

UNPACKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH AND HEART HEALTH

Why mental health may influence heart disease

In recent years, there has been plenty of talk about how the brain and gut are linked. But the association between the brain and heart is also significant and “a commonly overlooked issue,” said Dr. Momin.

Many experts believe poor mental well-being may influence heart health in various ways. That said, it’s important to understand that “while having a mental health problem may increase the risk of developing heart disease, it doesn’t guarantee somebody will get [it],” said Dr. Segal, a board-certified cardiologist and the founder of Manhattan Cardiology, Medical Offices of Manhattan, and also co-founder of LabFinder.



How to improve your mental health and heart health

Fortunately, you can adopt several behaviors that may help create a cozier relationship between your head and heart:



1. GET SOME EXERCISE:

Any number of physical activities, such as cycling, dancing, gardening, jogging, swimming and walking, can help calm

your mind and pump up your heart.



2. STEP UP YOUR DIET:

Make sure you’re consuming an adequate amount of mind- and heart-healthy foods like **fatty fish**, fruits, leafy greens, **nuts** and

whole grains. These components of a good diet won’t immediately fix mental or heart issues, but they can certainly put you on the road toward a healthier you, both mentally and physically.

3. LOOK INTO DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS:

Although not a substitute for nutrient-rich foods, there are many **supplements containing vitamins and minerals** that

may fill a dietary void and help promote a healthier mind and heart. Consult a health care provider or a dietitian before adding dietary supplements to your regimen.



4. DITCH BAD HABITS:

Smoking tobacco products and downing too much alcohol can do a number on your mental and physical health. Giving

up smoking and cutting back on alcohol consumption may just lift your mind and your heart.



5. BUILD A ROBUST SUPPORT SYSTEM:

The University of Rochester Medical Center suggests that a strong **network of relatives and friends can aid in easing**



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continued

stress and decreasing your risk of heart disease. “Having at least one person you can rely on takes a heavy burden off you and provides comfort,” the hospital says.



6. PRACTICE MINDFULNESS:

The Mayo Clinic notes that you should **incorporate mindfulness into your life** through methods like living in the moment,

expressing gratitude, **meditating**, focusing on your breathing and paying closer attention to your surroundings.

The connection between mental health and heart health

So, just what is the connection between mental health and heart health?

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) explains that **people coping with depression, anxiety, stress or PTSD over a long period may develop certain conditions** such as increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, reduced blood flow to the heart and heightened levels of cortisol (the so-called “stress hormone”). This then can trigger heart disease, metabolic disease (a group of risk factors for cardiovascular disease) and calcium buildup in the arteries (the primary cause of heart attacks).

Here’s a bit of a deeper dive into five potential mind-related contributors to heart issues:

- ➔ As many as 15% of people with cardiovascular disease grapple with major depression. On the other hand, some people with no history of depression become clinically depressed after a heart attack or open-heart surgery, **according to Edward-Elmhurst Health**
- ➔ The Harvard Health Publishing says anxiety *disorders influence* “**the stress response**,” which affects the same brain systems that impact cardiovascular functions
- ➔ The stress caused by work, relationship problems and other issues can elevate heart-unhealthy inflammation, prompt poor sleep, lead to less exercise and set off unhealthy eating
 - ➔ People with PTSD can demonstrate a greater risk of high blood pressure, high levels of fat (lipids) in the blood, obesity, cardiovascular disease and heart disease

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS. THE CDC SAYS THIS DUO POSES “A SERIOUS THREAT TO OUR MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH.”

How having mental health conditions could increase your risk of heart disease and vice versa

1. BEHAVIORAL PATHWAYS:

Many studies have shown that making **generally health-promoting lifestyle choices**—say, eating a nutrient-rich diet and exercising regularly—can **substantially lower your chances of getting heart disease**. Because having a mental health issue may make you less likely to do all of the above, that’s one major way that it could put you at greater risk for a heart condition.

“We know that people who are depressed or anxious may not do as good a job at taking care of themselves,” says cardiac psychiatrist Peter A. Shapiro, MD, professor of psychiatry at Columbia University Irving Medical Center. Largely, that’s due to how these illnesses affect a person’s energy and **executive functioning** (aka their ability to plan and complete goals and tasks). “If, for instance, they’re not paying as much attention to what they are eating, getting enough rest, taking their medications, or exercising regularly, they may be more prone to develop cardiac problems down the line.”

