

Cardiac Surgery

The Emotional Implications



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Preoperative Phase

Many patients and their families describe the time spent waiting for surgery as being very stressful. It is often a period of feeling that one's life is "on hold". It is difficult to make plans for the future or even to enjoy present activities, since the thought of heart surgery is always "lurking in the background".

The following are some of the feelings patients frequently report:

Boredom

Patients must often restrict their activities to a large extent before surgery. This may limit the number of things they can do to occupy time.

Depression and Mood Changes

Depression is part of the normal process of coming to terms with a major life change or event, such as heart surgery. It can be affected by having to give up important activities such as work, recreation or other daily activities. This may result in feelings of dependency and helplessness.



Feelings of sadness are related to a sense of real or perceived "loss". In turn, this makes one feel more vulnerable and not in control of their situation. Feeling "sad" or having "low moods" can have an effect on eating and sleeping habits, our energy level and our thinking patterns.

It is important not to try and transform your lifestyle overnight. Avoid adding to your level of stress and tension by making a series of small, manageable changes rather than a number of major ones all at once.

Many patients have found that taking part in a cardiac rehabilitation program after surgery has been very beneficial in helping them make lifestyle changes. Studies have shown that three months after surgery, most patients have resumed many of their normal activities and have returned to work. After one year, they describe their lives as much more satisfying and healthier than before.

Remember,
the Heart Health team is here to help you make a rapid recovery and to achieve the highest quality of life possible after your surgery!



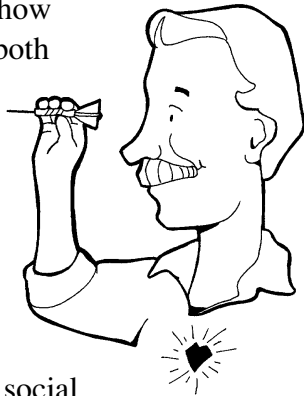
If you or a family member have any emotional concerns while waiting for your surgery or during your hospitalization, please contact a member of the Heart Health Social Work team at 944-1560.

Self criticism over failure to meet impossibly high expectations is not uncommon but tends to produce unnecessary stress.

Take some time during your recovery to consider how you might modify your future lifestyle to maximize the benefits achieved from surgery.

The following hints may be helpful to you in this process:

- Become aware of how stress affects you both mentally and physically.
- Find effective ways to relax and avoid unnecessary worry.
- Enjoy a variety of social and recreational activities.
- Pace your activities – set priorities, manage time effectively and have realistic goals which can be achieved within a reasonable time frame.
- Develop a regular program of physical fitness (walking, swimming, bicycling).
- Limit your alcohol intake to two drinks a day. Do not depend on alcohol to deal with stressful situations.
- Quit smoking.
- Follow a healthy diet (low cholesterol, low fat and salt).
- Enjoy positive relationships and strong family and social support systems.



Anger and Frustration

Anger is a normal human emotion. You may feel angry at fate because of your heart problem (Why me?). You may also be angry with yourself for the lifestyle choices which played a part in the development of your cardiac condition.



It can be very frustrating not knowing when you are going to have your heart surgery, feeling unable to plan events in your life.

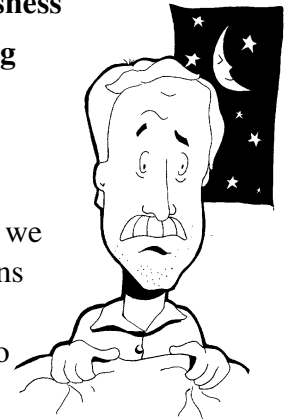
These are normal reactions which will generally decrease over time.

Anxiety and Fear

People tend to be very preoccupied with the vulnerability of their heart. The fear that something might happen before the operation is often mentioned and is very understandable. Common signs of increased levels of anxiety include:

- Irritability and restlessness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Forgetfulness
- Sleeplessness

Because we are all unique, we cope with stressful situations in different ways. Some individuals quickly adapt to the need for surgery, while others find their illness and the prospect of surgery overwhelming. Still others deny the importance of what is happening, refusing to restrict themselves and ignoring warning signals. Finally, some patients do things that put them at risk and give up things they can do.



