Manage Your Stress:
Preventing and Coping with Heart Disease in Women

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Did you know?

- **One in 4** women in the United States dies of heart disease, while **1 in 30** dies of breast cancer. *(NIH: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)*

- **Every 7 minutes** in Canada someone dies from heart disease or stroke. That's **206 people** dying from cardiovascular disease and stroke every day! *(HRI: Heart Research Institute)*

- Research shows that more than **95 %** of those who die from heart disease have at least one of the major risk factors such as **cigarette smoking**, **high blood pressure**, **high blood cholesterol**, **overweight**, **physical inactivity**, and **diabetes**. *(NIH: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)*

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Risk Factors for Heart Disease

Controllable Factors

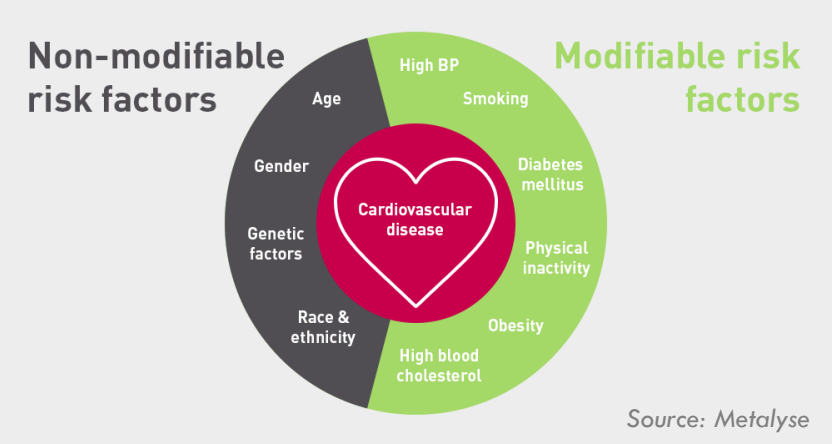
- Cigarette smoking
- High blood pressure
- High blood cholesterol
- Being overweight
- Physical inactivity
- Diabetes

Emotional Influence

- Stress
- Depression
- Anger\hostility

Uncontrollable Factors

- Age (65 and over for women)
- Family history
- Early Menopause



HRI: Heart Research Institute

Protective Factors

- **Supportive relationships**
- **Stress management tools:**
  - Relaxation techniques
  - Heart coherent breathing
  - Mindfulness meditation
- **Lifestyle changes:**
  - Regular physical activity
  - Enough sleep
  - Nurture yourself
  - Time Management

Harvard Health Publishing

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HeartMath Institute

- Research has shown that, contrary to prior beliefs, the **heart** plays an important role in our **emotional experience**.
- Emotions are a result of the interaction of the **brain**, **heart** and **body**.
- Several studies have identified the relationship between emotions and the heart.
- New insight into understanding how the activity of the heart is linked to our emotions and our **health**, **vitality** and **well-being**.
- The **heart** is in a constant **two-way dialogue** with the **brain.**

The Heart-Brain Connection

- The heart actually **sends more** signals to the brain than the brain sends to the heart! *(HeartMath Institute)*

- Significant effect on **brain functioning**
  - For instance, emotional processing as well as higher cognitive faculties such as attention, perception, memory, and problem-solving. *(HeartMath Institute)*

- During **stress** and **negative emotions**, heart rate can be erratic and irregular which can cause neural signals traveling from the heart to the brain to inhibit higher cognitive functions.
  - Limits our ability to **think clearly, remember, learn, reason, and make effective decisions** *(HeartMath Institute)*

HeartMath Institute

Heart Rhythm

- The normal variability in heart rate is due to the two branches of the **autonomic nervous system (ANS)—**the part of the nervous system that regulates most of the body's internal functions.
- **Sympathetic** nerves act to **accelerate heart rate**
- **Parasympathetic** (vagus) nerves **slow it down.**
- The sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the ANS are continually interacting to maintain cardiovascular activity in its optimal range and to permit appropriate reactions to changing external and internal conditions.

Emotions and the Heart

- Research has shown that as we experience feelings like:
  - **Anger**
  - **Frustration**
  - **Anxiety**
  - **Insecurity**

  = our heart rhythm patterns become more **erratic,** which in turn can make as more vulnerable to heart disease.

- These erratic patterns are sent to the emotional centers in the brain, which it recognizes as **negative or stressful feelings**. These signals create the actual feelings we experience in the heart area and the body.

The Role of Stress & Anger

- Research has shown that the risk of heart disease is significantly increased when we experience **stressful emotions** such as **anger, frustration** or **irritation**.

- These emotions create a **chain reaction** in the body:
  - **stress hormone** levels increase
  - **blood vessels** constrict
  - **blood pressure** rises
  - the **immune system** is weakened
  - chronic stress may damage **artery walls**

- Leads to a strain on the heart and other organs, and eventually lead to serious health problems.

American Heart Association and HeartMath institute

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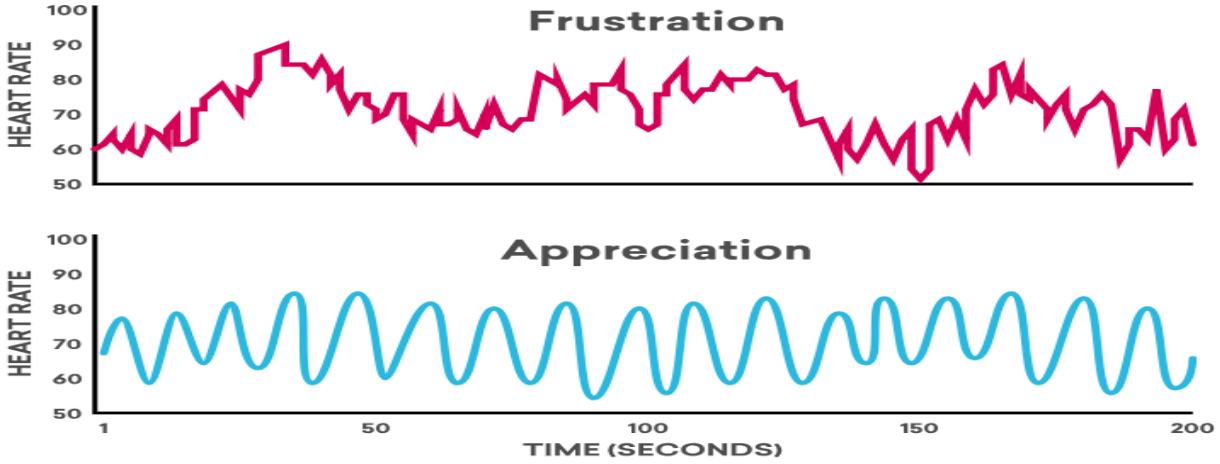
Heart Rhythm and Emotions

- **Emotional stress**: **anger**, **frustration**, and **anxiety**—gives rise to heart rhythm patterns that appear **irregular** and **erratic.** *(HeartMath Institute)*

- **Positive emotions: love**, **care**, **appreciation** and **compassion**—allow the heart to beat in a **stable rhythm** which benefits the entire body, affects how we perceive, think, feel, and perform. *(HeartMath Institute)*
  - Harmonious heart rhythms, are considered to be indicators of cardiovascular efficiency and nervous system balance.
  - This lets the brain know that the heart feels good and often creates a gentle warm feeling in the area of the heart.



The Role of Positive Emotions

- Learning to **shift out of stressful** emotional reactions to these heartfelt emotions can have profound positive effects on the **cardiovascular system** and on our **overall health**.
- **Appreciation** is one of the most concrete and easiest positive emotions for individuals to self-generate and sustain for longer periods.
- Almost anyone can find something to genuinely appreciate.
  - By simply **recalling** a time when you felt sincere appreciation and **recreating that feeling.**
  - This can increase your **heart rhythm coherence**, reduce emotional stress and improve your health.

The Intelligent Heart

- In the past, the role of the heart was thought to simply pump blood throughout the body.
- However, historically across different cultures, the heart had a metaphorical role of being regarded as a source of **wisdom**, **spiritual insight**, **thought**, and **emotion**.
- In the new field of **neurocardiology**, scientists have discovered that the heart possesses its own **intrinsic nervous system** —a network of nerves so functionally sophisticated as to earn the description of a **"heart brain."**
  - Ability to **independently** **sense**, **process information**, **make decisions**, and even to demonstrate a type of **learning** and **memory.**

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The Intelligent Heart

- Research has demonstrated that the heart is a **hormonal gland.**
  - Manufactures and secretes numerous **hormones** and **neurotransmitters** that profoundly affect brain and body function.
  - **Oxytocin**—the "**love**" or "**bonding hormone.**"

- Research has shown that the heart not only responds to emotion, but that the signals generated by its rhythmic activity actually play a major part in determining the **quality** of our emotional experience from moment to moment.
- These heart signals also profoundly impact perception and cognitive function by virtue of the heart's extensive communication network with the brain.
- The heart plays a key role in intuition.

