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Cardiac Rehabilitation

Psychological effects of a Cardiac Event

PATIENT
INFORMATION
BOOKLET

A cardiac event can have a big impact on a person's relationship. Talking through these issues with other people can help you understand your own feelings.

It is entirely normal and understandable for a person to experience a variety of emotions after having had a cardiac event.



Many people experience heart attacks or have heart surgery that can be a shocking and traumatic event; yet each person's experience will be different.

If you compare your experience to other people's, you may find out that there are many different causes and many different symptoms.

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

How you react to having a cardiac event may depend on many factors, such as when and where you had your event. Whether you had any warning, what other things were going on in your life at the time, your personality and usual coping style.

Psychological reactions to heart disease

Despite these different factors influencing the reactions, there are some common psychological reactions which are described on the next page.

The important thing to know is that these reactions are entirely normal and understandable.

“The story that you have to tell about your cardiac event will be unique to you”



Numbness	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 way to feeling things more intensely.
Fear	Of having another cardiac event. Of re-experiencing intense physical pain. Of “breaking down” or “losing control”. Of being left alone or having to leave loved ones.
Helplessness	Feeling that you are powerless, that there is nothing you can do.
Sadness and grief	For losing your feelings of being healthy. For any life changes you may have to make (e.g. giving up a job or hobby).
Guilt	For being better off than others, for having survived. For being the source of distress for people close to you. Regrets for things not done.
Shame	For having been exposed as helpless, “emotional” or needing others’ help.
Anger	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.
Shock	Feelings of disbelief Questioning “why me?”
Need for Privacy	Feeling that at times you may want to be on your own or only with close family and friends.
Relationship change	Your loved ones have also had a shock and may treat you differently for a time.
Worry about body sensations	Increased awareness of aches and pains, particularly in your chest with a tendency to interpret sensations as you having another cardiac event.

Fear of having another cardiac event

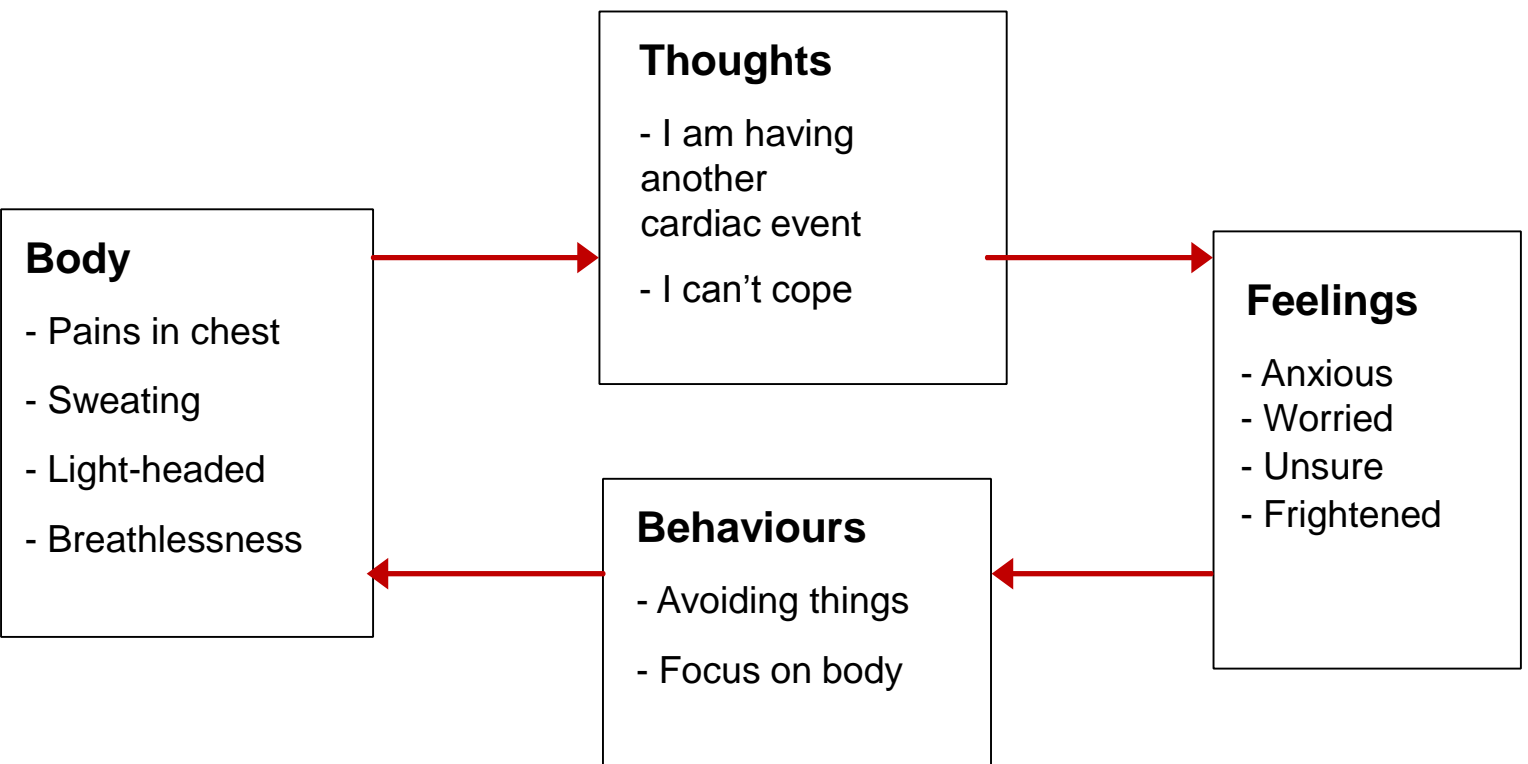
After having had a cardiac event, some people find that they are more aware of sensations in their body.

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

However, sometimes people find themselves misinterpreting normal bodily sensations as a sign that they are having another cardiac event.

This can lead to anxiety that can itself cause or exacerbate physical sensations.

The problem can be made worse if a person 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 or the staff in Cardiac Rehabilitation about how to tell the difference between normal body sensations, angina pains and indications that you are having a cardiac event, and the best course of action to take in each scenario.

Remember that ***thinking*** you are having a cardiac event does not mean that you *are* having a cardiac event.

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 cardiac event.

Use relaxation to calm symptoms of anxiety.

The Staff in Cardiac Rehabilitation are here to support you in your recovery. You can speak to them about any anxieties or fears you have.

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 cardiac event.**

Identifying and understanding your own reaction to having had a cardiac event 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.

Remember, no two people will have exactly the same reactions in exactly the same order. There is no right or wrong reaction.



Normal Physical Sensations

After a cardiac event, 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 previously.

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

Some common sensations are:

- **Feeling tense & uptight**
- **Feeling irritable**
- **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)**

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 cardiac event come back.

Many people who have had a cardiac event 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 cardiac event, there are some do's and don'ts which it is worth keeping in mind.



- 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.



- 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 cardiac event 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 cardiac event.

Close family members may also be experiencing some of the symptoms described previously, including fear, sadness, guilt and anger.

It is important to recognise that many of the feelings that each of you is experiencing are normal and understandable reactions. 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 need further help, it may be appropriate to contact your GP or another health care professional with whom you are having contact.

Please remember the staff in Cardiac rehabilitation are there to help you so please talk to them about your fears and worries. They can advise and help you.

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