Coping with Heart Disease

The way you cope with your feelings about having heart disease is an important part of your recovery. Coping is a response to stress. People respond to heart disease in many different ways. What works best for you may not work for someone else.

Some common feelings about having heart disease are denial, anxiety, depression, fear of being over-protected by family and fear of becoming an invalid. There is no reason to be afraid of having these feelings. These feelings usually do not last and by knowing about them you will be able to cope. It is important to recognize these feelings and their causes. Talk to your doctor, family and friends about your feelings.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal reaction to a scary or unknown situation. You may feel tense, nervous or irritable. These feelings usually come from not knowing what to expect during your recovery or what your life will be like. It is a good idea to talk about your feelings with the people around you. Keep in mind that your family may be afraid. Talking together can be helpful.

Denial

Denial is when you think that heart disease cannot happen to me. Denial is a common reaction because having heart disease can be overwhelming. Denial temporarily helps to protect you from a stressful situation. Often, treatment for heart disease is not a cure for your disease, but it may help control your heart problem. Some changes in your lifestyle must be made to prevent problems in the future. If you cannot accept your heart disease over time, you should seek counseling.

Depression

Feeling sad, lonely or angry are common reactions to heart disease. These may be signs of depression. Depression also may result out of boredom or inaction. A good way to deal with depression is to remain as active as possible. You may worry that you cannot return to your normal activities. Your strength and activity will return as you recover. Take one day at a time and set small progressive goals for yourself. Focus on what you can do, not what you cannot do.

If you have signs of depression or you are thinking of harming yourself or others, call your doctor. Treatment can help.

Role of family and friends

Family members may also become anxious and depressed it they do not understand your heart disease. Let them know what is going on, and what to expect in the future. Your family and friends can help support you if they understand. Talk to your family about
changes in responsibilities, such as money, chores, child care and roles. It is better to talk about problems and solutions than to worry about problems, and not share them with your family.

**Overprotection**

Your family members or friends may become overprotective. They may be afraid of what has happened to you and want to protect you from further harm. These feelings are normal, up to a point. If you begin to feel angry, frustrated or worthless because of their reaction, tell your family or friends. Family members need to know when they are being overprotective and learn how to be supportive instead. It will be easier to be supportive if they understand your feelings.

**Stress**

Stress alone does not cause problems with your heart. Stress is something that everyone has. Not all stress is bad and, in fact, it can challenge you to make life more interesting. On the other hand, too much stress over time can be harmful to your physical and mental health. Whether stress is good or bad depends on how you deal with it.

You cannot remove all stress from your life. You can decide how you will respond to it. The goal is to recognize stressful situations and learn how to deal with them. Learning how you react to stress is the first step to reducing stress with measures that work best for you.

**Community resources**

Call Social Work at 614-293-8427. A social worker will answer questions about insurance, finances, outpatient cardiac rehabilitation, support groups and getting to clinic appointments. The social worker also will help you contact agencies near you.

Ohio State’s Couple and Family Therapy Clinic can help you adjust to lifestyle changes, manage stress and connect with resources of support. For more information, call 614-247-7883.

Look for resources in your community to help you during your recovery:

- Local cardiac rehabilitation programs
- Your local doctor
- YMCA
- Local hospital community health education programs
- Local American Heart Association
- School adult education programs
- Mental health clinics
- Churches and synagogues
- Local department of health
- Home health nursing