The following are suggestions to minimize the stress of the waiting period:

- Ask yourself how realistic your expectations are about what you can do and tailor activities accordingly. Pay attention to your body. Respond to its signals to slow down the pace.
- Try to develop alternate hobbies and interests.
- Accept negative feelings and remind yourself that they are normal under the circumstances. At the same time, do some positive self-talk (i.e., “This is temporary and I will be able to do much more after surgery”).
- Do not be too hard on yourself. Give yourself credit for coping as well as you have.
- Do not spend your time waiting for a telephone call from the hospital – plan activities and maintain a normal routine. If you wish to go away from home, call the surgeon’s office. They will be able to tell you if you are scheduled in the immediate future.
- **Use relaxation techniques to keep your anxiety and frustration under control.**
- Seek help when it is required. If you are worried or upset, talk with your family or friends. Talk to recovering heart surgery patients. (You may need professional help if the intensity of the feeling does not lessen.)



The above activities may help you to keep things in perspective.

Lifestyle Adjustment

An important outcome of cardiac surgery is a better quality of life. In many cases, individuals feel the need to re-evaluate their lives and reorder their priorities. For some people, recovery means being able to do much more than before. For others, lifestyle changes might involve decreasing activity in some areas and modifying the pace of one’s life. For example, some individuals who could return to work after surgery don’t, simply because they have chosen to take early retirement.

In a survey, patients who had heart surgery were asked to comment on the quality of their lives post-operatively. The majority noted significant improvement in a number of ways including:

- **A more satisfying lifestyle** and a different perspective about what was important in their lives.
- **The ability to take part in activities of their choice.**
- **Increased energy.** Patients who had surgery six months to one year before answering the questionnaire were more optimistic than those who had undergone surgery in the past three to six months. This indicates that although the initial physical recovery takes approximately six weeks, in many cases the adjustment to feeling completely well, both physically and emotionally, requires a longer period of time. It is important not to try to evaluate the effectiveness of your surgery in the first six weeks. Those who recover emotionally from heart surgery with relative ease are those who are realistic and readily acknowledge and cope with minor setbacks.

A common source of conflict is the patient's physical activity. The spouse often feels responsible but helpless to influence the patient who may begin to assert his/her independence and physically test him/herself. There is frequently disagreement about what level of activity is appropriate.

One patient stated that even though he knew his wife was protecting him out of love (i.e., taking the telephone off the hook and telling people not to visit) he resented it and became angry because he felt it was up to him to decide what he could or could not do.

Both patients and their spouses may be reluctant to discuss or show any negative feelings to one another. It is important to identify the source of family tension and to talk about the situation from each point of view. Often, just understanding what is happening as a normal response to a stressful situation can help reduce conflict.



Get as much information as you need to reduce your anxiety.

- Some people read extensively and ask questions about the operation and recovery. Others prefer to know as little as possible about what to expect.
- The information is there if you need it – just ask. Remember, there is no such thing as a dumb question. Family members have said they were reluctant to ask about something because they did not wish to be a nuisance or they were sure the staff would think the question foolish. In fact, members of the Heart Health team welcome questions and consider it an important part of their job to provide needed reassurance.
- We know that high levels of anxiety sometimes interfere with the ability to understand and remember information. You may have to ask a question more than once before you are satisfied.



While all the emotions talked about in this book are considered normal, you should talk to your doctor if these feelings are: lasting for more than two weeks and/or interfering with your ability to function in your daily life. This applies to family members as well.

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Postoperative Phase

Intensive Care

The Heart Health team recognizes the family's need for support and reassurance during this very stressful time. Every effort is made to keep family members informed about what is happening to help decrease anxiety and maintain a sense of control.

While the patient is in intensive care, right after surgery, family members often describe feeling "helpless". They think there is nothing they can do to comfort their loved one and may be overwhelmed by the unfamiliar equipment and surroundings.

Family members play an important role in the recovery process.

Orientation and Reassurance

Even when the patient has not yet recovered from the anaesthetic, it is helpful for visiting family members to touch him/her. Talk about the fact that the surgery is over and that he/she is doing well. Tell them what day it is, where they are, etc. This should be repeated at each visit until the patient appears oriented. It is very normal for him/her to forget what he/she is told from visit to visit.

