



By  
Navin S. Nikam, M.D.  
Nik Nikam, M.D.

A lady patient of mine had a heart attack. I thought she was a bit depressed. I sent her to a psychiatrist for evaluation. While the psychiatrist was talking to her, he said, "Ma'am you've got to quit smoking!"

"Why?" My patient asked with a dejection.

"Didn't your heart doctor tell you that smoking is bad for your heart," he replied.

"I can understand my heart doctor being worried about my smoking. Why are you worried about my smoking?" she asked in an irritating voice.

"Because, you are burning my couch!" He replied.

The relationship between smoking and heart disease is much easier to understand and address. However, the relationship between heart disease and depression or depression and heart disease is less appreciated, which may have a bearing on how these people respond in terms of their depressive symptoms or cardiac symptoms. Unfortunately more than 50% of the depressive symptoms go unrecognized.

### **Depression 101**

It is a mood disorder where people feel down, sad, and gloomy. Approximately 6% of men and 18% of women in the general population suffer from depression. The

## Cardiovascular Diseases & Depression

prevalence of depression in medically ill patients may be as high as 40%. Family history, physical health, mental state, stress in life, and chemical imbalances in the body can contribute to symptoms of depression. It is not personal failure or weakness.

The most common symptoms of depression are feeling down or lacking interest in all activities. Other symptoms include change in appetite or weight, Insomnia or hypersomnia, fatigue or loss of energy, agitation or slowing, feeling of guilt or worthlessness, inability to think or concentrate, thoughts of death or suicide, unusual tearfulness, social withdrawal, and feeling hopeless or helpless.

### **Depressive symptoms**

Depression can increase the risk of death after a cardiac event. Following cardiac surgery, it can intensify pain, fatigue, hamper recovery due to sluggishness, and promote isolation from the society. People may also express hostility and irritability. It also can promote bad habits such as drinking, smoking, overeating, among others, as a means of coping with the depressive symptoms.

However, when the depressive symptoms last for more than 3-4 weeks, and they occur on a daily basis, they not only can interfere with the recovery, but also make your symptoms worse. Depression also can increase the chances of blood clots.

### **Heart disease and depression**

Diagnosis of a heart disease, heart attack, or heart surgery can send chilling and repelling effects through that person's mind and have a long-term effect on that person's life. These effects can have a profound

influence on that person's ability to return to full functionality.

One out of six people with heart attack suffer from depressive symptoms. It is not unusual to have some sadness and depressive symptoms after a life changing event such as a heart attack or heart surgery. Generally, these symptoms last only a few weeks.

### **Depression and heart Disease:**

Patients with history of depression have an increased risk of developing cardiovascular diseases and increased risk of dying from cardiovascular diseases. Depression is associated with worse outcome following a heart attack. Depression is an independent risk factor for future cardiovascular events.

Patients with depression have been shown to have increased cortisol level (Stress hormone), increased platelet stickiness, heart irritability, and elevated blood pressure.

### **Diagnosis of depression**

Every practicing physician should be cognizant of the fact that people are prone for depression after a major illness. A simple questionnaire should bring out certain subtle symptoms that patients may normally not mention. Watch for symptoms such as lack of sleep, inability to concentrate, short temper, irritability, sadness, etc.

Recognizing the presence of depression symptoms is very important from the physician's point, which can be accomplished with observation and a simple questionnaire completed by the patient. If there are enough symptoms in favor of a depressive mood, treating these patients with mild anti-depressive medicines can help to reduce their depressive symptoms.

Sometimes, the symptoms may be related to certain medicines. Your physician should be able to identify that by looking at a long list of medicines you may be on.

Actually, there are no tests designed to diagnose depression. It is recognized by certain symptoms. Hence, simple screening questions can aid in the diagnosis of depression.

### **Depression screening test**

Please answer the following questions:

- *In the last two weeks, did you feel depressed or lost interest in all activities?*
- *Change in appetite or weight?*
- *Insomnia or hypersomnia?*
- *Fatigue or loss of energy?*
- *Agitation or slowing?*
- *Guilt or worthlessness?*
- *Inability to think or concentrate?*
- *Thoughts of death or suicide*
- *Unusual tearfulness?*
- *Social withdrawal?*
- *Hopelessness or helplessness?*

Five symptoms may indicate major depression, while 2 or 3 symptoms may signal a minor depression.

Two most important questions that can identify more than 95% of the patients with depression are:

1. *In the past one month have you felt down, depressed, or hopeless?*
2. *In the past one month have you had little pleasure or interest in doing things?*

### **Depression management**

It is a team effort between the physician and you. Your physician might recommend a combination of psychotherapy (talk sessions) and/or certain antidepressant drugs.

The antidepressant medicines belong to a class of drugs called Selective Serotonin Re-uptake

Inhibitors (SSRI) which have been found to be useful reducing depressive symptoms and are safe to use in cardiac patients. The commonly used drugs in this class include Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft, and Celexa. Wellbutrin (Zyban) and Effexor are useful as second line of drugs in the treatment of depression in cardiac patients.

### **Your role in depression treatment**

Simple pills are not going to alleviate your depressive symptoms. You have to take a very proactive step toward shifting your lifestyle-focus in a positive direction with proper diet, exercise, smoking cessation, weight control, and relaxation; which should provide a more up-beat and optimistic outlook toward your future.

In addition, you might also consider some other measures:

- *Get dressed everyday*
- *Take a daily walk*
- *Join a network of people with similar interest*
- *Have hobbies*
- *Increase social interaction*
- *Share your feelings with family*
- *Get a good night sleep*
- *Educate yourself about heart disease and depression*
- *Take charge in making decisions again.*

Depressive symptoms may begin showing improvements within 2-3 weeks. Research has shown that treating depression does not necessarily reduce cardiovascular events, but it certainly helps you handle the situation in a more positive manner.

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Nik Nikam, M.D.  
P: 281-265-7567  
[nikam@alltel.net](mailto:nikam@alltel.net)