

Psychological Interventions for Heart Disease

To win against heart disease, you'll need to fight a two-front war. On one front—the physical—your mission is obvious. You need to follow your physician's orders, take medication as directed, eat right and exercise appropriately. In other words, be a conscientious patient.

You may not be so sure about how to deal with the psychological side of the illness. Do you need professional help? Or is self-treatment, with the help of family and friends, enough?

You may get your answer when a physician or nurse refers you to a mental health professional after seeing that your emotional burdens are more than you or your loved ones can handle. Or you may come to that realization yourself—after noticing signs of depression, for instance, that you just can't shake.

If you think you do need help, don't let the stigma of mental illness stop you from getting it. Depression, hostility and social isolation are dangerous conditions for a heart patient. Unless these conditions are addressed, they can lead to a worsening of your heart disease.

Mental health professionals may also help patients understand and change behavior, such as Type-A tension and anger, that contributes to heart disease. Evidence is building that stress management programs help prevent second heart attacks. A study published in the *American Journal of Cardiology* in 2002 showed that a group of heart patients in a four-month weekly stress management program had fewer “cardiac events” over a five-year period than a group getting ordinary cardiac care and a group that took a four-month exercise program.

You may not need help from mental health professionals, but if you do need it, you should never be afraid to ask for it. Heart disease is *not* something you should try to conquer alone.

By Tom Gray
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