

Struggling  
to cope?

Can't relax?

Stressed out?

Trouble  
sleeping?

Feeling low?

## Psychological wellbeing in heart failure

**i** Living with heart failure can be challenging mentally as well as physically. This book contains information on the types of difficulties you may experience and how to get more support.

## About this booklet

The purpose of this booklet is to explain the types of psychological difficulties and distress that you may be experiencing with heart failure and to provide information about the psychology self-referral service which is available.

## What is heart failure?

Living with heart failure can be very challenging, not just physically, but mentally. While support from hospital staff, friends and loved ones is often very helpful, sometimes this is not enough and you may find yourself struggling with complex feelings and emotions.

While a certain amount of emotional distress is common, especially around the time of diagnosis, many individuals with heart failure experience emotional distress which is severe enough to have a negative impact on their quality of life. This can present itself in many ways; are you:

- **Struggling to cope with your condition?**
- **Feeling low?**
- **Stressed out?**
- **Unable to relax?**
- **Having difficulty sleeping?**
- **Feeling bad about yourself?**

If you find you are regularly experiencing these feelings, there may be a service which can help you.

## When do these difficulties become a problem?

Many individuals simply ignore these feelings without asking for help, hoping they will improve on their own. While sometimes these will naturally improve as you come to terms with your condition, sometimes this will make things worse.

If you feel that you are stuck, have reached a crisis point, or just aren't sure how bad your issues are, then you may find a meeting with a clinical psychologist helpful.

## But how do I know if I am struggling to cope?

While there are crucial warning signs to look out for (identified on page one) there are other signs which may show you are struggling to cope with your condition; in some cases these are not as easy-to-spot in day to day life. These can include:

- feeling bad about yourself for no reason or feeling like you have let yourself or your family down;
- feeling like you haven't come to terms with your diagnosis or are not coping with your health condition;
- you may no longer be enjoying activities or are struggling to find things interesting;
- being unable to stop worrying about your health, finances or family's wellbeing;
- regularly feeling nervous, anxious or on edge;
- being easily annoyed, angry or irritable;
- a general feeling of lethargy or that you "can't be bothered";
- feeling your relationships are becoming a challenge or struggle;
- feeling down, depressed or hopeless;
- being unable to stop focusing on how your heart is functioning;
- avoiding situations because you are scared of particular things you might encounter; and
- avoiding certain situations because you are scared of something awful happening.

- trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching TV;
- trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much;
- drinking alcohol or taking drugs to help you cope with your difficulties; and
- forgetting appointments and conversations.

These are just a few examples of how heart failure can have a negative impact on your state of mind and mental health and wellbeing.

## What can I do?

If you have any concerns or you're not sure what to do, you may wish to make an appointment with a clinical psychologist.

Clinical psychologists are trained to use talking and therapy to reduce your distress and find strategies to help you cope better with your condition.

Talking through problems can help you to put them into perspective and can also make you aware of different ways of handling these issues and coping with them.

You may find that you are able to discuss things that you find difficult to talk about with family and friends. Clinical psychologists can talk to you about your memory, attention and language and offer advice on any difficulties you may have in these areas.

Clinical psychologists will not, however, prescribe medication.

**An appointment can be organised within a few weeks and these last about 45 minutes.**

## What can I expect during my appointment?

During your first appointment, you will have the opportunity to talk about what is bothering you and how you would like this to change. Your psychologist will usually ask about other aspects of your life and personal experiences to gain a more complete understanding of your life and you as an individual. The clinical psychologist will be able to advise you on whether psychological therapy may be of help to you and if so, suggest a treatment plan tailored to your needs.

## Psychology no longer means lying on a couch

Some people will feel intimidated when coming in for their initial appointment; but you do not need to worry, relax. Clinical psychologists will not ask you to lie down on a couch; they understand what you are going through and are there to help you find a way of doing things that you are comfortable with.

## How do I make an appointment?

Clinical psychology is now available to people living with heart failure. If you would like to make an appointment with a clinical psychologist you can.

*Insert sticker with relevant local information here*

### **David, 34, recently diagnosed with heart failure**

“When I left hospital I was given a lot of medicines to take, several times a day. When I got home I started to feel like I couldn’t be bothered. I couldn’t face thinking about my diagnosis – it sounded so terminal. I didn’t want to tell my wife how I was feeling; I didn’t want to upset her. I’ve always been the one who looks after her and protects her. It ended up I didn’t want to leave the house or even get out of bed. I started seeing a clinical psychologist and they really listened to me. I wasn’t sure at first but after a while I felt I could really talk. They helped me to realise how hard I was on myself and how this was affecting the way I was feeling and what I felt like doing. I learnt lots of techniques to cope and manage when I felt overwhelmed, and after a while I realised I could cope on my own and felt back in control.”

### **Jane, 65, diagnosed with heart failure for three years**

“Heart failure makes me so breathless. It used to terrify me. It would get so bad sometimes that I thought I was about to die. I became so anxious I stopped going out. I even stopped spending time with my grandchildren. That started to make me feel really down. I referred myself to a clinical psychologist. Initially I thought it was going to be a waste of time, after all, heart failure is a physical problem. I was surprised. The psychologist showed me how what happens in my body is linked to how I feel, what I think and what I do. I was amazed how anxiety made my breathlessness worse. The relaxation exercises I was given are great. They help calm me down and make me feel more in control of my breathing. I was also supported to start doing more things again as I became less worried about becoming breathless. I still have heart failure. I still get breathless, but I feel more like me again.”



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