

# Mental Health and Your Heart

You might have been experiencing more stress than usual and may even feel that this could have led to your heart attack. The good news is that it's not the stress that's bad for us - it's how we deal with stress.

After a heart attack, feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression are common. We encourage you to talk to your healthcare provider about it.

Feeling too stressed all the time can lead to unhealthy behaviors like overeating, not getting any activity, smoking, drinking too much alcohol, or doing drugs. Constant stress can worsen problems like high blood pressure and angina.

Anxiety is the body's "fight or flight" response to stress and can feel like a "buzz."

Depression is when you begin to feel hopeless, lose interest in things that interested you before, and lack the willpower to make healthy changes.

Here are some practical tips for improving your mental health:

**Identify your stressors.** Start writing down what you think is giving you stress. You might have stressors like losing your job, too much pressure at work, not being able to meet deadlines, loss of a loved one, taking care of a sick parent, or managing your finances. Once you've written your stressors down, you will find it easier to see where you can make changes. This might involve talking to someone for support, finding and using government or community resources available to you, applying for a new job, or creating a "To do" list to avoid procrastinating.

**Cut out unnecessary stressors.** Take a step back and see what is actually important to you. You might have taken on more than you need to. Surround yourself with supportive people, celebrate the small stuff, don't beat yourself up over mistakes, appreciate yourself, and help others.

**Learn to breathe through your anxiety.** Try the 4-7-8 breathing exercise. Sit with your back straight. Breathe in through your nose for a count of 4, hold for 7, then breathe out forcefully through your mouth for 8. Repeat five times. Notice the way your mind instantly seems calmer. You can do this breathing technique a couple of times a day.

**If you have muscle tension, try Progressive Muscle Relaxation.** Tense the muscle in your feet, hold for 10 seconds, and relax. Notice how the feeling of tightness is different from the sense of relaxation. Repeat this exercise with your calves, thighs, toes, back, shoulders, arms, face, then the whole body.

**Start your day on a positive note with App-based Guided Meditation** like Calm, Headspace, or Buddhify. You could also invite friends or family to join you while meditating in a dark, quiet room.

**Make Self-Care a habit.** Don't just find the time, instead make the time to do things you enjoy for at least a few minutes every day. Be specific about what self-care means to you like taking a walk, cooking a nice meal, sipping on herbal tea, practicing a skin-care routine, reading a book, or listening to music. Don't let yourself feel guilty for making time for yourself; remind yourself that YOU are your priority.

**Be More Mindful.** Our mind is always wandering. We are constantly thinking about what was and what could be, instead of what is. Mindfulness techniques ground us and bring us back to the present moment. An example of mindfulness is waking up to the aroma of coffee brewing, crunching of leaves beneath your feet as you're walking, the feel of the sand between your toes. If you've ever savored moments like this, then you were mindful without even realizing it. Mindfulness techniques can include things as simple as appreciating a scent you like, moving your body and noticing how it feels with every movement, picking up items around you and trying to describe them in as much detail as you can, or mindful breathing exercises. As you get better at becoming mindful, you will be able to deal with stress, enjoy the little things in life, and make changes when needed.

**Stay Healthy.** Plan healthy meals for the week, schedule a physical and mental activity for every day of the week. Exercise releases endorphins in the brain, which act as natural “painkillers” and “feel-good” chemicals.

**Work on your Sleep Hygiene.** Sleep and wake up at a fixed time every night. Don't confuse your body's internal clock by going to bed at different times every night. Avoid caffeine, smoking, eating heavy meals, and heavy exercise just before bed. Eat a light snack if you're hungry or have a warm bath a few hours before sleeping. Try not to look at your phone, laptop, or TV screen while trying to fall asleep at night. This overstimulates your brain and makes it harder to fall asleep. Instead, try reading or listening to something soothing and relaxing before bed. Get natural daylight and activity during the day. This keeps your body's internal clock in check. Avoid worrying too much before sleeping. Updating your “To do” list an hour before sleeping every night, can help ease your worries about the next day.

## **Links**

[Progressive Muscle Relaxation](#)

[Self-Care Checklist](#)

[Mindful Breathing](#)

[Mindfulness Exercises](#)