



British Heart
Foundation

Heart to heart

Heart disease and
your emotional health

**FIGHT
FOR EVERY
HEARTBEAT**

bhf.org.uk

Graham Bell
spoke up

The British Heart Foundation is fighting for every heartbeat

We are the UK's number one heart charity and through 50 years of funding cutting edge research we have already made a big difference to people's lives.

But the landscape of heart disease is changing. More people survive a heart attack or cardiac arrest than ever before, and that means more people are now living with heart disease and need our help.

The BHF would like to thank everyone who has given their time and support to develop this resource.


About this booklet:

If you have a heart condition and are experiencing emotional upheaval, then you're not alone. This booklet describes common emotional reactions to having problems with your heart and things that can help you cope. It suggests when and how to get professional support and outlines the different activities and treatments that can help you deal with your difficult feelings. It is written for anyone with a heart condition and for their family and friends.

Contents

About this booklet

I'm not my usual self. Is that normal?	02
How can I boost my wellbeing?	
Stress and heart health	
Cardiac rehabilitation	
What stops us talking about emotional health?	
How can I tell when I need more help?	12
Thoughts about ending it all	
How can I explain to my GP?	
What might help me?	20
Self-help	
Counselling and other talking therapies	
Medication	
Going back to work	
For partners, family and friends	24
How can I help my loved one?	
What about professional help?	
How can I help my loved one with their treatment?	
More help and support	28
Resources from the British Heart Foundation	30
Join the fight	32



**I'm not
my usual self.
Is that normal?**

Everyone reacts to having a heart problem in different ways. Some people take it in their stride, but others have more trouble coming to terms with it. There's no right or wrong way to feel.

If you've had a heart attack or had heart surgery or if you've been told you have coronary heart disease, it's only natural for you to feel different.

Annabel Broome Dorset

"I had my first heart attack a few years ago and I've had lots of tests and procedures since then. It's been quite hard to pick myself up every time.

You're not going to go back to how you were. It's about recognising that you are going to be different, and you will feel some loss. Now I'm not going to rush around and do 15 things at once. It's about enjoying what I have and finding the middle ground.

I learned to ask for help and to be very specific about what I wanted, like saying: "A lift to the hospital would be great" – otherwise we ended up with lots of soup left on the doorstep!

I found other people's stories have been very helpful to me, especially those that told it as it really was."

You may feel:



These feelings can be powerful and deeply distressing. But they're natural reactions to the stress of an unexpected or traumatic event like a heart attack. They're also common reactions to having heart surgery or developing a long-term condition like coronary heart disease. If you're experiencing any of the feelings listed on the previous page, you're not alone.

These feelings may come and go. You may have good days and bad days and in-between days. On bad days, you may feel less able to cope with things you'd normally deal with just fine. You may experience several bad days in a row. This won't be pleasant, but it is normal.

Your day to day life may be different now and you may need to change your lifestyle and your plans for the future. Dealing with this kind of change is often difficult and having heart disease doesn't just affect you. It affects the people close to you too: your family and friends.

When you're in hospital

It's very common to get the blues after heart surgery or being diagnosed with a heart condition. That doesn't mean you're going to feel low throughout your recovery period.

The medical team will advise you to take it one day at a time when you get home. They will tell you to expect occasional low moods, but advise that if you continue to feel troubled or unable to cope, you should see your GP. See page 12 for more on going to your GP.

How can I boost my wellbeing?

You may tend to 'put a brave face on it' when you're feeling gloomy or worried because you don't want to worry people. But bottling up your feelings doesn't really help you deal with them in the long run.

Remember the old saying: a problem shared is a problem halved. Just sharing the way you feel by talking to someone that you trust can help.

It can be hard to start the conversation and you may feel rather awkward if you're not used to talking about your feelings, but try and give it a go.

Lots of the things that will help you recover from your heart problems and keep your heart healthy will also improve your sense of wellbeing. So, even if you're having a bad day, keep following the advice your medical team have given you.

- **Eat a healthy, balanced diet that's good for your heart.**
- **Be active every day within the limits your medical team advise.**
- **Practise techniques like deep breathing that can help you to relax.**
- **Make sure you get enough rest.**
- **Take your medication following the instructions you have been given.**
- **If you drink alcohol, follow your medical team's advice or keep within the sensible limits – alcohol is a depressant which means it can make you feel low.**
- **Go to your check-ups – they're an opportunity to discuss all aspects of your recovery, not just your heart, and your doctor will want to know if you're having down days.**

It's really important to keep up a healthy lifestyle because when you're feeling down, it's tempting to give yourself a lift by smoking, drinking too much alcohol, misusing drugs or eating lots of sugary or fatty foods. It may feel like these things help you at the time, but their effects are only short-term. There are much healthier ways of coping with difficult feelings.

