



American Heart Association®

Hard Hats with Heart™



Toolbox Talks

How To Stay Heart Healthy, Even When You're Down

An estimated 1 in 10 of Americans ages 18 and older report experiencing depression, and that figure can be as high as 33 percent for heart attack patients. Just feeling down can lead to changes that affect your health, and not just because you may fall into habits that are bad for your heart. The biological and chemical factors that trigger mental health issues can also influence heart disease.

What is depression?

Depression is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how you feel, the way you think and how you act. Depression causes feelings of sadness and/or a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed. It can become debilitating and lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems which may decrease your ability to function at work and at home.

If you're struggling with depression, try these three steps to help:

1. **Identify the cause of your stress or anxiety and address it.** Seek therapy if necessary. Remember, feeling down for a few days is okay, but if it goes on for weeks, seek professional help.
2. **Choose healthy habits and don't rush it.** If you aren't in the habit of exercising, start gradually rather than putting pressure on yourself to get back to a rigorous routine. If reaching for unhealthy foods has become a habit, try using healthier cooking techniques or substituting ingredients. Instead of trying to "fix" everything at once, go step by step. This is especially true if one of the habits you want to break is a smoking habit.
3. **Seek support.** Ultimately, you have to take care of yourself to break the cycle of feeling down. That may look different for everyone, but things like exercise, gratitude, meditation, or simply doing things that you enjoy can help. And remember, sometimes you may feel like you have too much stress to handle on your own, and that is ok. If you are feeling overwhelmed by stress or anxiety, seek resources to help.

Frequently Asked Questions:

I'm just having a hard week. How will this affect my health?

While experiencing some level of stress is normal, increased anxiety can lead to unhealthy habits that will have longterm negative effects on your health. Focus on eating all four major food groups to provide your body with fuel! Monitor your numbers – blood pressure and cholesterol – to see what's changed.

Discussion Questions:

- What is something you do when you're feeling down?
- Who is your support system that you go to when you're struggling?