

# Cardiovascular (Heart) Disease

## Changes in Your Mental Health

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This pamphlet explains how cardiovascular (heart) disease may affect your mental health.

## **When will I feel like myself again?**

After having a cardiovascular event (like a heart attack) or heart surgery, you may experience physical and emotional changes. For example, you may:

- › have emotional distress from experiencing a life-threatening event.
- › have changes in your health.
- › be dealing with new medical treatments.

Change disrupts our lives. It will take time to adjust to the changes caused by your heart disease diagnosis (like monitoring your health, lifestyle changes, or taking new medications). Over time, you will get used to your new way of living.

While each person's experience is different, you may face some common challenges. Many people also have positive and rewarding experiences.

### **Common physical changes include:**

- › Medication side effects
- › Pain or discomfort
- › Fatigue (feeling tired) or weakness
- › Dizziness
- › Feeling lightheaded
- › Shortness of breath or trouble breathing

### **Common social changes include:**

- › Challenges with doing things on your own
- › Social isolation (not seeing people as much as you would like)
- › Changes in your roles (as a partner, parent, caregiver)
- › Challenges with going back to work
- › Financial (money) concerns
- › Challenges with doing things you enjoy (like hobbies)

### **Common emotional changes include:**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| › Fear (for example, fear of exercise) | › Gratitude (feeling grateful)                        |
| › Anxiety                              | › Difficult feelings about your body                  |
| › Sadness                              | › Worry about your health, finances, or relationships |
| › Anger                                |   |
| › Guilt                                |   |
| › Shame                                |   |

## **Common mental health changes include:**

- › Mood-related disorders (like depression)
- › Anxiety-related disorders (like generalized anxiety disorder)
- › Trauma-related disorders (like post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD])

**As many as 1 in 3 people who have had a cardiovascular event or surgery may have some of the mental health changes listed above.**

## **Are my feelings normal?**

Having a cardiovascular event or heart surgery will cause changes in your life. Your loved ones may find it hard to understand what you are going through.

For many people, having a cardiovascular event or heart surgery causes them to have a lot of emotions. **This is normal.** You may even have feelings that seem to conflict (like feeling grateful and angry).

## **Cardiac rehabilitation (rehab) and emotional distress**

For many people, it helps to take part in cardiac rehab. The cardiac rehab program in Halifax is called “Hearts and Health in Motion.” Participants take part in supervised exercise and education sessions to support their heart health. The goal of the program is to help people learn to manage their cardiovascular risk factors so they may lower their risk for future cardiac events.

Participating in cardiac rehab can help to lower your emotional distress and improve your confidence in managing your health. For example, it helps many people lower their fear of physical activity.

As part of the Hearts and Health in Motion program, you will also receive education and support on topics related to emotional stress, mental health, and changing lifestyle behaviours.

### **When should I get help?**

Just as your body needs time to recover from a cardiovascular event or heart surgery, so does your mind. Many people will notice their mental stress improves as they continue cardiac rehab and are reminded about their life beyond their illness.

There are a few important questions that can help you decide if you or your loved one(s) may need further support. If you answer yes to any of these questions, you may want to consider reaching out for help:

1. Is the mental stress **persistent (does not go away)**? For example, is it happening nearly every day, and for much of each day?
2. Does the emotional distress **affect my ability to function**? For example, does it make it hard for me to do my usual activities or socialize?
3. **Can I cope** with this level of emotional distress? For example, does it bother me so much that I feel like I cannot manage it on my own?

## How do I get help?

Contact your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner). They may be able to help with some of your concerns.

You may also access the following mental health services:

1. Many free, online self-guided programs are available through the Nova Scotia Mental Health and Addictions website:
  - › <https://mha.nshealth.ca/en/tools>

2. Call 211 to talk with a Community Resource Navigator (available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week). They can connect you with community resources in your region.
3. Community Mental Health Programs offer free professional mental health supports. You can self-refer by calling the intake line:
  - › Phone (toll-free): 1-855-922-1122
4. Private mental health care is also available from social workers, counselling therapists, and psychologists. **There are fees for these services.** Check your private health insurance (if you have it) to see if these fees are covered. To find a professional, visit:
  - **Nova Scotia College of Social Workers**
    - › <https://nscsw.org/about/find-a-social-worker/>
  - **Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia**
    - › <https://apns.ca/find-a-psychologist/>
  - **Nova Scotia College of Counselling Therapists**
    - › <https://nscct.ca/public-access-registry/>

## **If you need mental health help right away:**

- Call your primary health care provider.
- or
- Call the Provincial Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Line.
  - › Phone (toll-free): 1-888-429-8167

**If it is an emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest Emergency Department right away.**



This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:  
[www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources)

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:  
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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To be reviewed September 2028 or sooner, if needed.  
Learn more: <https://library.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources>