

Taming of the Hulk

Many of us know that anger and agitation provoke heart attacks. But we may think that it only happens to patients of cardiovascular diseases (CVD). The truth is that the importance of managing our anger to achieve a healthier heart is relevant to all, says Henry Lew, psychologist, National Healthcare Group Polyclinics.

Heart disease has many mind-body connections. Chronic stress, due to pressures at home, on the job or other sources, contributes to irritability and anger, and may subsequently create abnormally high blood pressure and circulation problems.

Your way of handling stress also influences how your cardiovascular system responds. Studies have shown that if stress makes you angry or irritable and you are not managing the anger well, you might be at greater risk of developing or worsening your heart disease. In fact, research has suggested possible connection between individuals of Type A personality (i.e. impatient, aggressive) and cardiovascular diseases.

Anger may increase the amount of certain hormones that cause plaque to build up in our arteries. We also tend to think that anger and heart diseases affect only angry males. However, women's smaller blood vessels may put them at higher risk, as plaque can build up more quickly. Hence both men and woman are equally at risk.

What we can do to manage our anger?

So what can we do to manage our anger? The general strategy is to manage your angry thoughts and feelings and to engage in alternative ways of responding to the stress and situation that generated the anger.

Cardiac Psychologist Robert Allen teaches his cardiac patients a three-step anger-management process which applies to anyone:

Step 1: Identify what makes us angry. Normally what makes us angry includes the following:

- The perception that we have been victimised or harmed
- The belief that the provoking person wants to deliberately harm us
- The belief that the OTHER person was wrong and he should have behaved differently, and that he was evil and tried to harm us.

Step 2: Identify which of our needs are not being met (e.g. respect or personal space)

Step 3: Find a way to meet the need. Express your needs not your anger. Or in some situations, decide to adjust to the fact that the need cannot be met. You can get equal if not more joy out from meeting other needs.



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How Can We Help a Loved One Who Has An Angry Heart ?

If you are a family member of someone who has CVD and he or she is easily angry, it will help to know that many patients with CVD are very sensitive to changes in their body, such as twinges of pain or increased fatigue. They may cry easily or become angry without reason. Don't take these things personally. Some of these emotions are the direct result of the stroke or heart attack. Others are a natural part of the recovery process. Being with them, listening attentively as they ventilate and problem-solving with them will help greatly.

Management of an Angry Heart

"Why do I have to be here? You can't help me!!" "I have to travel all the way to reach here and there was a jam! And I had to wait for so long" ...screamed Mr K.

Mr K went on complaining at the top of his voice about the things he was angry with: me and having to come for counselling; the doctor who had referred him for counselling and everything else under the sun that provoked him. Mr K had been referred to me for anger management.

During most of that first counselling session I had with him, he just went on and on about everything that frustrated him. Secretly, I was hoping to do something for him, to share with him ways to manage his anger. But with him talking non-stop, there was no way I could share any such tips. There was also the risk of being bombarded by him if I interrupted his ventilation, for I might be perceived as rude and that might fuel his anger further.

I noticed something though. Towards the end of the session, Mr K's voice had become softer and he seemed

more ready to talk about how to manage his anger. "Thank you for being there to hear me out. There is no one that I can talk to about all these things that are making me angry. And I am not sure why I am so easily angry nowadays. I know it is making my health worse, but I just can't help it," he said.

It turned out that what helped Mr K most was my being there and listening attentively to his problems. Thereafter, I worked quite successfully with him on ways to manage his anger.

A few months down the road, his health improved and it showed most significantly in his blood pressure level.

Mr K's experience highlightst to us that although anger is an emotion, we can choose how we want to manage it to achieve a healthier heart.

References from American Psychological Association, American Heart Association and CoHealth.