you've just been told you have heart disease, join a cardiac rehabilitation program, either on your own or by referral from your physician. Consider group therapy. Share your feelings with family and friends to build greater intimacy. If you're active in a church or community group, stay active. If you lack such a social network, consider joining one. If your job is just too stressful for you to go back, consider taking on a different job or a new line of work as your recovery proceeds.
- **Watch for signs of depression.** It's natural to feel down after learning you have heart disease. It's also natural to feel helpless after a stay in the hospital. But a persistent mood of sadness may signal a more serious condition—clinical depression. This illness is treatable. Left untreated, it can sharply lower your chances of recovery. One key symptom is a case of the "blues" that you can't seem to shake. Others include irritability, disturbances in sleeping and eating patterns (such as insomnia), feelings of worthlessness and helplessness, decreased energy and loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities, including sex.

Source: *Wayne Sotile, PhD, Herbert N. Budnick, PhD, National Institute of Mental Health*
(www.nimh.nih.gov)

By Tom Gray
© 2000 Lifescape