

HEART FAILURE AND ACCEPTING YOUR DIAGNOSIS

JOHN MUIR HEALTH

HEART FAILURE (HF) AND ACCEPTING YOUR DIAGNOSIS

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INTRODUCTION

A heart failure diagnosis takes some getting used to. As you try to understand and accept what it means to have HF, you'll probably feel a range of emotions. Your outlook on the future may also change, depending on your prognosis. Heart failure can be mild or severe and people respond differently to treatment. For some people, heart failure symptoms are reversible with proper treatment, yet for others, symptoms get worse over time.

Given the uncertainty of your diagnosis, it's natural and even healthy to grieve. Managing your feelings is an important aspect of taking care of yourself. Following are normal emotional stages after a diagnosis of HF:

Your initial reaction

Your initial reaction may be shock, disbelief, denial or numbness. For the first few months, you may have a hard time acknowledging your condition. It's tough to be told you have heart failure.

Adjusting to your condition

For 3-12 months after your diagnosis, you may experience preoccupation, fear, anxiety or anger. You may struggle to integrate new routines into your daily life. From questions of "why me?" to "what if" you will probably move toward more acceptance of your condition.

New habits become routine

When new habits become routine and your understanding of HF improves, you'll probably begin to feel more peaceful about your diagnosis. You may get satisfaction from the adjustments you've made in your life and feel new resolve about the future.

Throughout these emotional stages, be patient with yourself. Adjusting to life with HF isn't easy, but many people have learned to accept their diagnosis and to lead lives filled with a renewed sense of purpose and hopefulness. With time, support and patience, you can too.

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IS THERE A CURE FOR HEART FAILURE?

Heart failure is a chronic condition that in most cases cannot be cured. However, it can be managed. For most people with heart failure; management means **SELF MANAGEMENT**-taking medications and making positive lifestyle changes.

REACH OUT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Since self-management is so critical to your health, it's important to understand and accept your emotional reactions to your diagnosis so that they don't interfere with following your care plan. If you need encouragement, advice or just someone to talk to, reach out to others for support.

YOUR CARE TEAM

Many people will work together to help you live better with heart failure.

Your primary care provider

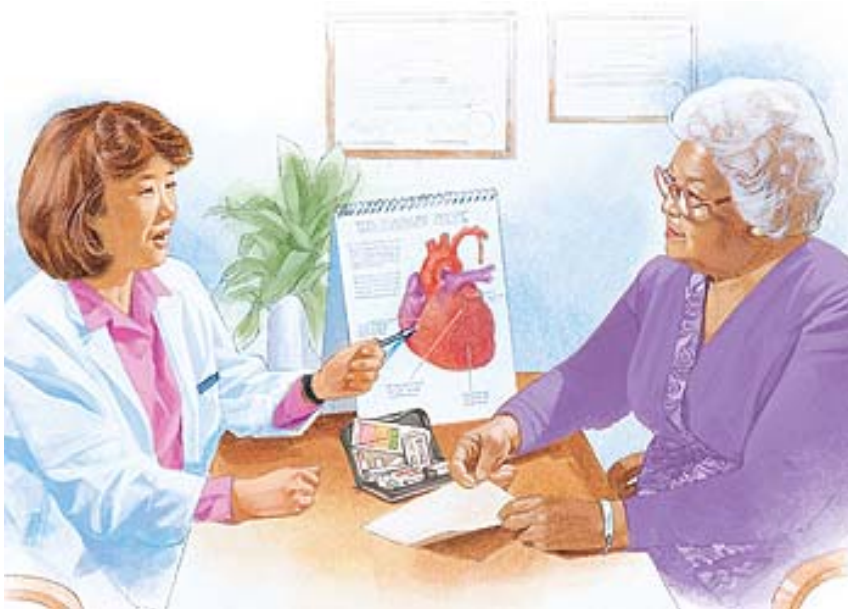
This is the person you usually see for health problems. Your primary care provider can be a family practice physician, a general internist, a nurse practitioner or a physician assistant.

Your cardiologist

This is a physician specializing in the diagnosis and treatment of heart and blood vessel diseases.

Other health care professionals

Many other professionals including nurses, dietitians, pharmacists, exercise physiologists, care managers, and social



workers may contribute to different aspects of your care.

You and your family

You and your family are at the center of this team! You need to be active participants in your care. This means learning as much as you can about your condition and treatment, following your treatment plan and most importantly, communicating with the rest of your health care team.

