



Sue Ann Says: Women and Their Physicians Should Take Stress to Heart

Can you die of a broken heart? Sherri Hansen, MD, a psychiatrist at Capitol Associates of Madison, says there is clinical evidence to support this euphemism.

Research indicates a strong relationship between depression and cardiovascular disease. But thus far, it's "a bit of a chicken and the egg thing," Dr. Hansen says. It's possible depression directly causes heart disease and poor outcomes. Or perhaps it's the behaviors associated with depression that impact cardiac health. Or people might become depressed as a reaction to heart disease. Most likely all three of these are factors.

Much data is emerging about the role of depression and anxiety disorders in cardiovascular disease, but few studies have examined this link in women. Here's what we do know:

- Heart disease is the leading cause of death in women in the US.
- Major depression in both men and women with recent heart attack or unstable angina more than doubles the risk of cardiac death.
- Women are diagnosed with depression, anxiety and mood disorders twice as frequently as men.

"Depression prolongs a state of chronic stress on our bodies, with profound physiological effects on the heart," Dr. Hansen told me. "Depression could be just as significant an independent risk factor for heart disease in women as obesity."

Chronic stress floods the body with stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline and reduces the "feel-good" hormone serotonin. Dr. Hansen explained that chronic stress also can lead to many risk factors for cardiac disease, such as diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. In addition, stress increases the heart rate and blood pressure, reduces blood flow to the heart, and can trigger blockages in the arteries. Behaviors associated with depression also increase the risk for heart disease and the likelihood of poor outcomes. Studies have shown that people with depression are less likely to take prescribed medications and follow lifestyle recommendations regarding diet, exercise, smoking cessation and alcohol consumption.

"You won't deal as well with heart disease if you are depressed," Dr. Hansen told me. "Heart disease requires careful self-management, such as cutting back on salt and fat and

following a strict medication and exercise regimen. People with depression often don't feel the motivation."

And, of course, many people become depressed following a diagnosis of cardiac disease or a major cardiac event – making a full recovery less likely. Dr. Hansen says this is especially true of women. She believes it is because women have less social support. Women tend to be the family caregivers, with no one to care for them physically and emotionally when they are ill themselves.

We can reduce our risk of cardiac disease through all the stuff we already know: don't smoke, get plenty of exercise and eat well. And Dr. Hansen says it is vital for women to reduce our risk of depression. Research shows that chronic emotional stress is one of the most potent triggers of depression. Thus, Dr. Hansen urges us to recognize and control the stress in our lives. We need to understand our limits, learn to delegate or just plain say no, and put ourselves in control of our lives instead of letting our lives control us. She encourages us to empower ourselves with strong, nurturing relationships. Because an unhappy marriage is the number one trigger for depression in women, Dr. Hansen emphasizes that women who are having marital problems find a marriage counselor and seek other emotional support.

Take your stress to heart...literally. Use this glorious time of year to incorporate new lifestyle habits and stress-reduction techniques, see sidebar for details. Follow Dr. Hansen's advice: kick back and relax for a change!

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
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The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF visit www.wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

Dr. Hansen's tips for a healthy heart and mind:

- Know your risks for heart disease such as family history, blood pressure and cholesterol. Make lifestyle changes as appropriate.
- Maintain a healthy diet. Fish oil capsules can be a great supplement for a healthy heart, but check with your doctor to make sure they are right for you.
- Exercise 20 minutes a day at least three times a week. Exercise not only protects against heart disease, it is a mood elevator.
- Talk with your doctor if you have persistent feelings of sadness, anxiety, hopelessness or an "empty" or flat mood; have experienced a change in weight,

eating or sleeping habits; have decreased energy; have become socially withdrawn; have thoughts of death or suicide; or have other symptoms of clinical depression.

- If you have cardiovascular disease, ask your doctor if a depression screening is appropriate.