You can also improve your mood if you:

- **spend time in the open air, getting close to nature**
- **keep in touch with family and friends – they can provide a listening ear and help you solve practical problems**
- **spend time doing activities you enjoy – concentrating on a hobby like the crossword can help you forget your worries for a while; sketching lets you express yourself creatively**
- **do things you're good at – achieving something, however small, can boost your self-esteem.**

If you're starting a new activity or getting back into something you haven't done for a while, set yourself realistic goals. Be easy on yourself and don't try to achieve everything at once.

Some people find complementary therapies like yoga or aromatherapy helpful, but it's wise to check with your GP or pharmacist before you start something new.

And don't forget to ask for and accept help. If you have practical problems you are struggling with, like money worries, there are organisations like Citizens Advice Bureau set up to advise you.

Stress and heart health

The challenges of everyday life can be stressful and it's normal to feel overloaded sometimes when everything just seems too much to deal with. Stress and depression or anxiety are sometimes linked, but being stressed a lot doesn't always lead to mental health problems, nor is it the only cause of depression.

How you deal with stressful situations does have an impact on your heart health because some of the ways people 'de-stress' – like smoking or overeating – are not good for your heart.

For some people with coronary heart disease, extreme stress can trigger symptoms. But that doesn't mean you should try to avoid all stressful situations – avoiding them could mean you don't learn how to cope with the stress you really can't avoid, as well as missing out on activities you enjoy.

More help and support

If you'd like some help understanding your personal triggers for stress or some tips to help you cope with stressful situations:

- read our booklets *Cardiac rehabilitation and Coping with stress*. Find out how to download or order copies on page 30
- read more about how to look after your heart in our other booklets and on our website. There's more information on page 30
- call our confidential Heart Helpline on **0300 330 3311**. Find out more on page 28
- find out if there's a BHF Heart Support Group in your area. Call our **Heart Helpline** or visit **bhf.org.uk** and search for 'Heart Support Groups'
- join our online community to share your experiences.

Cardiac rehabilitation

If you have the chance to take part in a cardiac rehabilitation programme, do go along or ask if you can follow the programme in your own home.

Cardiac rehab is designed to help you:

- **recover from your heart attack or heart surgery**
- **get advice on how to get back to your everyday life as quickly as possible**
- **understand your condition and reduce your risk of further heart problems.**

Understanding what's going on inside you and learning about the changes you need to make to your lifestyle can help you feel more in control. The cardiac rehab team can reassure you and your loved ones that you are doing the right things to improve your heart health. They can help you build your confidence, whether you are trying to get a bit more active every day or need encouragement to talk to your children about the help you need from them.

The cardiac rehab team are there to help you improve your health. That includes your emotional health so talk to them about any worries you have. The team will get in touch with your GP if they have concerns that need following up.

Cardiac rehab is also a great place to meet people in the same situation. You will gain a lot from chatting to them and the other people there will benefit from hearing from you too.

What stops us talking about emotional health?

Emotional health problems are often described in medical language because that helps professionals to refer people to the support they need. But the words you or the professionals use are less important than understanding what's troubling you and getting help. Whether or not the problems are diagnosed as 'mental health problems', the majority of people who experience difficulties get over them, especially if they get help early on.

Emotional health, wellbeing, mental health - different people use different words, but they all describe how we think and feel and our ability to cope with whatever life throws at us. Like physical health, your emotional wellbeing can change as you move through different stages of your life.

Many people don't understand mental health problems and the stigma around them means that people don't talk about them much, even though they're more common than you think. It's often easier to talk about physical health problems than to talk about the way you feel, but both are equally important. It may be more difficult to 'admit' you have a problem with your emotional health, but no-one who cares about you should make you feel bad about speaking out.

A man with glasses, wearing a grey zip-up jacket over a red shirt and dark trousers, stands on a muddy path in a wooded area. He is looking directly at the camera. A wooden fence runs across the middle ground. The background is filled with bare trees and a hillside.

How can I tell when I need more help?

Things often get easier as life gets back to normal and you adapt to the lifestyle changes you need to make to look after your heart. But if your negative feelings continue for several weeks, it's time to get help.

Graham Bell Midlothian

"I was diagnosed as having a problem with my coronary arteries and immediately became tense and anxious. Many people told me that my anxiety would pass once I had my bypass operation but it didn't. I felt like I'd lost control. I felt mortal for the first time. At my worst, I felt like nothing could have helped me. And I was so tense I couldn't relax. It was like having a coat hanger in my shoulders.

