Cardiac Rehabilitation - Psychological effects of a heart attack

- It is entirely normal, common and understandable for a person to experience a variety of emotions after having had a heart attack
- Each individual’s experience is likely to be unique to them
- A heart attack can have a big impact on a person’s relationships
- Talking through these issues with other people can help you to make sense of and understand your own feelings

Many people experience heart attacks. Often a heart attack is a very shocking and traumatic event; yet each person’s experience will be different.

If you compare your experience to other people’s experiences, you may well find out that there are many different causes and many different symptoms. The story that you have to tell about your heart attack will be unique to you.

Sharing your story with others who have also had a heart attack can be a good way of finding out the similarities and differences and differences in your experiences and help you to recognise that your reactions are normal and very common.

How you react to having a heart attack may depend on many factors such as whether you’ve had one before, when and where you had your heart attack, whether you had any warning, what other things were going on in your life at the time and your personality and usual coping style.
Psychological reactions to a heart attack

Despite these different factors influencing the reactions, there are some common psychological reactions to having had a heart attack. These are described below. The important thing to know is that these reactions to having had a heart attack are entirely normal and understandable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reaction</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numbness</td>
<td>Your mind may protect you by allowing your trauma to be felt only slowly. At first you may feel numb. The event may seem unreal, like a dream, something that has not really happened. Only in time may this numbness give away to feeling things more intensely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Of having another heart attack. Of re-experiencing intense physical pain. Of “breaking down” or “losing control”. Of being left alone or having to leave loved ones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helplessness</td>
<td>Feeling that you are powerless, that there is nothing you can do.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sadness and grief</td>
<td>For losing your feelings of being healthy. For losing your sense of being invulnerable. For any life changes you may have to make (e.g. giving up a job or hobby).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>For being better off than others, for having survived. For being the source of distress of people close to you. Regrets for things not done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>For having been exposed as helpless, “emotional” or needing others’ help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>At what has happened. At the unfairness and senselessness of it all. At any shame or indignities you have suffered. At other people not understanding or being inefficient.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shock</td>
<td>Feelings of disbelief Questioning “why me?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for Privacy</td>
<td>Feeling that at times you may want to be on your own or only with close family and friends.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Relationship change       | Close family members may have a difficult job of “steering a middle ground” between encouraging you to do too much and, on the other hand, “wrapping you
Worry about body sensations | Increased awareness of aches and pains, particularly in your chest with a tendency to interpret sensations as you having another heart attack

Fear of having another heart attack

After having had a heart attack some people find that they are more aware of sensations in their body.

Often this can be helpful because it allows you to take better care of your body and be more responsive to what your body needs. For example, noticing signs of stress or overexertion.

However, sometimes people find themselves misinterpreting normal bodily sensations as an indication that they are having another heart attack. This can lead to anxiety that can itself cause or exacerbate physical sensations. In turn, this can reinforce the idea that something is wrong with the person’s heart.

The problem can be made worse if a person then starts to avoid things because of this fear, or spends a lot of time checking and focusing on their body.

If you notice yourself getting into this cycle:
- Talk to your cardiologist about how to tell the difference between normal bodily sensations, angina pains and indications that you are having a heart attack, and the best course of action to take in each scenario.
- Remember that thinking you are having a heart attack does not mean that you are having a heart attack.
- Look after your body as best you can by reducing your own risk factors. This will help you to know that you are doing all you can to prevent
another heart attack.

- Use relaxation to calm symptoms of anxiety.

The important thing to know is that such feelings of numbness, fear, helplessness, sadness, guilt, shame or anger are normal and understandable reactions to having had a heart attack. Identifying and understanding your own reaction to having had a heart attack can be an important first step in recovery.

You may go through different phases each dominated by one or more of these reactions. So, for example, some people may feel initially numb, followed by sadness, followed by fear and then anger. However, no two people will have exactly the same reactions in exactly the same order.

**Normal Physical Sensations**

In the aftermath of having had a heart attack, people sometimes experience a number of physical sensations which may be a reaction to stress. Indeed, they might notice the physical sensations with or without being aware of the feelings described above.

Some common sensations are:

- Feeling tense and uptight.
- Feeling irritable and bad-tempered.
- Tiredness.
- Sleeplessness.
- Bad dreams.
- Loss of memory or concentration.
- Dizziness.
- Palpitations.
- Difficulty breathing.
- Nausea.
- Diarrhoea.
- Menstrual Disorders.
- Muscular disorders which may lead to pain (e.g. headaches, backache).

If you are in any doubt about the cause of your physical sensations, you should of course consult an appropriate health care professional.

**Psychological Recovery**

Some people find that returning to their normal self takes some time and that they have periods when thoughts and feelings about their heart attack come
back. Indeed, you may find that, in adjusting, you take a different perspective on your life. Many people who have had a heart attack find that they look at things differently afterwards. Some things that they used to think were important now seem trivial or unimportant. Other things assume much greater importance and this can lead to people making major changes in their lives.

In order to help psychological recovery following a heart attack, there are some do’s and don’ts which it is worth keeping in mind.

Do
- Express your emotions.
- Take opportunities to review your experience by yourself or with others.
- Take time out to sleep, rest, think and be with your close family and friends.
- Be careful of abusing alcohol or self-medication.
- Take care around the house and with machinery – accidents are more common after severe stress.

Don’t
- Bottle up feelings.
- Avoid talking or thinking about what has happened.
- Expect the memories to go away quickly – the feelings may stay with you for some time.

Your Relationships

The early period following a heart attack can be a traumatic time for both yourself and for your close family. In a sense they also have suffered a trauma and may be experiencing feelings of loss.

Close family members may have a difficult job of “steering a middle ground” between encouraging you to do too much and, on the other hand, “wrapping you up in cotton wool”. It is possible that they may feel frightened about you having a further heart attack. Close family members may also be experiencing some of the symptoms described above, including fear, sadness, guilt and anger.

It is therefore especially important to recognise that many of the feelings that each of you is experiencing are normal and understandable reactions to having had a heart attack. It is also important to “keep lines of communication open” – in other words, talk to each other about your feelings both about what has happened and also about your hopes and fears for the future.
When and Where to Seek Help

It may be necessary to seek help if:

- You feel that you cannot handle intense feelings or body sensations.
- You feel that your emotions are not falling into place over a period of time; you feel chronic tension, confusion, emptiness or exhaustion.
- You continue to have bodily symptoms.
- After a month, you continue to feel empty and numb.
- You continue to have nightmares and poor sleep.
- Your relationship seems to be suffering badly or you have sexual problems.
- You are feeling very down or have lost all hope for the future.

If you do wish further help, it may be appropriate to contact your GP or another health care professional with whom you are having contact. Other sources of help include the Samaritans on Chesterfield 270000 or Relate on Chesterfield 231010.

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