Assess Your Stress

The contribution to heart disease of the “psychosocial risk factors” listed below is on par with abnormal cholesterol levels, smoking, elevated blood pressure, diet and diabetes.* The term psychosocial is used to define psychological, behavioral and social factors, which can affect not only your heart, but also your general health and happiness. Consider the following factors. Have you recently experienced any of them? If you recognize yourself in some or most of the situations below, you will likely benefit from taking some steps to manage your stress.

1. **Depression.** Symptoms of depression include depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, appetite or weight changes, sleep changes, agitation or sluggishness, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, concentration problems, irritability, aches and pains.
2. **Time Pressure.** The feeling that there is never enough time to do what you have to do. When this happens occasionally it is not a problem, but some people live with this pressure constantly.
3. **Anxiety.** Intense anxiety associated with fear of heights or enclosed spaces or crowds can sometimes set off cardiac arrhythmias.
4. **Chronic Stress.** Situations like chronic work stress, a troubled marriage, concern for a child, caring for an ill parent or partner has been linked to heart disease.
5. **Lack of Social Support.** Among those who have survived heart attacks, social isolation is almost as important as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and smoking as a predictor of long-term survival. Do you have a personal support system?
6. **Anger/Hostility.** The process of atherosclerosis advances more rapidly in those people who score high on anger/hostility scales. To assess your anger level, answer the following questions:
   - Do you become impatient when a car ahead of you in your lane is going too slowly?
   - Do you become easily irritated by the faults you see in other people?
   - Do you tend to interrupt others if they do not come to the point fast enough?
   - Do you have extremely high standards for yourself regarding achievement, and become critical of yourself if you fall short of meeting your standards?
   - Do you get upset if someone keeps you waiting?

Recognize that the above conditions trigger the release of stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol), which cause physiological effects that can be damaging to your cardiovascular system (see “Get the Facts: Stress and Your Cardiovascular System” fact sheet).

* Rozanski; Blumenthal; Davidson; Saab; Kubzansky. *The epidemiology, pathophysiology, and management of psychosocial risk factors in cardiac practice.* “Journal of American Cardiology.” 2005
Get the Facts: Stress and Your Cardiovascular System

Stress and its effects on your body are nothing new. The 17th-century British physician William Harvey recognized this when in 1628 he wrote “every affection of the mind that is attended either with pain or pleasure, hope or fear, is the cause of agitation whose influence extends to the heart.”

The stress response is normal and necessary, but the more that it is activated, the harder it is to shut it (and its effects) off. When you repeatedly react negatively to stressors in your environment the levels of stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) remain elevated and the effects can be life altering.

Effects of stress on the cardiovascular system:

- Elevated heart rate
- Abnormal heart beats (arrhythmias)
- Elevated blood pressure
- Increased blood clotting
- Increased blood lipids (cholesterol and triglycerides)
- Accumulation of abdominal fat (increased risk of heart disease and diabetes)
- Elevated blood sugar (increased risk of diabetes)
- Increased inflammation of the lining of the coronary arteries
Want to Better Manage Your Stress? Get Started:

Use your head:

1. Listen to what you are saying to yourself. Practice “self-talk”.
   - “It’s not worth dying for”.
   - “This too shall pass.”
   - “Will this matter to me next week, next month…?”
   - “Am I going to let someone else push my buttons?”

2. Incorporate a “thought-stopping word” when you find yourself thinking stressful thoughts:
   - “Stop”
   - “Downshift”
   - “Cool it”

3. Analyze the situation:
   - “Is this situation one over which I logically have control?”
   - “Are my expectations of others/myself too high?”

Change your behavior:

- Practice abdominal breathing.

- Scan your body for muscle tension. If you find any, tense that area and then try to completely relax it.

- Slow down. Reduce your pace in walking, eating, talking, driving.

- Disengage from the world and responsibilities for at least 5-10 minutes daily:
  1. Listen to music.
  2. Meditate.
  3. Pet your cat or dog.
  4. Go outside.

- Attend “Heart Forum Managing Your Stress Class”

- Attend “Heart Matters” stress management class.