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How Mental Health Affects Heart Health

PRIORITIZING MENTAL HEALTH CAN IMPROVE NOT ONLY YOUR MOODS BUT LIKELY LOWER YOUR RISK FOR HEART ATTACK...



Statistics like these go to reveal that our mind and body will always influence each other.



Researchers are working hard to curb the impact of heart disease, which is currently the leading cause of death in the United States. These efforts to develop new prevention strategies have led them to some surprising heart health hypotheses. You probably know that you should eat well and stay active, but these lesser-known risk factors may not be on your radar. Here are **7** unconventional ways to support your heart that have sparked the interest of leading health experts.

7 Unusual Heart Health Risk Factors

1. Your Oral Health

It turns out, brushing your teeth may have extra benefits than just sparkly whites and fresh breath. Numerous studies have documented a link between poor dental health and heart disease. The conclusion is still out as to why, but the prevailing theories point to inflammation. It could be that

the bacteria which infect gums enter the bloodstream and cause blood vessel inflammation or that the body's immune response is to blame. While more research is needed, it's one more reason to brush your teeth for the recommended two minutes twice a day and get regular dental checkups.

2. Your Job Satisfaction

There have been some thought-provoking studies exploring the connection between workplace stress and heart health. A decade-long study in Sweden found that having a bad boss increases your risk of a heart attack. Additional research has suggested that working long hours may increase your risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke.

A key takeaway here is that stress, in general, isn't great for your overall health. Stress causes your cortisol levels to spike, which can point to high blood pressure, weight gain, sleep



disruption, and reduced energy over time. Not to mention, your diet, exercise routine, and other healthy habits often suffer when you're stressed out. Make sure to find ways to unwind at the end of your workday, whether that means listening to a relaxing sound track on your drive home or a brief meditation before you make dinner. Sometimes you can't avoid challenging coworkers or chaotic days, but you can put some strategies in place to help you feel calmer and more resilient.

3. Your Pets

Not that you needed another reason to love your pets, still several studies have shown that pet ownership, especially having a dog, can improve heart health. [According to Harvard Health](#), researchers have found that dog owners have lower blood pressure and cholesterol than non-owners, probably because dogs require daily walks and tend to have a calming effect on their humans.

If you are not a dog owner, we do not advise that you add pets to your life purely as a health strategy. Instead, you might think about stopping by to meet some of your four-legged neighbors. [A few studies](#) have found that just petting a dog can lower your blood pressure.

4. Your Sleep Habits

Sleep is the unsung hero of the health world. It allows your whole body to rest and replenish. Although your heart never stops beating, it does however, [slow down](#) and recover during sleep. [According to John Hopkins Medicine](#), by depriving your heart of this crucial recovery time, lack of sleep increases your risk of heart attack and heart disease.

If you have trouble sleeping, creating a nightly ritual can help. Try to wind down at the same time every evening and create a calm, dark, and quiet environment in your bedroom. You should turn off your electronic devices at least thirty minutes before bedtime to help your body prepare for restful sleep.

If you find yourself tossing and turning on a regular basis, it is always best to talk with your doctor. There could be various underlying and unsuspecting conditions that could be causing your lack of sleep and there are many different therapies that can help.

For more sleep-enhancing tips, read, ["Too Stressed to Sleep? These Strategies Can Help."](#)

5. Your Breakfast (or lack thereof)

Bring on the oatmeal and scrambled eggs! When a [panel of experts](#) from the American Heart Association reviewed studies on eating habits and heart health, they formed an intriguing conclusion: breakfast-eaters tended to have lower instances of heart disease and were less likely to have high cholesterol and high blood pressure.

If you have difficulty making the time you need to eat in the morning, the American Heart Association recommends [these breakfast hacks](#) for some quick and easy meal ideas. [Harvard Health](#) suggests including whole grains in your morning meal to further reduce your risk for heart attack, stroke, and heart failure. They offer a [menu of options](#) full of whole grains, fruit and protein.

6. Your Downtime

We all love a good movie marathon, but regularly sitting for hours at a stretch could be putting your heart at risk. And yes, that includes long workdays at the computer.

The American Heart Association and the American College of Cardiology [have both warned](#) that regularly sitting for long periods is a significant contributor to heart disease. It's not an issue of laziness—in a world full of desk jobs, car trips, and the all-important need to unwind, many of us struggle to find time to get the consistent and essential movement that our bodies need.

If you are stuck sitting for long periods, the [American Heart Association](#) suggests finding ways to sneak movement into your day. You might try setting a timer and taking a five-minute stretch break every hour or using your lunch break to go for a walk. Every extra minute on your feet will help you get to the recommended [150 minutes of activity per week](#). Exercise also helps you reduce stress and sleep better, making it a true heart-health all star.

