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The anxious afterlife

Have you survived a heart event only to feel anxious, troubled and worried? It's natural, says **Associate Professor Rosemary Higgins**, and it can be helped.

Anxiety, fear and worry are common in people who have had a heart attack, especially in the early days of recovery. At this time, the experience of anxiety is so common that it can be seen as a normal reaction. Patients need to come to terms with living with heart disease and may talk about being 'scared to death' or 'frozen by fear'. While this does not mean that patients have an anxiety disorder, they may experience many symptoms of anxiety.

An intense anxiety reaction is not surprising, considering the overwhelming intensity of

physical symptoms that patients experience during a heart attack. Many patients will believe that they have somehow cheated death.

Extreme levels of fear, dread and panic may be felt by patients during and after their heart attack. Patients will ask themselves, "Will I get through this? What will happen to my family if I don't? How will I cope? Will I be damaged? Will I be able to get back to my normal life?"

Death anxiety

After going home, patients need to adjust to living with heart disease. Those with

heightened anxiety can become distressed and excessively vigilant, both expecting and dreading another heart attack.

Some patients report feeling as though The 'Sword of Damocles' is hanging over them as they struggle with the ever-present knowledge of their own mortality. Such patients will continually scan their body, monitoring for any signs of further heart problems. Normal aches and pains are misinterpreted as signs of an impending heart attack. This can lead to feelings of panic and being 'frozen with fear', then distress about bodily sensations. Anxiety related to this distress leads to more symptoms, greater distress and, for some, absolute panic.

Other causes of anxiety

Heart patients will be concerned about the impact of their illness on their working life, financial security, current commitments and future plans. It is important to seek appropriate reassurance about this because the future may not be as dire as it first seems.

About 90% of working-age patients go back to their jobs after a heart attack, according to Dr Barbara Murphy, Director of Research at the Heart Research Centre in Melbourne.

Anxiety is not all in the mind. It is a product of our 'fight or flight' reflexive reaction to the belief that we are under threat. People experiencing anxiety have a range of physical and mental symptoms (see box below).

In some cases, anxiety symptoms may feel very similar to the original cardiac symptoms. It is little wonder that some patients end up feeling panicky or having full-blown panic attacks. If in doubt about whether symptoms are cardiac or anxiety-related, it is important to see your doctor and not attempt to self-diagnose.

When worry makes things worse

While some anxiety is normal after a heart attack, if ongoing it can lead to more health problems. Patients who are anxious may avoid

Ask the expert



HOW IS ANXIETY TREATED?

Psychologists will use a range of treatments that have a high rate of success in leading heart patients to an improved quality of life as well as better health outcomes, including:

- Education about anxiety reactions
- Relaxation training to reduce symptoms
- Challenging beliefs about the illness
- Behaviour modification
- Support with the existential crisis of a heart attack
- Building resilience.

Medicines used to treat anxiety can include heart medication, such as beta-blockers, or psychotropic medication, such as antidepressants.

Regardless of treatment, it is important that anxiety is recognised early to ensure better health outcomes and lessen the impact of heart disease on the individual and their families.

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physical activity because they might fear what will happen if their heart works too hard.

Some people will self-medicate their anxiety, using cigarettes, alcohol or other drugs. Others can comfort eat to reduce anxiety symptoms. All this can adversely impact on cardiac health.

Anxiety can lead to a poorer quality of life for both the patient and their families. You may fear being alone, be concerned about resuming your usual life, and/or reluctant to travel too far from the treating hospital. This leads to a very restricted life, which may increase relationship tensions.

You may need extra assistance to manage your anxiety if:

- anxiety continues as your physical health improves
- your anxiety gets worse over time
- you have frequent panic attacks
- you have frequent distressing flashbacks to your heart attack
- your anxiety stops you getting back to life. ♥

ARE YOU ANXIOUS? COMMON SYMPTOMS

- Preoccupying thoughts of death or illness
- Feelings of impending doom
- Sweating
- Dizziness and nausea
- Bowel problems
- Pounding heart or rapid heartbeat
- Fast breathing and hyperventilation
- Muscle tension or shakiness
- Being restless or on edge
- Irritability