

Maintaining a heart-healthy lifestyle



How psychologists can help with managing heart disease

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Heart disease is a major chronic illness in the United States, affecting more than 26 million people. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women. Some risk factors associated with heart disease, such as being overweight and smoking, can be controlled through lifestyle and behavior choices.

Having a heart attack or being diagnosed with heart disease can be a life-changing event. And, it can be challenging emotionally to make necessary lifestyle changes to help live a heart-healthy life.

Seeing a psychologist about heart disease

Altering eating habits, managing stress and following the treatment plan your health provider prescribes all at once can be overwhelming. Psychologists can help people with heart disease find ways to make these lifestyle changes and address emotional reactions such as anxiety.

Licensed psychologists also have the professional training and skills to treat individuals suffering from depression.

Psychologists work with individuals, families and groups in private practice or as part of a health care team. Sometimes psychologists will work with heart disease patients who have been referred by a cardiologist, dietician or other health care professional.

In working with a psychologist, you can expect to discuss your overall physical and emotional health, your health beliefs and behaviors. You will also discuss how much you understand about heart disease and your specific diagnosis.

A psychologist can provide support and help you deal with any setbacks, develop new skills and change unhealthy behaviors. You and your psychologist will work together, sometimes along with your cardiologist to decide what treatment options are best suited for you.

Heart disease and depression

According to the American Heart Association 33 percent of heart attack patients develop some degree of depression. Symptoms of depression like fatigue and feelings of worthlessness can cause people to ignore their treatment and engage in unhealthy behaviors such as overeating or refusing to take medications. Studies show treating depression makes it easier for people with heart disease to follow long-term treatment plans and make appropriate changes to their lifestyle.

Getting the support you need

Without a strong support system, it can be difficult to make lasting behavior changes. Research shows that as many as two-thirds of heart disease patients may revert back to behaviors that contributed to their heart attack a year later. Working with a psychologist or attending a support group for people with heart disease can help keep you on track and prevent you from returning to old behaviors.

Steps to a heart-healthy lifestyle

Consider the following steps to help live a heart-healthy lifestyle:

Get Active. Exercise is an important part of a heart-healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise can help keep arteries flexible and open, reducing the chance for blockage. Talk to your cardiologist and a psychologist about an exercise plan that is right for you. To get started, try taking a short walk or using the stairs instead of the elevator to get started.

Eat well. A healthy diet is essential to maintaining your new lifestyle. Focus on developing healthy eating habits that become part of your everyday life. For example, choose grilled instead of fried food.

Manage stress. Research shows that stress can contribute to many different health problems, including increased risk of heart disease. Regulating stress is an important part of preventing and treating heart disease. Studies have shown that if you learn to manage your stress you can better control your heart rate and blood pressure.

Recognize how you deal with your emotions. After a heart attack, you may experience depression, anxiety or added stress. It is important to acknowledge and address any negative emotions and distress to help with your recovery and maintain good health.

Accept support. Getting help from friends and family can go a long way in aiding your recovery. Research shows that people with greater social support build their resilience and experience less depression and anxiety. Friends and family are often eager to offer support, but are not always sure how they can help. It can be a huge boost when others run a few errands for you, take you to your doctor's appointments or just lend you their ears.

Avoid burnout. Keeping up with your prescriptions, exercising regularly and making healthy food choices can feel overwhelming. Research shows that people with heart disease may experience burnout at some point. Burnout can make you feel mentally and physically drained and can negatively affect your efforts to change your lifestyle. To lessen burnout, keep in mind that small steps can lead to long-term change. Remind yourself that you are moving in a healthier direction and take time to celebrate your efforts.

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