

How mental health affects heart health

It's not unusual for someone who has suffered a heart attack to experience stress, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.^{43,44} But there's growing evidence that these and other mental health issues can also increase your risk of developing cardiovascular disease in the first place. A great way to improve your physical health is to improve your mental health.^{45,46}

Stress⁴⁷

When your body is under stress, it releases the hormone cortisol, which can, over the long term, increase your blood pressure, cholesterol, triglycerides and blood sugar—all risk factors for heart disease. Even short-term stress, like you might feel if you have to give a speech, can cause reduced blood flow to the heart (cardiac ischemia).

Depression⁴⁸

Clinical depression may accelerate atherosclerosis, the clogging of the arteries that's a major cause of heart attack and stroke.

Anxiety⁴⁹

Anxiety may cause rapid heart rate (tachycardia), which can increase the risk of sudden heart attack, as well as elevated blood pressure, which can put excess strain on the heart.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder^{50,51}

The fight-or-flight response that PTSD triggers has been associated with dysfunction of blood vessels in the heart, which can contribute to atherosclerosis.

To make things worse, studies have found that people who struggle with PTSD are more likely to smoke, eat a poor diet, stop taking needed medications and forgo exercise—all actions that can raise the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Self-assessment tools such as this one can be useful for checking in to see where you are on the mental health spectrum: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mood-self-assessment/>

43 <https://www.escardio.org/The-ESC/Press-Office/Press-releases/You-survived-a-heart-attack-Now-what-about-the-depression>

44 <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0038915>

45 <https://www.health.harvard.edu/heart-health/the-head-heart-connection-mental-health-and-heart-disease>

46 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/06/200616100817.htm>

47 <https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content.aspx?ContentTypeID=1&ContentID=2171#:~:text=Studies%20suggest%20that%20the%20high,plaque%20deposits%20in%20the%20arteries.>

48 [https://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343\(16\)30551-4/fulltext#secsectitle0015](https://www.amjmed.com/article/S0002-9343(16)30551-4/fulltext#secsectitle0015)

49 https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/heart_vascular_institute/centers_excellence/women_cardiovascular_health_center/patient_information/health_topics/anxiety_heart_disease.html

50 https://www.ptsd.va.gov/publications/rq_docs/V28N1.pdf

51 <https://psychcentral.com/news/2020/04/29/how-ptsd-can-lead-to-earlier-heart-disease/156078.html>

Improving mental health

When you improve your mental health, you'll feel better, and your heart may become stronger. Here are simple steps to take.

Recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health issues

Stress: anxiety, lack of motivation, feeling overwhelmed, irritability or anger, sadness or depression, difficulty sleeping⁵²

Depression: Sadness, energy loss, weight loss, difficulty sleeping (or oversleeping), loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed, feelings of worthlessness, thoughts of death or suicide⁵³

Anxiety: Sudden feelings of panic, chest pain, fast heartbeat, breathing difficulty, dizziness⁵⁴

PTSD: flashbacks, difficulty sleeping or nightmares, loneliness, angry outbursts, feelings of guilt, worry or sadness⁵⁵



Know your family history

Genetics plays a role in both mental health and heart health,^{56,57} so learn all you can about the history of illness in your family.



Talk with your health team

A cardiologist might overlook mental health issues, while a counselor might ignore physical health issues. Be sure your doctors have a full picture of your health status.



Avoid negative coping behaviors

Turning to tobacco, alcohol or drugs may only mask mental health conditions. Stress eating may only feel good in the moment. Invest in your long-term health by avoiding these behaviors.



Maintain a healthy lifestyle

Eat a proper diet, stay physically active and get plenty of sleep. Avoid triggers that worsen your mental health, whether that's social media, TV news or people who bring you down.

Take steps now to make sure your heart and your head are as healthy as possible. At our Heart healthy resources hub, Aetna International members can find the information, tools and support needed to prevent and manage heart-related conditions. Aetna International members can also find help and resources in the Health Hub. For more information about your health care benefits, contact your plan sponsor or one of Aetna International's expert sales consultants for group business or individuals and families.

The beat goes on: Move more. Stress less. Live heart-healthy.

Heart-healthy resources hub: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/en/about-us/explore/heart-health-support-resource.html>

Health Hub: <https://www.aetnainternational.com/members/login.do>

52 <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-symptoms/art-20050987>

53 <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/what-to-look-for/mood-disorders/depression>

54 <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/what-to-look-for/anxiety-disorders/panic-disorder>

55 <https://www.mentalhealth.gov/what-to-look-for/post-traumatic-stress-disorder>

56 <https://www.nhs.uk/news/genetics-and-stem-cells/five-mental-disorders-may-have-genetic-links/>

57 <https://www.health.harvard.edu/heart-health/the-genetics-of-heart-disease-an-update>