7. Your Outlook on Life

Several studies suggest an association between optimism and a lower risk of cardiovascular disease. A [2015 study](#) found that those with a more positive outlook were more likely to make healthy lifestyle changes after a heart attack. And a researcher at the University of California, San Diego, [found that](#) patients with a greater sense of gratitude had lower levels of inflammation and better heart health overall.

Heart disease, [*the leading cause of death in the United States*](#), is deeply intertwined with several of the most comprehensive mental illness disorders, including depression and anxiety.

Anxiety, depression, and heart disease are known to take place together. In fact, the association goes both ways: mental health affects heart health, and cardiovascular disease can contribute to mental health disorders. Here's what you should know about the link between mental health and heart disease, including heart-healthy ways to navigate emotional lows and manage stress.

A healthy heart can help with a healthy mind.

From Head to Heart (and vice versa)

The body is an ecosystem. If one part of it is off-balance, then the entire body reacts negatively. The same can be said about the link between anxiety, depression, and heart disease. Again, bad physical or mental health puts an unwanted strain on the body's systems. Being a little stressed or sad from time to time is not invariably a big deal.

However, having constant stress and sadness can make heart health worse. Mental illness can not cause heart disease and vice versa. But the appearance of either respectively could signal one another. For example, having mental illness can be an underlying symptom of cardiovascular disease or disorder.

Heart disease might seem like a purely physical issue, but mental health affects heart health. Up to [*40% of people affected by heart disease*](#) also achieve the diagnostic criteria for major depressive disorder, one of the most common mental health disorders and the [*most frequently diagnosed type of depression*](#) in the U.S. At the same time, people with depression can face a much [*higher risk for heart disease*](#).

Beyond Behavior: Physiological Effects of Mental Health Disorders

The link that's between mental health and heart disease doesn't only occur indirectly through the behaviors that lead to higher risk. [*Research has found*](#) that mental health disorders cause changes in the body that overlap with the risk factors for heart disease, including:

- ◊ **Increased heart rate**
- ◊ [*Increased blood pressure*](#)
- ◊ **Reduced blood flow to heart**
- ◊ **Higher levels of inflammation**
- ◊ **Higher levels of cortisol**

These physiological effects can lead to calcium buildup in the arteries and the development of heart disease.



Statistics like these confirm that our mind and body will always influence each other. This relationship is both behavioral and physiological: our thoughts and emotions shape our habits and routines — like how well we sleep, how often we exercise, and how we cope with stress — in addition to impacting heart rate, blood flow, and cortisol levels. And, in turn, our physical health has the power to impact our emotional and social well-being.

Mental Health Disorders and Risk Factors for Heart Disease

[*According to the CDC*](#), more than half of the total population of all Americans will be diagnosed with some type of mental health disorder in their lifetime. And since mental health affects heart health, the prevalence of mental health disorders in the U.S. also means that there are millions of Americans at a higher risk for heart disease.

The [*primary drivers of heart disease*](#) include both uncontrollable factors like age and [*family history*](#) and ones that we can either modify or treat, including smoking, physical inactivity, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. The correlation between mental health and heart disease happens in part from the overlap between behaviors associated with mental health disorders and risk factors for heart disease. For example, [*anxiety and depression are both associated with smoking and less active lifestyles*](#).

In addition to these key physical risks, there are additional factors for heart disease that relate to your mental well-being, including sleeping habits, alcohol use, diet, and even how happy you feel at work. Given the link between mental health and heart disease, any efforts you make on the self-care front, like prioritizing rest or exploring where you find professional and personal fulfillment, can only help to boost heart health.

Depression and Heart Disease

A variety of mental health disorders influence a person's risk for heart disease, from anxiety to PTSD and chronic stress, but the heart-head connection is particularly strong with depression. Not only are people with depression more likely to develop heart disease, they also face a worse prognosis. Depression can intensify fatigue and contribute to isolation after serious cardiac events, complicating recovery from surgery, heart attacks, and strokes. In addition, heart disease patients with depression may face a higher risk for premature death as well as longer or more frequent hospitalizations.

Research has likewise found that while having both heart disease and anxiety doubles a patient's risk of fatality, the combination of depression and heart disease triples it. It's important for people with heart disease to proactively address symptoms of depression if they appear, even if they've dealt with depression before.



"I feel like a ticking time bomb. Many of my family have succumbed to a heart attack or stroke... will I go the same way?"

- Man with high blood pressure

How a Heart Attack Affects Mental Health

Because of the heavy emotional toll of a heart attack, depression is even more common after this type of serious cardiac event than with heart disease overall. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that up to 65% of cardiovascular disease patients who've had a heart attack experience depression.

After a heart attack you may have new or deeper feelings of anxiety given the uncertainty of your future. Stepping back from regular roles and responsibilities at work or with family while you recover can bring up complicated feelings and impact your sense of identity.

