

## **Stress management may save lives**

Study shows increased life expectancy for cardiac patients who learn to unwind

David Tuller, New York Times

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Teaching cardiac patients how to manage stress may be as effective as aerobic exercise in decreasing the long-term risk of further coronary illness, and it may also reduce medical costs, researchers at Duke University Medical Center have found.

The idea that lowering stress can improve outcomes for heart patients is not new. But the Duke study, which followed patients for five years, is believed to be the first to measure the benefits of stress management over a sustained period and to demonstrate its potential economic benefits.

"Lots of physicians remain very skeptical about the value of psychological interventions in treating patients with medical disorders," said Dr. James Blumenthal, a Duke psychologist, who was the lead author. "Our data suggest that these interventions do affect the process."

The study, conducted in cooperation with the American Psychological Association, was published this month in the American Journal of Cardiology. It followed 94 men with previous heart problems and evidence of continuing ischemia, an insufficient flow of blood to the heart.

The subjects were divided into three groups. One attended a four-month aerobic exercise program; a second participated in weekly stress management classes for the same period, and a control group received just the usual care for cardiac patients, including medications and regular doctors visits. Aerobic exercise has long been considered a key to cardiac health.

The researchers followed up the patients each year for five years and recorded additional cardiac events, like heart attacks, angioplasty and bypass surgery.

After five years, members of the stress management group had an average of 0.8 additional cardiac events each, compared with 1.3 for the group that received only the usual care. When medical costs over five years were tallied, the stress management group averaged expenses of \$9,251 each compared with \$14,997 for the members of the control group.

The exercise group also experienced more cardiac events and higher average costs per member than the stress management group. But when the five-year results were adjusted for variables like age and cardiac history, the differences between the exercise and stress management groups were not seen as statistically significant.

The stress management program featured presentations on the physiological effect of stress on cardiovascular disease along with extensive training in muscle relaxation techniques. It also taught participants to recognize how they created stress in their own lives through cognitive distortions, like mistakenly blaming themselves for bad luck.

Despite the Duke study's suggestive findings, the authors themselves acknowledged some limitations. They pointed out that the sample was small and that even after five years the pool of participants suffered relatively few additional cardiac events, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions.

## LEARNING TO FIGHT STRESS

Cardiac patients in a study's stress management training were taught to identify and correct anxiety-inducing beliefs with several techniques, including:

- Performing muscle relaxation and deep breathing exercises.
- Pausing before taking action.
- Writing down other possible ways of interpreting events.
- Reviewing better ways to respond to stressful situations. .

Here are five examples of irrational thought patterns that produce anxiety.

**STRESSOR:** Catastrophizing: Exaggerating the harmful effect of something that happens to you.

**EXAMPLE:** When your boss offers mild criticism, you're sure you'll be fired.

**STRESSOR:** Personalizing: Seeing yourself as the cause of a negative event.

**EXAMPLE:** Your child fails a test, and you assume it's because you're a bad parent.

**STRESSOR:** All-or-nothing thinking: Reducing complex situations to absolutes.

**EXAMPLE:** You know you're not perfect, so you must be a total loser.

**STRESSOR:** Overgeneralizing: Interpreting one unpleasant situation as part of an endless pattern.

**EXAMPLE:** When you are turned down for a date, you're sure everyone will reject you.

**STRESSOR:** Mental filtering: Focusing on the bad while screening out the positive.

**EXAMPLE:** You obsess about your B in history when all your other grades were A's.