HeartMath Institute

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Tools

Tools to regulate heart rate variability and regulate heart health:

- Diaphragmatic breathing
- Mindfulness meditation
- Breathing using heart coherence

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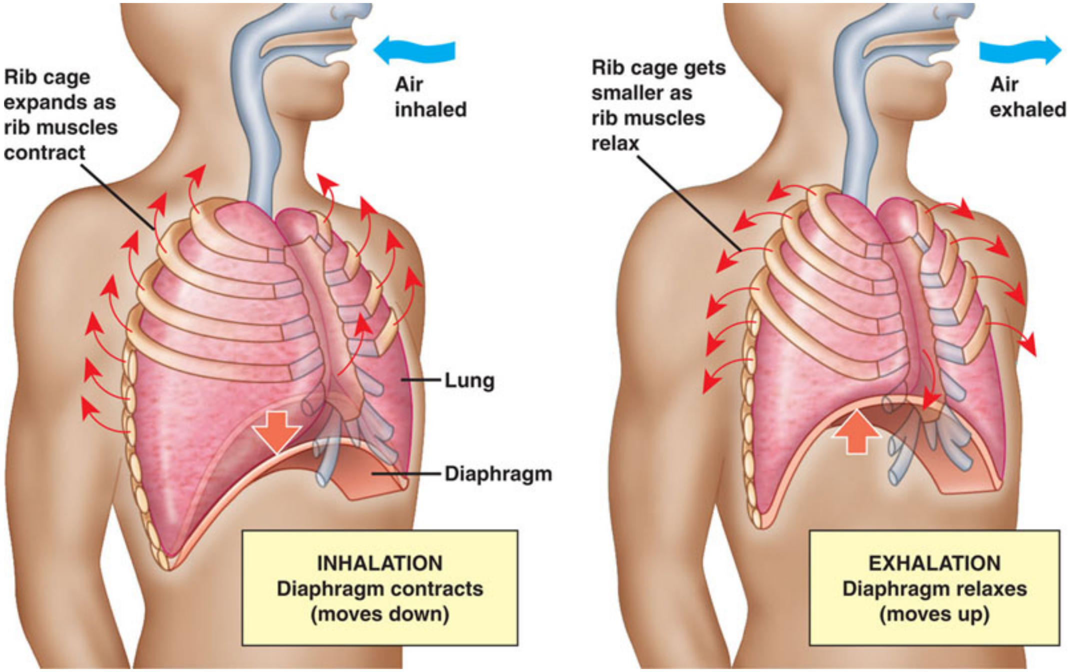
The Role of Breathing

- Breathing patterns modulate the **heart's rhythm**
- Breathing **slowly and rhythmically** at a 10-second rhythm allows to generate a coherent heart rhythm
- Breathing rhythmically is a useful intervention to shift out of stressful emotional state and into increased coherence

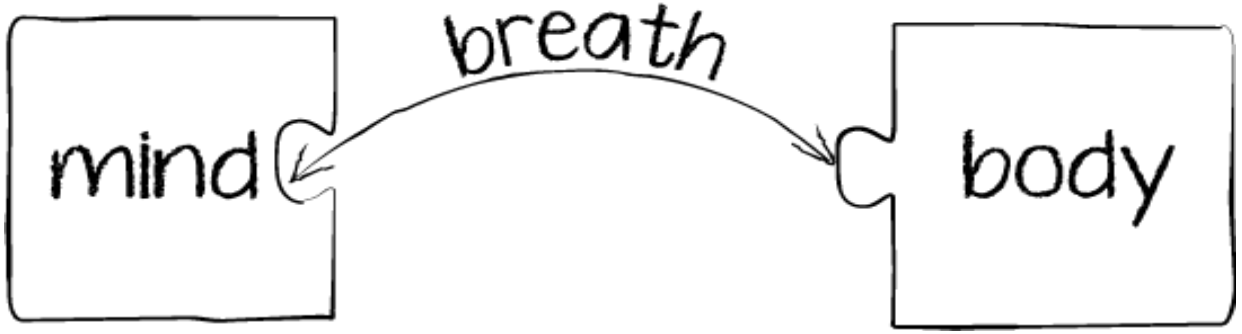
Abdominal Relaxation

Exercise:

Diaphragmatic breathing



Mindfulness Meditation



"Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; On purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."

-Jon Kabat-Zinn
Founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

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Heart Coherence Breathing

- Create a coherent state in about a minute with these simple but powerful steps.
- **Step 1 Heart Focus** – focus your attention on the area around your heart, the area in the centre of your chest. If you like, place your hand over the centre of your chest to help to keep your attention in the heart area.
- **Step 2 Heart Breathing** – breathe deeply but normally and feel as if your breath is coming in and going out through your heart area. As you inhale, feel as if your breath is flowing in through your heart, and as you exhale, feel it leaving through this area. Breathe slowly and casually, a little deeper than normal. Continue breathing with ease until you find a natural inner rhythm that feels good to you.
- **Step 3 Heart Feeling** – as you maintain your heart focus and heart breathing, activate a positive feeling. Recall a time when you have felt a feeling of love or appreciation. One of the easiest ways to generate a positive heart-based feeling is to remember a special place you've been to or the love you feel for a close friend or family member or treasured pet. This is the most important step.

Thank you !

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