And if lifestyle habits contributed to your heart attack risk, you may feel a sense of guilt as well. These are all understandable, natural reactions. The important thing is to keep moving forward by taking ownership of your own health, which may include seeking mental health treatment. Remember, there's no shame in getting the support you need, and in fact, doing so is vital to your physical recovery.

There are many distinct types of diseases and disorders that can affect the heart. These kinds of health conditions are known as cardiovascular diseases or disorders. Some directly affect the heart and some indirectly make heart health worse. The great variety of heart diseases and disorders can be grouped into four categories.

The Heart

The four categories are:

1. **Heart failure** – the heart has become weak or damaged that can lead to heart attacks as well as high blood pressure
2. **Structural heart disease** – there are four chambers of the heart, when any of these heart parts are abnormal, it's structural heart disease
3. **Coronary artery and vascular disease** – hardened arteries when heart arteries become narrower or get blocked off
4. **Heart rhythm disorders** – arrhythmias, or heart rhythm disorders, is when the heart beats to the extent that it's not supposed to

Each poses its problems and can be deadly. Mental health and heart disease are deeply connected. An issue with physical health can turn into a mental illness and the other way around. Unsound mental health can manifest as any of these four types of heart diseases and disorders.

Factors that may increase the chance of heart diseases and disorders are:

- High blood pressure
- Smoking
- High cholesterol
- Genetics
- Age
- Diabetes
- Obesity

Mental health

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), depression is a mood disorder that can negatively influence how people act, feel, and handle simple activities. When a person has a low mood that disrupts their way of thinking or life for two weeks or more, it might be depression.

The five major types are:

1. **Persistent Depressive Disorder (dysthymia)** – a depressed mood that lasts at least two years



55-64

the age group most likely to say they had been affected



2. **Postpartum Depression** – depression is what happens after giving birth
3. **Psychotic Depression** – depressed mood accompanied by psychotic beliefs (i.e.: paranoia and hallucinations)
4. **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)** – that's when a person becomes depressed during seasonal cycles (normally happens during months with less sunlight)
5. **Bipolar Disorder** – not depression specifically but people with bipolar disorder go through periods of depression

Depression is a serious mood disorder that can qualify as a disability in some instances. The amount of stress it puts on the body can lead to other health disorders, like heart disease. It's important to seek help if a low mood continues for more than two weeks.

■ Signs and symptoms of depression:

- Inability to perform simple daily tasks, like eating and showering
- Social isolation, *suicidal thoughts* or tendencies
- Poor school and work performance
- Feeling sad, hopeless, and worthless

■ Anxiety?

An anxiety disorder is a wide term to describe persistent worry and fear without cause. It's an extremely common mental illness that plagues many Americans. Over 18% of Americans suffer from some type of anxiety disorder, which is around one in five people.

Types of anxiety disorders include:

1. **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)** – constant stress and *worry* without any direct cause for six months or more
2. **Panic Disorder** – *panic attacks* that involve intense amounts of dread, sweating, heart palpitations, shaking, and several other unpleasant physical sensations
3. **Phobia-Related Disorder** – a fear of a specific place, object, or situation
4. **Social Anxiety Disorder** – anxiety that happens from being in social settings (can be all social settings for some and certain ones for others, like public speaking)

Anxiety is highly treatable but can also lead to much deeper health complications if left untreated. Heart arrhythmias are associated with anxiety. Both should be treated at the same time for treatment to be effective.

■ Signs and symptoms of anxiety:

- An intense feeling of constant dread

- Feeling worried or stressed for no reason
- Paranoid thoughts and wanting to escape
- An uncomfortable physical sensation that stems from feeling worried
- Feeling unable to perform daily activities because of stress or worry
- Issues sleeping and eating

What is Good for the Heart is Good for the Mind

The good news is that taking care of your mental health often looks exactly the same as taking care of your heart. Lifestyle changes that help manage heart disease, like following a balanced diet, drinking less, and getting those steps in, can also alleviate symptoms of depression and other mental health disorders.

Plus, having happy thoughts are literally good for the heart. *Some research suggests* that patients with positive outlooks are more likely to make vital lifestyle changes following a heart attack, while being grateful is linked to lower levels of inflammation and better overall heart health. Of course, it can be more difficult to practice gratitude when you're experiencing the isolation of clinical depression, so if you're dealing with symptoms, remember that when you seek help, it is taking charge of your well-being — and your heart.



The next time you're feeling stressed or anxious, center your mind and keep your heart beating strong with these proactive strategies:

- Do a deep breathing exercise
- Check in with yourself by journaling
- Try a stress-related guided meditation
- Explore visualization strategies to mentally picture a positive outcome to a challenge you're facing
- Consider taking something off your plate at work or at home
- Stop smoking and eat a healthy diet

This content is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or another qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.