

Managing Stress

Where do I begin?

Living with a heart condition is an emotional experience. It is not just a physical one. After your cardiac event, it's normal to feel a range of emotions. It's normal to be more aware of feeling stressed. It's important to know that these emotions tend to resolve over time.

What Is Stress?

Stress is a set of responses. These responses can be physical or emotional. They happen when you think a situation is scary or difficult. Having a heart event can cause stress. You may feel many strong emotions.

What is the stress response?

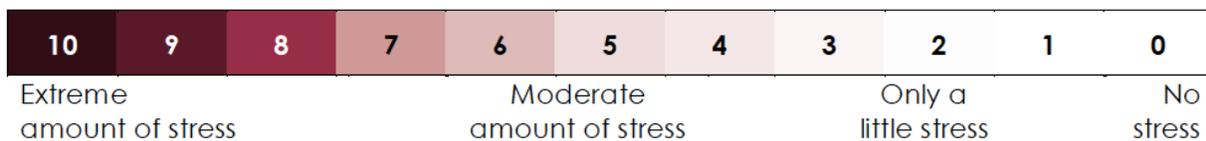
Your body responds with the 'fight' or 'flight' response:

- You may feel your pulse increase
- Your breathing becomes faster and more shallow
- You have 'butterflies' in your stomach
- You may feel dizzy or lightheaded

This response is helpful for short-term physical stress. For example, meeting a grizzly bear on a hike. However, many of us suffer from long-term stress. This is a response to a super hurried pace of life. This can cause persistently high blood pressure and blood sugar levels. It can even weaken your immune system.

Track Your Stress Response

Check in with yourself at the same time(s) daily. Ask, “How much stress am I currently feeling?” This can help you recognize when you’re too stressed and need to actively cope with it. Use the stress scale below to track your responses. Beware if your stress is 5 or above. It might be worthwhile to consider some stress management strategies.



How can I manage my stress?

Regular Exercise

Exercise helps improve your mood. You can focus better. Exercise also helps your overall drive.

Deep Breathing/Meditation Techniques

These can lower muscle tension, angina, and blood pressure. They can reduce anxiety and worry. These techniques can also improve sleep and mood. Set aside a few quiet minutes each day to deep breathe. This can help you reduce symptoms of stress.

Sleep

Sleep allows your stress response to reset. Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day. Make sure that your setting is calm, cool and quiet. Avoid caffeine 6 hours before bed. Get off all screen devices like TV, phone and computer 30-60 minutes before bed time.

Healthy Relationships

Family and friends are great buffers against life stressors. They can help you feel less isolated too.

Heart Healthy Eating

Focus on eating high fiber grains, fruits, leafy greens, oily fish and nuts. This helps even out blood sugars and build up immune function. Avoid refined sugars in sweets and soda. See our Heart Healthy Eating Tip Sheet online Nutrition Resource.

smgh.ca/Heart-Healthy-Eating-Tip-Sheets.pdf

Self-Care

Practice self-care. Awareness that your ability to cope is being stretched is key. Say 'no' to additional requests for the time being. These requests may be from work, home, or extended family. Say 'yes' to learning effective ways to cope with stress. Using effective ways to cope with stress during cardiac rehab is key. Using these coping techniques can reduce symptoms of heart disease. They can also improve emotional well-being.

The following websites have free relaxation techniques:

- myhealth.alberta.ca/Relaxation-audio-tracks
- campusmentalhealth.ca/mcmaster-guided-relaxation-cd
- dartmouth.edu/relax

Information in this resource is adapted from Total Cardiology, **A Guide to Stress Management** tcrehab.totalcardiology.ca