I joined a cardiac rehab class. The physiotherapist said to me, 'How are you doing?'. "Physically, I'm doing fine," I told her, then pointed to my head: "But up here, I'm not right." I was referred to a clinical psychologist and had six sessions of cognitive behavioural therapy. Deep down, I realised the way to get through my problem was to talk about it.

The therapy gave me a way of looking at why I was feeling fragile. It taught me to stop and think every time I felt too anxious to do something. I also learnt breathing techniques to help overcome my anxiety. So many people can't bring themselves to admit they are troubled. But admitting to having a problem and talking about it are the first steps to getting over it."

Asking for help isn't a sign of weakness. It's part of taking charge of your wellbeing and doing what's right for you. Living with distressing feelings doesn't help you manage your heart condition and in fact it can affect your physical health too.

You should consider getting help from your GP if your difficult feelings are:

- **overwhelming you**
- **stopping you getting on with everyday life**
- **having a big impact on the people you live or work with**
- **affecting your mood over several weeks.**

Like physical health problems, mental health problems can become serious if you don't get treatment for them. So you shouldn't ignore distress that has such an impact on your life. Even if you're not sure if you need help, your GP would rather you made an appointment than suffer in silence.

If you have experienced some of the following things for most of the day, every day for more than two weeks, you should go to your GP:

- **frequently feeling unhappy or tearful**
- **having no interest in daily life, even in doing the things you always used to enjoy**
- **finding it hard to concentrate**
- **sleep problems – difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep or waking too early**
- **changes to your usual appetite or weight loss or gain – being off your food or wanting to 'comfort eat'**
- **being tired and having no energy**
- **feeling in despair – helpless or hopeless**
- **feeling worthless.**

These are signs that you may be depressed. Some of these things may be the side effects of medication or the symptoms of physical health problems. Either way, it's good to get yourself checked out.

You should also go to your GP if:

- **Your worries are stopping you getting on with your recovery and daily life**
- **your worries are extremely stressful and upsetting**
- **you can't control your worries**
- **you worry about all sorts of things and have a tendency to think the worst**
- **you have felt worried every day for at least six months.**

These are signs that you may be experiencing the kind of anxiety that doctors consider a mental health problem.

Thoughts about ending it all

If you have thoughts about taking your own life or of harming yourself, it's important you tell someone.

- Samaritans are trained to listen. You can call them on **08457 90 90 90** any time of the day or night or email **jo@samaritans.org**
- If you have taken an overdose or are about to seriously harm yourself **call 999** or go to your nearest **Accident and Emergency department (A&E)**.

How can I explain to my GP?

If you are still going to cardiac rehab, you can tell one of the team there that you are feeling troubled. In fact, you can tell any healthcare professional. They will contact your GP. Otherwise, book an appointment with your GP yourself.

Going to your GP can take courage, but remember that your GP is there to help you with any health issues. It may feel strange to talk to them about feelings rather than aches, pains and other symptoms, but there's no need to feel uneasy. Your GP will know how hard it can be to open up and will do their best to put you at ease. They will listen to what you say without judging you.

Be honest and describe your situation in your own words. If you don't understand something your GP says, just ask. There's no such thing as a stupid question.

As well as asking you about the thoughts and feelings you describe, your GP may ask you questions about:

- **your physical health**
- **your medication**
- **your lifestyle**
- **the support you get from your family and friends.**

Your GP may also ask you to fill in a short questionnaire to help them understand the effect of your feelings on your everyday life. They may not think you have a mental health problem, but may still offer advice on ways to improve your mood or deal with practical problems.

They may tell you that you are depressed or that you are experiencing anxiety. These are known as 'common mental health problems' and they are experienced by thousands of people in the UK every year. Depression is particularly common among people who have had a heart attack, a stroke or heart surgery or who have coronary heart disease or heart failure. Anxiety problems are also common among people with these heart conditions.

Keep a feelings diary

It can be helpful to keep a feelings diary which you can take along to show your GP.

- **Just note down how you feel at different parts of the day over two to three weeks.**
- **It's not always easy to describe how you're feeling. If you can't think of one word, use lots. What does it feel like inside your head? What does it make you feel like doing – or not doing?**
- **If you think anything particular made you feel this way, note that down too – it may be something someone said or it may be a thought you had, like suddenly realising something you can no longer do.**
- **You may not be able to work out why you felt that way, but that's ok – it's still good to note it down.**
- **Look back over your notes – which feelings have you had most often? Which feelings were strongest?**

It's a good idea to keep the diary every day for up to three weeks because your moods may change from day to day. The diary can also help you to feel more in control of your feelings.

