

Seven Hidden Risks that Improve Prognosis after Heart Attack

By Denise Barnes

There's nothing like a sudden heart attack to push you to make lifestyle changes you've been contemplating for months or years. A diagnosis of cardiovascular disease, cancer or other serious illness can really up the ante to get you over the motivational hump. Improving diet and exercise, quitting smoking, moderating drinking – these are well known risk areas you've likely heard or thought about. But what about lesser known risk areas that can negatively impact health, especially the health of the cardiovascular system?

In my work, I assess people's 'psychosocial' health after a heart attack. Psycho-social means the psychological and the social sides of life. Research isn't completely conclusive, but there's enough evidence to identify trends and areas that negatively impact cardiac recovery. Based on this field of research, my job is to check how my cardiac event survivors are faring in the following seven areas. When areas are troubled, we'll work together to help them improve their health picture.

You might follow along here, and do your own assessment to see where you stand. Rate yourself in these seven areas; low, medium or high risk. I'll recommend actions you can take to decrease these risks. Whether or not you're a cardiac event survivor, attending to these risk areas impacts your health positively. Beside your health, making changes like these improves quality of life

(QOL) (QOL = fun mixed with fulfillment). And that's worth braving the pain of change.

Some areas of life and stressful challenges can't be changed, it's true. Still, small tweaks can be made that make a huge difference, for the betterment of your health and longevity.

Risk #1) You've gone through major life changes in the last couple of years

Have you moved, retired, lost your job, lost a loved one, or had a child leave for college? Are you dealing with a major illness? Are you a caregiver for a parent, child or older relative? Sudden changes, like a health crisis, can cause your stress level to go through the roof. This can put your health at risk to the havoc it wreaks with your immune system and your physical equilibrium.

Keep in mind that even positive life events, like a wedding or new job, increase stress because they shake up your equilibrium. Some roll with stress more easily than others, so a lot will depend on how you cope. Still, you might tend to underestimate stress' impact on your health until you're looking back at your life.

While you often can't change or stop these events, just be aware that **they may negatively impact health for some months or years.**

Recommendations / Possible Actions:

a) **Examine how much you have on your plate**, in addition to these changes. Keep it realistic; in fact, you may want to do less than

usual at times like these. If too much is going on, see if you can offload some projects for now, or get some help.

b) **Make sure you've been taking enough down time.** Plan a vacation, schedule time for friends and fun. People tend to delete these activities when stressed but that's the opposite of what's needed. Do what you can to take more care of yourself and to strengthen your reserves, especially if this stress will be impacting you for an extended time.

Risk #2) Your social network has dwindled or is bugging you

After a heart attack, those who feel isolated or lonely had a poorer prognosis. But if you're married, you could also be at risk – that is, if your relationship is stressful or communication is troubled. Many things can cause friendships to change – people move, differences arise, work gets busier for a time. These days of social media may also change your frequency of face to face encounters; it offers some connection, though it's not the same as sharing a rousing chorus around the piano.

Close encounters with good friends are super nutritious for your heart and your health. If you've made good friends, they're worth cultivating, even if they're long distance. Disagreements come up; if a good talk might help repair a previously close friendship, it's worth the extra effort.

Possible Actions:

a) **Need more friends?** Most of us do. Plan to take a few months for this project, and decide how you'll make this happen. You might investigate areas of interest on meetup.com in your area. Put the

phone down more when you are out and about doing activities you enjoy to see if there are interesting humans lurking. See what happens when you create an intention to make friends, and pay more attention to your social environment.

b) **Get braver with conflict.** Most people prefer to avoid conflict, but in the long run, this increases stress. Conflict is natural, and tends to happen with those we care about the most. Learning “communication skills”, can have a positive impact on many areas of life, as you learn to peacefully assert yourself and handle issues more skillfully. Search on google, or schedule a couple of sessions with a therapist who can walk you through tips for difficult conversations. You can even enlist an objective comrade to help you test drive the conversation you need to have. Then heave a sigh of relief – it’s a mark of maturity and resilience to be able to pull off these meaningful, though challenging, discussions.

Risk #3) You are feeling depressed or anxious lately

A certain amount of emotional distress is normal for humankind. But when the emotional stress burden starts to interfere with functioning or is darkening your usual outlook, your body and psyche suffers.

A common way to rate emotional stress is to look at the last two weeks, and see if you’re feeling depressed or anxious most of the day, most every day. If yes, you might have “clinical” depression/anxiety, versus more of the regular ups and downs most people deal with. About one quarter of people deal with this.

You can also rate your depression or anxiety on a 1–10 scale – what number would you give it in general, for the last two weeks, if 10 is the top of the scale? If my clients are above a five, that tells me they might benefit from a few counseling sessions.

Possible actions:

a) **Exercise, medication and therapy** are all shown to help anxiety and depression. Combinations of the above help even more. If you are dealing with health issues or other life stress, you don't need to also be struggling with mood problems. This can make challenges seem even more insurmountable. It also contributes to the tendency to make poorer health choices when we're under the influence, and that can quickly undermine progress if you're working on getting healthier.

b) **If seriously depressed or anxious, get help.** Google “mental health services” together with your city or county, or ask a friend for a referral to a therapist. Most counties offer sliding scale therapy or phone counseling if cost or distance is an issue. Visit at least three therapists to ensure a good fit. Therapy can follow a brief format (3–6 sessions) and should be helpful quickly. Medication may take 6–8 weeks to be felt, and sometimes improvement is more evident to your friends and family than it is to you. Even temporary help from medication to get you through a crisis time can be smart.

Risk #4) You are stressed about finances or work

We spend a large percentage of our time at work, so it makes sense that this is an important area to consider in viewing your

health picture. Work brings up finances, and this is another common area of stress for many people, even wealthy ones.

Finances can be an area that feels non-negotiable, or takes a lot of effort to change. Similar to unhappy marriages, people decide to stay at unsatisfying jobs because change can be so daunting. Though again, in the long run, avoidance of the truth can multiply stress. Better to take small actions and see what helps.

Possible Actions:

a) **Live within your means.** Regardless of income, living with your means is the first intelligent move for fiscal fitness. You can use apps or Internet software to help you track your spending. Check your bank's website or mint.com for budget helpers. Some advice suggests a two job approach to debt management. There is unlimited information out there for financial areas. Search for helpful info. at your nearest library or internet browser.

b) **Aim to increase income and fulfillment:** Just like making friends, improving your work takes time and often, additional skills. These can include salary/raise negotiation, small business training, job interview skills, or writing skills, for example. Scope out first if you can increase your current income and job, even in your same company. Get some help to make it interesting! You can partner with others and/or employment resources in your state like workforce.com to investigate working with skills that fulfill you. Even if you're retired, you may still want to investigate hobbies or other contributions that may also increase income and happiness.

Risk #5) You are frustrated or angry more than half the time

Anger, hostility, frustration –some amount of this is normal in life. But if you spend more than half the time stewing over the news, politics, sports, your daughter’s sass, or the bosses irritating manner, it might be time for a reality check. On that good old 1–10 scale, in the last two weeks, what level of anger or frustration would you say you dealt with in your day to day? If above 5, let’s talk.

Good stress management includes tools for handling anger and keeping things in perspective. Don’t forget that anger has positive aspects, like helping you advocate for yourself, saying no to over activity, and setting boundaries when needed. You also can go through a period of feistiness if you’ve working to reverse a tendency to be too passive.

Note that anger at outside sources can be a sign that something is amiss in your own life. Many of my clients bemoan the state of the world when their marriage is less than ideal or they secretly long to make more of a difference in the world. Try some of these steps to work through unhealthy amounts of anger.

Possible Actions:

a) **Examine the ‘charge’ more closely.** In therapy lingo, you have a ‘charge’ about something when it pushes your buttons in a way that’s out of proportion to the situation. This is usually due to past history that makes you extra sensitive. One way you can check on this is to just sit for a moment, get quiet, take a few deep breaths, and ask yourself what is going on under the surface of this particular trigger. Sometimes you’ll get an instant answer, a picture of a past event, or at least some clues to explore, so that you can see more accurately what’s triggering your anger. That awareness

can help you keep things more in perspective when those particular buttons get pushed.

b) Take action where you can; manage stress when it can't be changed. One helpful stress management edict mimics the Serenity prayer. Take action to change the things you can, surrender when you can't. Action may include getting more information about an issue, planning the step you'll take or enlisting help. Surrendering may mean trusting to a deeper intelligence beyond your rational mind, taking care of your own life areas that are messy, or adopting regular stress management practices so you handle stress and anger better. Exercise (kick boxing anyone?) and creative expression are also hugely helpful here.

Risks #6) You don't rest, take breaks, or drop your stress level enough

Welcome to life in the Type A first world. You may not work as hard physically as our predecessors did, or as third world residents do, but it seems rare that you totally "unplug" from work and other duties. And when you do, you might choose to watch TV or Netflix, or some other activity that doesn't feed your creative and generative side as much as a non-digital format might. But we need more than a few hours of TV to really drop into deep relaxation. We need to really shift gears to shift out of that fight, flight or freeze response that kicks in with the smallest anxiety.

In the 70s, Western researchers discovered the "relaxation response" and found that it lowers blood pressure, decreases muscle tension and lowers heart and breathing rates. It causes hormone shifts that benefit the immune system. Building resilience

requires that you broaden your repertoire for stress management to include at least three to six things that really help you completely drop your stress level – regularly. In a few well-known cardiac rehab programs, relaxation time is recommended to be at least an hour a day. This regular time is like making a deposit to your relaxation bank, and the “interest” that accumulates equals greater resilience toward life’s challenges and surprises.

Possible Actions:

a) **Get a relaxation CD from your library or similar app.** There are four main types of the relaxation response practices – see which ones you like best, and find 3 CDs or apps for your personal library. Commit to a regular relaxation practice for 3 weeks, and see how this works for you. Keep a notebook and pick some areas to measure before and after – stress level, amount of sleep, poor choices in health behaviors, etc.

b) **Take a meditation or yoga class,** and establish a regular home practice for yourself. Again, you might have to try three versions of each or more, to find what works well for you. You can do your research ahead of time, on google or at your favorite local library. Even ten minutes a day makes a difference and you can slowly increase your practice time as you start to reap the benefits.

Risk #7) Your life satisfaction index is puny

One of the things I’ll ask clients in their psychosocial assessment after heart surgery is to rate the degree they are living the life they want to be living. On that 1–10 scale, if 10 were great, **what number would you rate your life satisfaction?**

Your rating says a lot about your life. Are you good with a 6 or would you rather be at least a 7.5? Reaching a little further for more meaningful activities or desires can take time and energy. Still, even taking a baby step toward a desire can shift your rating, and fast.

Don't think you have to reach the goal before you'd see some improvement here. Once you decide, "Yes, that's worth doing" (i.e., "I'm worth taking this action", or "My health is worth this time investment"), you can also decide to enjoy the process of getting there.

Possible Actions:

a) **Update your "field of dreams" list.** If you could do anything and not fail, what might you do that would be outrageously fun or interesting? And how would you take one small step to dabble in this area? Try a sliver of your dream fragment and see if it is as enjoyable or satisfying as you suspected.

b) **Consult with a friend or acquaintance who appears to be smiling too much.** Ask if they're as happy as they seem, and how they got there. See if they have any advice for you to improve your satisfaction or to follow a dream that beckons. When in doubt, try helping or mentoring others; younger family members, new colleagues. Or try giving back, "paying it forward", in some way.

How are you doing with these risk areas? What do you do now?

How does your health picture look, when you consider these seven hidden health risk areas? Maybe you're doing great. Maybe not so much, and you're feeling a bit overwhelmed with the seventeen action steps that you want to try.

To keep things manageable, you might name one area to start with, listing all the actions that can help. You might partner with friends, or announce your plans to your network to keep you motivated.

The good news is, just looking at these areas puts you ahead of the curve. Taking a proactive stance to improving health is much better than letting it happen by default, don't you think? Life changes that ambush us can be much more disruptive. Once you decide to initiate your own changes, better health, less stress and more life satisfaction can make each day hold a little more joie de vivre.

About Denise Barnes

Denise Barnes, MA, LPC is a licensed therapist, health coach, stress management consultant and Motivational Interviewing trainer who has worked in mental health and health care since 1992. Her passion for supporting people with life changing illness started in 1983 when her family dealt with her father's cancer. She partners with clients to help them improve health, masterfully handle stress, and make time for what is meaningful in life. An engaging speaker and trainer, Denise's warm and humorous demeanor puts clients at ease, so they become empowered to use their own wisdom to change their health and quality of life.

Contact Denise

If you are dealing with serious illness and wish to get through it with grace and a sensible plan, you can get on Denise's e-list for regular inspiring tips, or get a free consult by phone. **Contact info, links.**