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January 2011

Mental Recovery After a Heart Attack

Warning Signs

Myocardial infarctions, or heart attacks, can be traumatizing medical events with negative psychological ramifications. Denial, anger, anxiety and transient depression are common post-event reactions. The many complex feelings that result from a heart attack—such as having a sense of vulnerability or loss of control over one's health, hopelessness over having to make difficult lifestyle changes, and fear of having another heart attack—can lead to depression and anxiety. These changes in mood may last several months after the cardiac event. Some of the signs of depression may include loss of interest or pleasure in doing things, depressed mood, social withdrawal, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, restlessness, trouble concentrating or making decisions, fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, guilt or low self-esteem, and/or recurring thoughts of death or dying, including thinking about, planning, or making a suicide attempt. These symptoms should be discussed with a physician, the latter symptoms indicative of immediate need for help. Anxiety symptoms may include sleep disturbance, trouble concentrating, fatigue, restlessness, irritability, muscle tension, and excessive worry. Some individuals may also experience symptoms of panic attacks (e.g., heart palpitations, shortness of breath, chest pain, or dizziness.) Individuals may worry that panic symptoms are symptoms of another heart attack, which may be hard to distinguish and should also be discussed with a physician. Some of these symptoms may also be normal reactions to a physical condition or side effects from new medications. A physician can help assess for depression and anxiety and make referrals when needed.

Road to Recovery

Several key steps are recommended by physicians to aide recovery from heart attacks and provide protective benefits against future heart disease complications. Dr. Edward Ellerbeck, a physician and researcher at the University of Kansas Hospital, explained that the most important steps are adhering to the proper medication regimen and addressing and correcting the underlying causes of heart disease. Addressing underlying issues almost always includes making important lifestyle changes. These changes include getting regular, graded and monitored physical activity and consuming a heart-healthy diet, which consists of reducing intake of saturated fats, cholesterol, and simple carbohydrates and increasing intake of fruit, vegetables, and whole grains. Further lifestyle changes that are targeted include reducing stress and avoiding unhealthy risk behaviors (e.g., excessive alcohol use; smoking). Dr. Ellerbeck stated that quitting smoking and removing second hand smoke from the patient's environment (e.g., making the whole house non-smoking) are both important lifestyle changes that will have protective benefits.

Get in the Driver's Seat

Recovering from a heart attack takes time. For many individuals there is a high degree of motivation to make changes after a heart attack, but depression and anxiety can impede that motivation and may also lead to poorer health outcomes. Here are some practical tips to help combat both anxiety and depression during the recovery process:

Therapeutic Lifestyle Change: Getting regular exercise and consuming a healthy diet are two steps recommended to help support improvement in mental health and quality of life, per Therapeutic Lifestyle Change (TLC) therapies. Motivation for making changes may be increased by self-monitoring behaviors (e.g., keeping a record of diet or exercise) and rewarding small victories in the change process. Other aspects of TLC that can also be beneficial during illness recovery include seeking support through relationships and stress management.



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Seek Support: Support is an important aspect of recovery. It can come in many forms and from many sources—family, friends, medical professionals, church communities or through prayer. Taking time to talk about fears or concerns can be a comfort, especially in times of uncertainty. It is also important for individuals in recovery to be assertive and ask for what is needed from others in order to support recovery and any needed lifestyle changes. Cardiac rehabilitation programs can be instrumental in allowing patients to connect with each other to provide support and also provide monitored physical activity and nutritional counseling to support lifestyle changes. Professional counselors or support groups may be especially important to seek when other supports are not readily available.

Manage Stress: Experiencing increases in stress are likely after a cardiac event. Stressors may include financial strain from hospital bills or lost work income and lifestyle changes that affect the individual and the family (e.g., diet, smoking restrictions). Stress can be managed by taking time to relax every day, getting adequate sleep, doing things that are enjoyable, spending time with loved ones, and practicing other forms of relaxation, such as stretching, meditation, and deep breathing. Stress can also be managed by focusing on recovery first, and developing a “worry later” attitude about things that are not a priority.

Focus on the Positive: Finally, having a positive mental attitude and engaging in benefit finding are important aspects of coping with a major illness. Some benefits cited by individuals coping with major illness include that the experience gave them a new perspective about life and what is most important, that the illness brought them and loved ones closer together, and that the health scare was a “wake-up call” for them to lead a healthier or less stressful life. Positive thinking can be facilitated by using encouraging statements such as “This is only temporary” or “Recovery takes time.”

For more information, options for support are available. Help treating depression and/or anxiety and referrals for cardiac rehabilitation programs can be obtained through primary care physicians. Medication evaluations and counseling are available through COMCARE of Sedgwick County or any licensed mental health professional. Help quitting smoking can be obtained through the state quit-line (866-KAN-STOP). Cookbooks and free recipes for heart healthy diets can be obtained through the American Heart Association’s website (www.heart.org).