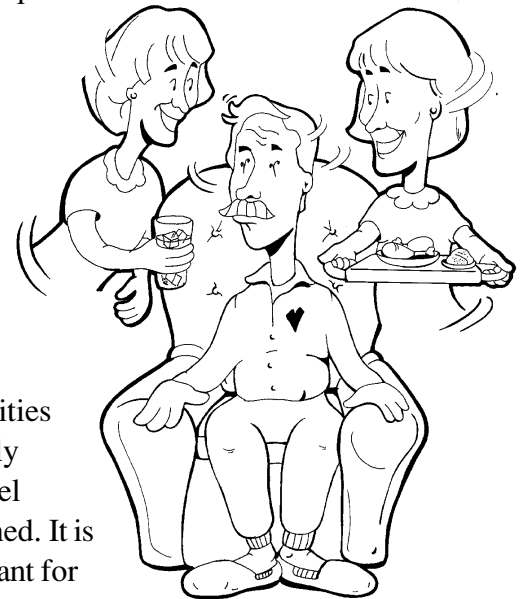
It is not uncommon for patients to be out of touch with reality and to behave differently while they are in Intensive Care. The effects of the medication as well as the stress of the surgical experience can result in these temporary changes. Patients usually feel reassured when their family is with them.

Family Relationships

Cardiac surgery not only affects the patient but also his/her family. Recovery involves mutual adjustment. In the closest of families, there may be tension resulting from changes in roles, expectations, and social confinement.

Family members usually feel a sense of responsibility to care for the patient during recovery and are constantly alert for problems. They often feel anxious about their ability to provide adequate care.

In many cases spouses take on additional roles and responsibilities in the family and may feel overburdened. It is also important for them to take care of themselves and their own need to recuperate physically and emotionally. Be realistic about what responsibilities and commitments are urgent and those that can wait.



Postpone, delegate and accept help from others if necessary.

Frustration

Most patients notice increased irritability and impatience during recovery.

This can be linked to physical limitations and being dependent on others during this time. It can be extremely frustrating to be unable to predict and control the speed of one's recovery. There is generally no need for special treatment for the anger unless it persists over time.



Denial

Recovering heart surgery patients may minimize physical symptoms or distress and attempt to do more activity than is recommended. It is understandable to want to find out what you can do, and to regain independence as quickly as possible. At the same time, it is important to pay attention to your body and to rest and do moderate activity. This will smooth the process of recovery.

Guilt

Patients frequently feel guilty for the anxiety and inconvenience caused to their family members. While this feeling is normal, it is important not to prolong the guilt. **Acknowledge this guilt and remind yourself that if the circumstances were reversed, you would support your family as they have supported you.**

Advocate

Advocacy (speaking on behalf of the patient so his/her needs can be met) is an important role since family members obviously know the patient much better than the hospital staff. This is particularly true while the breathing tube is in place and the patient is unable to speak. **Sometimes a very simple explanation about what is happening can significantly reduce anxiety and fear.**



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Emotional Reactions Following Surgery

How you will feel emotionally following heart surgery varies from person to person. It depends on your expectations concerning recovery and how your body responds: the pace of physical recovery, and the amount of exhaustion, minor setbacks and complications.

While no one can tell you exactly what your recovery will be like or what challenges you may experience during that time, there are a variety of normal psychological responses. You may experience some or all of the following reactions during your hospital stay. For some, it is not until after discharge that the emotions “catch up”.

Generalized Feeling of Anxiety or Fear

Feeling anxious and scared is understandable given one’s physical vulnerability after surgery. A sense of physical helplessness can result in

anxiety about whether recovery is progressing normally.



It takes time to begin to think of one’s self as being on the *Path to Recovery*, particularly if there was a lengthy period of physical restrictions

before surgery. Some patients describe flashbacks about aspects of the experience. These can take the form of reliving the event emotionally and may sometimes be very frightening.

Another common source of anxiety is about going home. While there is a feeling of happiness about going home, there is also a concern about leaving the safety and security of the hospital.

Depression and Changes in Mood

Depression and feelings of sadness are a common response to the physical exhaustion that comes after the operation. Patients have described feelings like they have been hit with a ten-ton truck!



Most patients have expectations about what their recovery will be like. If these expectations are unrealistic or not being met, individuals may feel pessimistic about their recovery. There is also a letdown feeling compared to the preoperative level of tension. People often describe that it is difficult to remain in control of their feelings. They may become tearful for no apparent reason. It takes time to come to terms with the impact of this event and to begin to understand what it will mean for one’s lifestyle. Patients often state that they are not so much depressed as in need of some quiet time to sort things out. Others may misinterpret this as withdrawal and sadness.

Confusion and Disorientation

Many individuals have difficulty concentrating for a few weeks after surgery. They may also experience some short-term memory loss. Some people have periods of confusion and disorientation and may have trouble keeping track of time or the sequence of events. These “temporary” reactions are normal and are not cause for alarm. Difficulty sleeping and having unusual dreams or even nightmares can also occur.