The same thing applies when it comes to the opposite kind of habits—those with known cardiovascular health risks, says Dr. Celano. Data shows that people with mental health disorders are **more likely to smoke** and **drink**—two practices with negative impacts on the heart.

By the reverse token, it’s also likely that certain behavioral tendencies common to folks with heart disease may increase their risk of developing a mental health condition. “You could imagine that somebody with heart disease might be less able to engage in physical activity,” says Dr. Celano. Since physical activity itself is **known to have some antidepressant effects**, a person in this situation would be missing out on those benefits.

That effect would only be compounded by any of the negative psychological impacts of getting the heart disease diagnosis in the first place, says Dr. Shapiro. “For some people, the stress of having one’s ordinary life role or process disrupted by heart disease may be enough to cause depressive symptoms,” he says. Not to mention, the potential pain and fear involved in having a cardiac event or spending time in the hospital, all of which could increase a person’s risk of mental illness, too.

2. PHYSIOLOGICAL PATHWAYS:

The science on the physiological ties between mental health and heart health is a bit more limited, says Dr. Celano. “Most of the biological links tend to be proven at one point in time, so it’s harder to figure out which direction the relationship is really going.” (In other words, it’s unclear if one causes the other, or if any observed biological abnormality is simply a result of having both types of conditions.)

That said, certain physiological pathways are likely involved in one way or another. For starters, people with depression have been shown to have **higher levels of interleukins** (proteins produced by white blood cells) in their blood, suggesting higher levels of inflammation that could put them more at risk for heart disease, says Dr. Celano. The reverse may be true, too, as people with severe heart disease also **tend to have elevated inflammation levels**, which could perhaps contribute to or worsen depressive symptoms, he adds.

People with depression, in particular, are also **more likely to experience endothelial dysfunction**, “which means that the lining of their blood vessels isn’t as good as it should be at relaxing to allow blood flow to reach the heart,” says Dr. Celano. Without healthy blood flow, the heart can’t do its job as effectively.

Add in the potential cascade of neuroendocrine effects common for psychiatric conditions, and you get yet another potential link between mental and heart health. “In general, people who are depressed or anxious, for example, tend to experience **more sympathetic nervous-system activity** [aka fight-or-flight] than parasympathetic [aka rest and digest],” says Dr. Celano. Translation: These folks are likely to experience more frequent spikes in blood pressure and heart rate, and higher levels of cortisol coursing through their bodies than non-depressed people, which can put a lot of extra stress on the heart over time.

Why maintaining good mental health and a positive outlook may help protect your heart

Based on **recent research tying optimism with heart health**, it’s likely that a positive psyche can help the heart just as much as a negative psyche can hurt it. “We’re seeing that it’s not just the lack of depression that tends to have protective heart benefits,” says Dr. Celano. “There does seem to be a beneficial effect from positive emotions that’s distinct from the negative impact on the heart of feeling depressed.”

Some of that connection is rooted in just the opposite behavioral effect as noted above: Research shows that you’re more likely to **engage in heart-healthy behaviors if you’re optimistic**.



“Specifically, optimistic people are more likely to eat more fruits and vegetables, be more physically active, and take their medications,” says Dr. Celano—all of which is helpful for maintaining a well-functioning heart.

It’s also likely that there’s a supportive neuroendocrine link between having a positive outlook and maintaining a healthy ticker. In fact, **research on positive affect** has shown that it may lead to more parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) activity and lower levels of cortisol, reducing the frequency of blood-pressure and heart-rate spikes as a result.

All that to say, there’s a significant and measurable heart-health benefit to experiencing a positive mental state—which is why Dr. Celano stresses both the importance of seeking treatment for any mental health condition and of finding ways to support your psyche daily, regardless. “Even if you don’t have depression, anxiety, or any other mental illness, taking care of yourself, cultivating gratitude, and doing things that feel important and meaningful can really have benefits not only for your emotional well-being but also for your heart,” says Dr. Celano

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