

Don't Lose Heart

AFTER A HEART ATTACK



Recovering from a heart attack can be physically draining, but it can take an emotional toll, too.

"I haven't met anybody in my career who wasn't slightly depressed after a heart attack," says Dr. Stephen T. Sinatra, board certified cardiologist and author of *Heartbreak & Heart Disease*.

Dr. Sinatra adds that a heart attack is your body's way of telling you that your previous lifestyle wasn't working – and a chance to create one that will. Reframing the heart attack in this way will help fight post-heart attack depression, giving you the courage to make necessary changes.

Eight lifestyle changes that experts recommend for those recovering from a heart attack:

1

Get support. Most hospitals have a cardiac rehabilitation group that offers exercise instruction, useful information classes and emotional support. These groups can also be found in local churches, skilled nursing facilities and rehab units. Nationally-based support groups, like Mended Hearts, are also easily accessible.

5

Be yourself. Trying to live in a way that is not consistent with who you are is one of the biggest causes of stress. In her book *Don't Grow Old – Grow Up!*, Dorothy Carnegie gives three rules for mental health: know yourself, like yourself and be yourself. Carnegie suggests, "Be yourself by developing your own convictions and standards; then have the courage to live with them."

2

Consider therapy. While mild depression after a heart attack is normal, if it seems very deep or lasts longer than a month, you should seek help. If you don't feel comfortable going to a therapist, contact a social worker, minister or anyone who can talk with you about how you are feeling.

6

Don't be afraid to cry and express anger. The inability to cry or express anger correlates strongly with an increased risk of developing heart disease. "Crying is the body's way of discharging sadness and hurt," says Dr. Sinatra. "Deep sobs allow energy bound by stress to be released from the thoracic cavity, freeing the grip of muscular tension to your heart."

3

Become more spiritually involved. Research shows that people who attend church or pray regularly have lower rates of heart disease and are less likely to have a heart attack. Moreover, studies worldwide have shown that people who are prayed for by others have higher survival rates and fewer complications from heart surgery.

7

Relax or meditate. Research points to relaxation as the primary way that the door to change is opened. "When stressful moments occur, they can be countered by simply closing your eyes and quietly focusing on your breathing for 5 or 10 minutes," suggest Sullivan and Michaud.

4

Surround yourself with loving people. In addition to praying for you, family and friends can provide priceless emotional support. "Strong connections to family, friends, community and God reduce anxiety and fight depression – two factors that increase your risk of a heart attack," say Martin J. Sullivan, M.D., and Ellen Michaud in *The Duke University 24-Day Program to Stop a Heart Attack*.

8

Laugh. A study conducted by Michael Miller, director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center, shows that heart-healthy people are more likely to laugh frequently and heartily than those with heart disease. Other studies indicate that laughter decreases the chances that heart attack victims will suffer subsequent heart attacks.

Heart attacks are life-altering events for you and your loved ones. But, the changes a heart attack brings can benefit you and your family. By following these suggestions and making other changes as needed, you can experience a positive transformation and live a longer, happier life.

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