Preparing to see your GP

- **If you want more time to talk to your GP, you could ask for a double appointment.**
- **Decide whether you want to go on your own or with a relative or friend.**
- **Think about what you want to say – write down your main points and the questions you want to ask.**

Why is my heart problem making me feel low?

The links between mental and physical health are complex and still not fully understood. Experts don't really know why some people get depressed or experience a worrying level of anxiety and others don't.

We do know that people who have experienced depression in the past are at greater risk of having it again, but lots of people who become depressed after a heart attack haven't been depressed before.

A woman with dark hair and bangs, wearing a red short-sleeved top and black shorts, sits on a grey sofa. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The sofa has a red cushion behind her. To the right, there is a vase with red and white flowers. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

What might help me?

Most people do recover from depression and anxiety, although the time it takes is different for everyone. It can take several months.

There are several things your GP might suggest could help you. They range from things you can do yourself to treatments provided on the NHS, depending on whether your problem is mild, moderate or severe. What's available may depend on where you live and whether or not your GP refers you to a specialist mental health service like a clinical psychologist.

Yvonne Genas Nottingham

"I had a heart attack just before Christmas and started to feel low once Christmas was over, I was back at home and my family were back at work.

I like to be in control of things. Having a heart attack was completely out of my control. I had my first panic attack on my way to a follow-up appointment. I felt I was having another heart attack.

Cardiac rehab and cognitive behavioural therapy helped me to become aware of the panic attack symptoms and develop tools to deal with them. My favourite saying these days is: 'Focus on the things you can change and leave the things you can't alone.' I live life to the full and enjoy family and friends. It's my delight to spend time with my grandson."

Your GP should explain how the different treatments work and you can ask anything you like. Different tactics work for different people, which is why it's important to talk through the options.

Self-help

Your doctor may encourage you to use the coping strategies listed on page 7 as part of your recovery from your problems and to stay in good mental health afterwards. For example, exercise is as effective as antidepressants for some people with mild depression and, in some areas, doctors can prescribe exercise programmes for patients as part of their treatment.

Counselling and other talking therapies

Talking to a trained counsellor may help you. What you say will stay confidential and the counsellor will listen carefully and help you make sense of your feelings and find a way forward. Your GP may refer you to a counsellor or you could find one yourself if you can afford to go private.

Other 'talking therapies' or psychotherapies use particular approaches to help you explore your thoughts and feelings and the effect they have on your behaviour and mood. One of the most common is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) which you can do face to face with a therapist or online. You do not have to be told by a doctor that you have a mental health problem to be offered or benefit from a talking therapy.

See page 28 for organisations that publish lists of qualified counsellors and therapists.

Medication

If you are moderately or severely depressed, your doctor may recommend that you take antidepressants. Many are safe for people who have had a heart attack or any other heart condition.

If you start a course of drugs, they will take time to start working. Your doctor will keep reviewing how well they are working for you and whether you have any side effects, just as they do for the drugs you may take for your heart condition. **Do not take any natural or herbal remedies for depression as they can prevent your heart drugs working.**

Going back to work

Going back to work may seem like a big deal, especially if you have been away for a long time. But it's important as it gives structure to your day, can help restore your self-esteem and gets you out and about again.

Talk to your boss or your occupational health advisor about what works for you. Tactics that can help include:

- **phasing your return to work, starting with just a few hours a day, a few days a week**
- **returning to light duties at first**
- **taking the breaks you need.**

It's also helpful to chat to your boss about what you would like your colleagues to be told about your problems – if anything. If you have a friend at work, ask them to look out for you.

More help and support

- Read our booklet **Returning to work with a heart condition.** Find out how to download or order a copy on page 30.



For partners, family and friends

It can be very upsetting to see a change in your loved one, particularly if they have always been the optimistic type, and you may feel powerless to help them. You may also feel drained and exhausted trying to support them and it can be hard when your loved one doesn't seem to respond to or appreciate your efforts.

David & Karen Kinder Wetherby, Yorkshire

David

"I was diagnosed with dilated cardiomyopathy two years ago, and a year later developed atrial fibrillation. The side effects of the medication were horrific. I was so down, depressed – suicidal even. I felt so helpless. I couldn't walk out of the front door to the car, I wasn't sleeping. I couldn't enjoy watching a film or listening to music.

My wife was fantastic. I spoke to her a lot about my feelings. She's taken the pressure off, fielded calls from friends and family and always tries to help. I was referred to a cardiac specialist and had an ablation a couple of months ago. At the moment I'm feeling much better and more positive."

