



Chapter 5. Part 1

Adapting to living with heart disease

Living with heart disease

Dorothy shares her story

Dorothy was 53 when she had a heart attack. She describes the experience as “terribly frightening.”

She credits cardiac rehabilitation for helping her cope with the adjustments she had to make in her life. She says, “I was lucky to have somewhere to go.” She emphasizes that it is important to connect with others who had a heart episode so that you can share information and ask questions in a safe environment.

Although she has not had to make too many lifestyle changes, Dorothy explains that it is important to learn how to deal with the anxiety of a new condition. She says, “I have a stent in my heart. Now what does that mean?” Dorothy describes feeling a sense of panic or anxiety with every new little ache or pain and says it is important to seek answers to the many questions and concerns you may have after being diagnosed with a heart condition. “Information should be easily accessible, because when something like this happens to you, you want more information. Even if you do not want it, you need it,” she says.

The new rules of the game: Managing your emotional reactions to coronary artery disease

Whether you’ve just been told you have coronary artery disease, or you have had a heart attack or surgery on your heart, it is normal to have feelings like shock, denial, guilt, anger and sadness. You need time, courage and support to get used to your “new normal.”



I was young and naïve and thought it couldn’t happen to me.”

— Chad

Coronary artery disease is a chronic illness. This means you need to take care of it for the rest of your life. But you can be healthy with coronary artery disease. You do this by following your doctor’s advice, changing your lifestyle and caring for your emotional health.

Shock and fear



I had quite a shock! I was so scared of dying after my heart attack; I could not understand what was happening to me when I woke up.”

— Paul

You may feel shocked when you learn you have coronary artery disease. It can be hard to take in what is happening to you. You may feel frightened and worried. You may not be able to explain how you feel, or you may not feel any emotions at all. It might be hard to think about how your life is going to change. You may have come close to dying and are now afraid of death.

Useful tips if you feel shock and fear:

- Take it one step at a time.
- Your job right now is to deal with your health and your feelings.
- Remember you can get better and live a full life.
- Accept your fears. Talk to your family, friends and healthcare team. Ask questions. You will probably need to hear things a few times before you remember them!
- Wait before making big life decisions! Give yourself a few months to get used to your new heart condition, its treatment and your lifestyle changes.

Denial



It is not really true; I did not have a heart attack! It did not happen to me, I am not really sick, I feel much better after my surgery, like a new man that could conquer the world!"

— **John**

Denial means acting like your heart disease didn't happen or doesn't matter.

Denial is not always easy to see. You may find it hard to believe you really have heart disease. You survived your heart attack. You made it through surgery. You feel better than before — almost as if nothing had happened. Your treatment is working. You may feel like stopping your medication or hiding your condition because you are afraid your family and friends will see you differently.

Denial is common when you are adjusting to an upsetting situation. When you are in denial, you may not accept that your heart disease is real and you might not want to think about how it will affect your life. You may also avoid anything that makes you think about your illness (such as your medical appointments, medication and lifestyle changes).

If it lasts for a while, denial can be harmful, because it can keep you from taking care of yourself. That can make your heart disease worse. It is important to understand that denial will not change the real fact of your heart disease.

What should I do about denial?

- Figure out what frightens you. Are you afraid of experiencing another heart attack? That loved ones may leave you? Of feeling weak? Of dying?
- Talk about your fears and emotions with someone you trust.
- Make a list of what can happen (good and bad) if you don't follow your doctor's advice.
- Take your medication properly, even if you have side effects. Talk about them with your healthcare team.
- Learn everything you can about your condition and the changes you need to make. Understand that you are in charge of your health. This will help you cope with fear and feel more in control.

Guilt



It is my fault that I developed angina; I knew I should have taken better care of my health before. I worked too much, was under a lot of stress and did not have time to exercise”

— Theresa



Guilt can make you blame yourself for not looking after your health. You may wonder, “If I had eaten better, stopped smoking earlier, gone to the gym and lost some weight, I might never have developed coronary artery disease.” Blaming yourself can stop you from taking control of your health and increase your risk of another heart attack or medical complications.

How can I deal with my feelings of guilt?

- Be kind and forgive yourself. Blaming yourself can make you feel powerless, hopeless and depressed. Have realistic expectations about adapting to your heart disease and lifestyle changes.
- Keep in mind that coronary artery disease is a complicated illness caused by different conditions and behaviours, some of which are beyond your control, such as your family history.
- Focus on what you can do now to take care of your health and get control over your life.

Anger



Why is this happening to me? I was in such good shape because of my job! Life is so unfair! I am 35 years old, at the beginning of my life! Nobody has a heart attack at that age!”

— William



It is common to be angry after losing something as important as your heart health. You may think it is unfair and ask why it is happening to you. You may feel that you are losing control and want to fight back. You may think that life has punished you or that it is your doctor's fault. You may feel no one understands how you feel. You may be angry at your family and friends.

How can I manage the anger that I feel?

- See that you are angry and talk about it. Do not blame yourself or others.
- Let people know how you feel. Cry if you feel like crying.
- Don't hold these feelings in. Talk about them when they happen. If you let them build up, you may explode later.
- Don't attack or criticize your family or friends and hurt their feelings. Talk about how **you** feel instead.
- Learn how to deal with anger without harming your health or relationships. See Recognizing anger and hostility, page 90.

Sadness



I will never feel like I used to before. I feel damaged, my life is over”

— Claire



You may feel sadness, grief and pain for the loss of your health. You may feel sad about all the changes you need to make to take care of your heart. You may be afraid you will not be able to make them. You might be worried you will disappoint your healthcare team and your family if you cannot make these changes. You may be spending too much time alone, cry easily and not take any pleasure in doing what you used to enjoy. You may feel your heart disease has stolen a part of you and nothing will ever be the same.

And you are right! Your heart disease has changed you forever. The sadness you are feeling is different from clinical depression. It is part of getting used to coronary artery disease and usually goes away as you learn to live with your new reality. Clinical depression lasts longer, takes over your life and needs treatment. See Recognizing and dealing with depression, page 91.

How can I deal with sadness?

- Accept your feelings. Talk about them with someone you trust.
- Remember that you are still a person of value with dignity, strengths, knowledge and interests.
- Let yourself cry if you feel like it.
- Keep to your normal daily routine as much as you can.
- Stay in touch with people close to you and plan to do things you enjoy.
- Get some exercise.
- Ask your healthcare provider about seeing a mental health specialist if your sadness lasts a long time or worries you.

Acceptance



I now accept living with my new heart disease. I am no longer scared of dying. I am now able to do all the activities that I did before, with more pleasure because I am taking the time I need and putting my heart health and my family first.”

— **August**



Acceptance of your heart disease means you feel less frightened, angry, sad or guilty. You are OK with your situation. Fighting it and running from it hasn't helped. Now you can get back to your life and do the things you care about, while you take care of your health. That will be your new way of living. And you will learn that taking good care of yourself will become easier and easier. It will become your habit. You will be able to look forward to your future with hope.

Yes, you need to take care of your heart disease for the rest of your life. But you can lead a normal life while you take good care of yourself!



Mindfulness living, instead of living in the past or living in the future, we appreciate and live in today”

— **Jay**

How can I learn to accept my coronary artery disease?

- Learn everything you can about your heart disease and your treatments.
 - Ask your healthcare team questions.
 - Follow your doctor's advice.
 - Take your medication.
 - Change your lifestyle.
- Find a meaning to your heart disease. Let it be the reason that you take charge of your life and make changes that are good for you and your family. You may need to work on important relationships or create new ones. You may decide to reduce stress, enjoy life more or try new activities.



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