

Life after heart surgery: how do you *feel*?

A cardiac event is an emotional experience, not just a physical one. Rehab psychologist **DR ROSEMARY HIGGINS** explains what people go through and what helps.

A heart attack or other cardiac event can come as a huge shock. People may pass through a range of emotions including shock and disbelief, fear and anxiety, guilt, anger, sadness and even relief as they adjust to a life-changing event.

This period of adjustment can range from a few weeks to many months. For some, it can take quite some time to adjust to lifestyle and physical changes that arise in response to the cardiovascular problem. While this adjustment will differ depending on your own circumstances, there are some commonalities.

The emotional range

This emotional adjustment happens at the same time that patients are asked to make major changes in their lifestyle. The list of lifestyle changes can be long for some, including dietary change, increasing some forms of physical activity and reducing others, cutting

down on alcohol consumption, quitting smoking and taking medication daily. It is small wonder that patients feel overwhelmed when recovering from a cardiac event.

SHOCK AND DISBELIEF are common early on, with the whole experience described as being 'surreal'. This disbelief is stronger for patients who had little or no warning time before undergoing coronary artery bypass surgery, having a stent or some other cardiac surgery. Patients may need to retell the story of what happened to them numerous times as they come to terms with what has happened.

FEAR AND ANXIETY are also common in the early days after a cardiac event. Patients may become 'hyper-vigilant' to any bodily sensations, fearing that this may signal another event. Cardiac rehabilitation can provide much-needed education and appropriate

reassurance to help reduce this vigilance to a more helpful level. Other patients need to learn to 'trust their body again' after feeling as though their heart has 'let them down'.

EXISTENTIAL CRISES – Many patients, particularly the young ones, report a heightened awareness of their own mortality after a cardiac event. They realise that life is both precious and short. While we all know logically that we won't live forever, becoming aware of this at an emotional level can feel like a heavy burden to carry. This is a natural reaction to a serious health event. Over time, this fear and anxiety reduce as patients recover and return to the distractions of normal life.

SOME PATIENTS MAY FEEL GUILTY, particularly if they believe that the event could have been avoided "If only ...". Some can feel guilty about what they have put their family through,

The place of rehab

People who have a heart event need time to recover emotionally as well as physically. Cardiac rehabilitation helps in your emotional recovery by:

- letting you know that you are not alone
- helping you to understand your condition
- helping you plan for a new and healthier future
- building your confidence that you will recover
- giving you feedback about improvements in fitness.



Some patients find themselves being more irritable or angry after a cardiac event, feeling much more ‘tightly wound up’ and tending to snap at those around them.



for not responding to the first symptoms that something was wrong. Some patients even feel guilty about passing down ‘bad genes’ to their children. Some patients can feel guilty for not being able to do the things that they normally do, such as grocery shopping, driving or taking out the rubbish. Others may feel guilty about their lifestyle before or after the cardiac event. Cardiac rehabilitation can be useful for helping patients to focus on the future rather than the past and to understand what they can do to look after themselves.

SOME PATIENTS FEEL MORE IRRITABLE OR ANGRY after a cardiac event, feeling much more ‘tightly wound up’ and tending to snap at those around them. Others feel frustrated at not being able to do the things that they want to do or with being dependent on others for help. Over time, these feelings pass

as you recover physically. Anger and frustration may signal that you need to go a bit easier on yourself and on those around you.

PATIENTS CAN ALSO GET DEPRESSED post-cardiac event. Some report feeling that ‘it is all too hard’ and ‘the future is bleak’. Having a cardiac event can initially overwhelm our coping resources, leaving us flat and miserable. For most patients, ‘the cardiac blues’ tend to pass over time. Rehabilitation can be helpful but for some patients, unfortunately these feelings of sadness do not pass, or even get worse over time. This is serious — people tend not to take good care of their health when they feel down or depressed. Patients with depression are less likely to take their heart medications, less likely to stop smoking and less likely to change other aspects of their lifestyle. If this is you, it is important that you talk to

your general practitioner to get some help right now.

PEOPLE CAN ALSO FEEL RELIEF after a heart attack, surgery or stroke; relief that their life was saved, that they finally know what was wrong or that good treatments are available for their heart problems. Some people can feel a renewed connection to those around them and feel lucky to have people who care about them. ♥



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