Karen

"It was a shock to see David get so low and depressed. It affected the whole family. He is a naturally positive person, but this created a black cloud over our lives. I tried to be there for him and be someone he could talk to, and hopefully now he's had the operation we will see some light at the end of this tunnel."

How can I help my loved one?

- **Talk to them about how they're feeling and how they feel they're coping – or encourage them to talk to another relative or friend.**
- **If they are feeling low or anxious, remember that's only natural and try not to be judgemental.**
- **Remind them to take their medication as they may not feel like bothering.**
- **Encourage them to make healthy lifestyle changes – the changes will benefit your heart health too.**
- **Support them to do the mood boosting activities on page 8.**

What about professional help?

You may be the one who notices that your loved one has not been their usual self for a while. That's helpful because people often don't realise themselves that something is wrong. But it also means they may be reluctant to get help. If your partner doesn't want to go to the GP, you can still talk to your GP yourself about your worries. It's usually better to let your partner know that you're doing this.

Before you go, explain to your loved one how worried about them you are and remind them how much you care about them. This may give them another opportunity to talk to you about how they feel and you can encourage them to get help themselves.

How can I help my loved one with their treatment?

If your loved one needs treatment, you can help them accept that depression and anxiety are real health problems that deserve attention. Remind them that the treatments are tried and tested and have been offered because they work for many people.

Understanding more about mental health problems may help you both. You can find out more from the organisations on page 28.

It's particularly important to look after yourself if you are caring for someone. That means paying attention to your own wellbeing and physical health. It will keep you strong for your loved one and better able to look after them.

- **Read more about the emotional aspects of being a carer in our booklet, 'Caring for someone with a heart condition'. Find out how to download or order a copy on page 30.**

More help and support

BHF Heart Helpline

For information and support on anything heart related call **0300 330 3311** (open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday, similar cost to 01 or 02 numbers) or email heartmatters@bhf.org.uk

Samaritans

If you need to talk through your feelings call **08457 90 90 90** (open 24 hours a day, charges apply) or email jo@samaritans.org

Mind Infoline

For information on mental health problems and treatments call **0300 123 3393** (open 9am to 6pm Monday to Friday, calls from landlines charged at local rates) or email info@mind.org.uk

Anxiety UK helpline

To speak to someone about your anxiety call **08444 775774** (open 9.30am to 5.30pm Monday to Friday, charges apply) or visit anxietyuk.org.uk

These organisations have lists of approved therapists which you can search online:

British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy (BACP)

W itsgoodtotalk.org.uk
T 01455 883300

British Association for Behavioural & Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

W cbtregisteruk.com
T 0161 705 4304

Relate (for support with relationships)

W relate.org.uk
T 0300 100 1234

Resources from the British Heart Foundation

For over 50 years we've pioneered research that's transformed the lives of people living with heart and circulatory conditions. Our work has been central to the discoveries of vital treatments that are changing the fight against heart disease.

We produce a wide range of resources to help you and your family and friends look after your heart health.

To order any of our heart health resources:

- **Call the BHF Orderline on 0870 600 6566**
- **Email orderline@bhf.org.uk**
- **Visit [bhf.org.uk/publications](https://www.bhf.org.uk/publications)**

For information about all of our resources, ask for a copy of **Take heart** (code G5). Our resources are free of charge, but we rely on donations to continue our vital work.

Join the fight

There are many ways you can get involved and play a crucial role in our efforts to beat heart disease.

- **Make a one-off donation or set up a direct debit – there are lots of ways to support us.**
- **Become a volunteer and help run our shops, support local events and fundraising or even campaign for the UK's heart health – there's something for everyone.**
- **Give to your local BHF shop – it's easy to donate your unwanted items to us and help us raise vital funds.**
- **Take part in one of our events – they're a great way for you to have fun, get fit, and save lives. Choose from cycles, runs, walks and more.**
- **Shop from the heart with our online shop – all profits from the BHF Shop help fund our life-saving work.**
- **Join our Heartstart initiative and learn to save lives with the skills of emergency life support. Over 3.5 million people already have.**



**British Heart
Foundation**

Coronary heart disease is the UK's single biggest killer.

For over 50 years we've tirelessly pioneered research that has helped to transform the lives of people living with heart and circulatory conditions. Our work has been central to the discoveries of vital treatments that are helping change the face of the UK's fight against heart disease.

But so many people still need our help.

From babies born with life-threatening heart problems to the many Mums, Dads and Grandparents who survive a heart attack but must endure the daily battles of living with heart failure.

Join our fight for every heartbeat in the UK. Every pound raised, every minute of your time and every donation to our shops will help make a difference to people's lives.

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