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RETURNING TO WORK

If you have been in the hospital for your heart failure, your doctor will tell you how soon you can return to work. You may need to change some of your job related activities. This may involve job re-training or taking disability.

PLAN PERIODS OF REST

Be sure to get plenty of rest. You may need to plan at least one rest period every day. When you rest, keep your feet up to keep the swelling down. Also, make sure that you rest during any non-work activities.

CONSERVE YOUR ENERGY

Using less energy with daily tasks can help you have more energy to do more activities during the day. You may need to cut down on some of your activities or use energy-saving devices or techniques. If daily self-care or home care activities are too tiring, discuss this with you doctor. Here are some energy saving tips:

- Simplify your tasks and set realistic goals.
- Plan activities (chores, exercise and recreation) ahead of time. Do not schedule too many things to do in one day. Do things that take more energy when you are feeling your best.
- If necessary, rest before and after activities.
- If you become tired, stop and rest. You may need to finish on another day or when you feel less tired.
- Do not plan activities right after a meal.
- Get a good night's sleep.
- Ask for help. Divide tasks among family and friends.
- Use devices and tools such as a walker, shower chair, hand-held shower head, bedside commode or long-handled tools for dressing.
- Do all of your grooming (shaving, drying your hair, etc.) while sitting.
- Arrange your activities so you do not have to climb up and down stairs many times.
- Avoid extreme physical activity. Do not push, pull or lift heavy objects (more than 10 pounds) that require you to strain.
- For more energy-saving tips, tell your doctor you would like to speak to an occupational therapist or cardiac rehabilitation specialist.

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TAKE CARE OF YOUR EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Your diagnosis of heart failure, your symptoms and your concern for the future may cause you and your loved ones to feel depressed or worried. Your concerns are normal. As you begin taking charge of your health and making positive changes, you may find these feelings start to fade. However, if negative feelings continue and interfere with your ability to enjoy life, talk to your doctor. Counseling might help you feel better.

RECOGNIZING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

Everyone feels anxious or blue some of the time. But if these feelings persist and they interfere with your ability to do and enjoy daily activities, or if your relationships are affected, you should seek help. You may be depressed if you have any of the following symptoms for more than 2 weeks:

- Down mood
- Feeling blue
- Irritability
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- Withdrawal from others
- Excessive sleepiness
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Hopelessness
- Suicidal feelings
- Preoccupation with death



Also, keep in mind that people who are depressed often feel tired and have no energy. They may lose interest in sex, have trouble sleeping and lose their appetite. Although fatigue and loss of appetite are also common symptoms of heart failure, they are more likely due to depression if accompanied by any of the symptoms listed above.

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You may be anxious if you have any of the following symptoms for more than two weeks:

- Excessive worry
- Fear
- Tension
- Feeling keyed up or always on edge
- Restlessness
- Feeling shaky

Many people in our society feel there is some stigma associated with having emotional problems like depression or anxiety. As a result, they may be reluctant to talk to anyone about how they are feeling. However, having emotional problems is nothing to be ashamed about. It is important to recognize and treat depression and anxiety. If you are having difficulties coping with feelings about heart failure, you should seek help and support. In other words, if depression and anxiety are interfering with your life or causing distress, it is important for you to seek help from your doctor or nurse.

TIPS TO HELP YOU DEAL WITH EMOTIONAL BLUES

- Get out and walk every day
- Get dressed every day
- Keep up with activities or hobbies you enjoy
- Share your feelings with your spouse, a friend or clergy
- Get a good night's sleep
- Follow your treatment plan
- Set and follow a realistic daily schedule



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TRAVELING AND VACATIONS

You may travel as soon as you are feeling better, but always let your health care provider know when you plan to go and provide a phone number where you can be reached.

By following these traveling tips, your vacation will be worry free:

- Always take all of your medications with you and make sure you have enough medications to last throughout your trip.
- If you are traveling by plane, carry your medications with you. Never check them with your luggage. You may need a letter from your health care provider that verifies all of your medications, especially if you are traveling internationally. Pack this letter with your medications.
- Consider wearing an Emergency Medical Identification band.
- Make sure you have your doctor's phone number.
- Be careful to avoid infection when traveling. In areas where the water might be unsafe, drink bottled water or other beverages (order beverages without ice). Swim only in chlorinated pools.
- Select food and drink with care to avoid illness. It is easy to overeat and to take in too much sodium when you are away from home routines, especially while eating meals at restaurants.

References

www.hfsa.com

www.clevelandclinic.org