

Anxiety following a heart attack and / or heart surgery

Patient and Carer Information

Cardiac Occupational Therapy Service



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Why do I feel anxious?

It is quite **normal** to feel anxious after a heart attack and/or heart surgery. You may feel anxious for a variety of reasons including:

- Being worried about having another heart attack
- Concern that you are not making very good progress
- Being worried about how successful your operation was
- Being afraid of dying
- Uncertainty about the future, e.g. work, finances
- Concern about the impact on your family

It is also common to feel as though your life has been turned upside-down due to restrictions in activities and to experience a (usually temporary) loss of role/s. It can take time for what has happened to sink in and you may experience 'good days' and 'bad days'. Most people start to feel better as your routine gets back to normal, but for some people it can take longer.

How does anxiety feel in the body?

Anxiety is the body's way of responding to danger or threat. Stress hormones such as Adrenaline and Cortisol are released into the blood stream to help prepare us to run away or fight – known as the 'fight or flight' response. This is a **normal** survival and protective reaction which is necessary to help us when we are in **actual** danger. Fight or flight can result in many different physical sensations in the body which include:

- Heart racing
- Increased breathing rate
- Tense muscles, including chest muscles
- Sweating & Trembling

Following a heart attack/surgery, this fight or flight reaction can be triggered even when we are **not** in any actual danger. From the list above, it is easy to see how symptoms of anxiety can be **misinterpreted** as another heart attack or that the operation hasn't worked.

What triggers anxiety?

There are two main ways that anxiety can be triggered. These include:

- Misinterpreting physical (especially chest) sensations as signs of another heart attack or believing that the operation hasn't worked.
- Starting to worry/have worrying thoughts about your heart which can trigger increased heart rate, breathing etc.

What maintains anxiety?

Anxiety is maintained by our thoughts and what we tell ourselves. For example:

- "I'm having another heart attack"
- "I'm going to pass out"
- "I can't cope"

These are known as automatic thoughts which make the anxiety worse.

What can help?

There are many helpful techniques to reduce and/or manage anxiety. These include:

- Breathing control
- Mindfulness
- Thought restructuring/alternative thinking.

For further information and guidance on these techniques, please contact your cardiac occupational therapist:

Telephone:

Useful information

Local Pharmacy - Your local pharmacies offer a wide range of services including information and general advice on symptom relief medicines as well as a prescription collection and delivery service.

Comments, Compliments or Complaints

The Patient Relations/Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) Department provides confidential on the spot advice, information and support to patients, relatives, friends, and carers.

Contact Us

Tel: 01942 822376 (Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm)

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Ask 3 Questions

Become more involved in decisions about your healthcare. You may be asked to make choices about your treatment. To begin with, try to make sure you get the answers to three key questions:

1. What are my options?
2. What are the pros and cons of each option for me?
3. How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?



How We Use Your Information

For details on how we collect, use, and store the information we hold about you, please see patient information leaflet, Ref. **Corp 006** How we use your information, this can be found on the Patient Information Leaflets page on the Trust website, see details on the front cover.

This leaflet is also available in audio, large print, Braille, and other languages upon request. For more information, please ask in the department/ward.

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