

Heart and Soul HEALTHY

Love, spirituality, and your prescription for wellness

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What's the condition of your heart? When asked this question, most people will tell you their medical stats—blood pressure, cholesterol level, and maybe the results of their last EKG.

Now consider the condition of your “emotional” heart. Yes, the heart is an organ in the chest that pumps blood, but it is often considered the seat of our emotions, and even our spirit. Aristotle believed the heart was the center of all emotion. And anyone who has been heartbroken feels that heaviness in the center of the chest. A sense of joy noticeably lifts and lightens our hearts. When we are excited, our hearts beat faster. Life experiences would indicate that the heart is, in some way, connected to our emotions.

Often we tend to look at ourselves as separate parts that fit together to make one unit, like a jigsaw puzzle. With that mindset, we approach our health in a disjointed way. The reality is that each of our body systems is interconnected and dependent upon one another. Our heart, which is part of our circulatory system, does not beat unless our brain, part of our nervous system, tells it to.

Your body also responds to the way you think, feel, and act. In other words, your physical health is strongly tied to your emotional health. When you are stressed, anxious or upset, your body tries to tell you that something isn't right. For example, high blood pressure or a stomach ulcer



might develop after a particularly stressful event, such as the death of a loved one.

In the same way, experiencing love can be good for your overall health, including your heart health. Research shows that married people live an average of five years longer than those who are single. They also have lower rates of heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, and other chronic ailments. When you are feeling love, blood vessels relax and your blood flows more freely.

You have probably heard of someone dying from a broken heart? There are cases that indicate this may be so.

Normally, the cause of a heart attack is an artery blockage. However, in certain heart attack deaths, the functions of the heart are severely reduced yet there are no blockages in the arteries whatsoever. We find that often, in these cases, the patient has experienced a recent significant stressor—like the death of a spouse.

As you might guess, unloving emotions like anger and hostility may raise your risk of heart disease significantly. Scientists are not yet sure exactly how, but research indicates that anger may produce direct physiological effects on the heart and arteries. These emotions quickly activate the “fight or flight response,” causing stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, to speed up your heart rate and breathing and give you a burst of energy. Blood pressure also rises as your blood vessels constrict.

Becoming angry on occasion can be useful, but frequent and prolonged anger can cause wear and tear on your heart and cardiovascular system—accelerating the process of atherosclerosis, making the heart pump harder, constricting blood vessels, and even increasing levels of glucose and fat in the blood.

Though it takes some effort, you can let go of destructive emotions and choose more loving thoughts and behaviors. If you’re not part of a loving couple, engage in other types of loving relationships—love of your community, your church. Try volunteering with a group that allows you to reach out and share love with others in need. Any act of compassion, selflessness, or altruism offers the experience of inner peace—a characteristic of spirituality and associated with a loving heart.

With the realization that medical science does not have all the answers to every question about disease and wellness, many Americans are becoming interested in the role of spirituality in their health and healthcare. A growing research database actually documents a link between spirituality and cardiovascular disease. This is a very personal matter, but I think everyone can agree that we all need peace, love, and a meaningful life to feel truly healthy.

We have control over the standard risk factors for heart disease—cigarette smoking, excessive alcohol, physical inactivity, poor diet, high blood cholesterol, obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure. In addition to these, consider the choices that affect your emotions and spirit and, quite possibly, the condition of your heart. 🍷



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