

## Managing Feelings About Heart Failure

The Heart Failure Society of America (HFSA) is a non-profit organization of health care professionals and researchers who are dedicated to enhancing quality and duration of life for patients with heart failure and preventing the condition in those at risk. These educational modules have been developed to help patients, their families, and individuals at risk for heart failure understand and cope with the disease. For more information about the Society please visit our web site [www.hfsa.org](http://www.hfsa.org).



[www.hfsa.org](http://www.hfsa.org)

**Heart Failure Society**  
of America

## Contact Information

Please write down important contact information in the space below. You may also want to share this information with family members and friends.

### Doctor Treating Me for Heart Failure:

Name:

Address:

City:

State:

Zip:

Phone number:

Fax:

E-mail:

### Other Important Phone Numbers:

Ambulance, fire department, or emergency services: **911**

Pharmacy:

Other doctors or nurses:

## Introduction

Heart failure can cause physical problems that affect your sense of well-being. You should also be aware that you may experience feelings or emotions such as depression and anxiety as a result of having this disease. These emotions can be distressing and can affect your overall wellness.

By recognizing these emotions for what they are, you can take positive steps that can help you feel better. Learning how to manage feelings is part of taking control of heart failure and living successfully with the disease.

This module will provide information on:

- Feelings many people have after they are diagnosed with heart failure.
- Why managing feelings is part of a successful heart failure treatment plan.
- Things you can do to manage depression and anxiety.

It will help you:

- Recognize feelings of depression and anxiety.
- Take positive steps to manage feelings about heart failure.
- Learn when to seek professional help for emotional problems.



## Common Feelings About Heart Failure

It is common for people to feel depressed or anxious after learning that they have a chronic disease such as heart failure. For some people, these feelings decrease or go away after they learn more about heart failure. They see that it is possible to cope with the condition and live good quality lives. For others, however, the feelings may continue or even get worse over time.

Although people with heart failure commonly experience depression or anxiety, that does not mean you have to accept living with these feelings. If you continue to feel depressed or anxious, it is important for your health that you take positive steps to manage these problems, instead of just waiting for them to get better on their own.



# Recognizing Depression and Anxiety

Everyone feels anxious or blue some of the time. But if these feelings persist and they interfere with your ability to do and enjoy your daily activities, or if your relationships are affected, you should seek help.

You may be depressed if you have any of the following symptoms for more than two weeks:

- Down mood
- Feeling blue
- Irritability
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- Withdrawal from others
- Excessive sleepiness
- Feeling worthless or guilty
- Hopelessness
- Suicidal feelings
- Preoccupation with death

Also keep in mind that people who are depressed often feel tired and have no energy. They may lose interest in sex, have trouble sleeping, and lose their appetite. Although fatigue and loss of appetite are also common symptoms of heart failure, they are more likely due to depression if accompanied by any of the symptoms listed above.

You may be anxious if you have any of the following symptoms for more than two weeks:

- Excessive worry
- Fear
- Tension
- Feeling keyed up or always on edge
- Restlessness
- Feeling shaky

Many people in our society feel there is some stigma associated with having emotional problems like depression or anxiety. As a result, they may be reluctant to talk to anyone about how they are feeling. But having emotional problems is nothing to be ashamed about. It is important to recognize and treat depression and anxiety. If you are having difficulties coping with feelings about heart failure, you should seek help and support. In other words, if depression and anxiety are interfering with your life or causing distress, it is important for you to seek help from your doctor or nurse.

## What You Can Do About Your Feelings

There are many things that you can do to eliminate depression and anxiety and improve your quality of life. Try the following:

- One of the most powerful things you can do to combat depression and anxiety is to talk about these feelings with someone. Sometimes the simple act of saying a problem or worry out loud makes it more manageable and less overwhelming.  
  
Consider talking to a trusted friend, family member, someone else with heart failure, or your doctor or nurse. Your doctor or nurse can also help you explore other treatment options for emotional problems.
- Ask your family and friends for support. People who have more emotional support from family and friends often are less depressed and anxious. Unfortunately, people who are depressed or anxious tend to isolate themselves. This only makes emotional problems worse. So, reach out to family and friends. Spend more time doing activities you enjoy with them or just have a meal or a conversation together.
- Take a more active role in managing heart failure by learning more about the disease. It will help you feel more in control. Research has shown that people who take more control of their disease are less depressed and anxious.
- Follow your treatment plan. If you take your medications as prescribed, follow a low-sodium diet, monitor your weight and symptoms, and keep active, you can feel better and have fewer symptoms. Feeling better physically can decrease depression and anxiety.

- Exercise regularly and increase your activity level. Regular activity or exercise is an effective treatment for depression and anxiety. See Module 5: Exercise and Activity for information on how to become more active.
- Try to find new activities to enjoy. Many people with heart failure find that getting involved in a new activity helps them keep their mind off of their symptoms and gives them a new outlook on life. For example, consider volunteering to help at an organization or agency, or with heart failure group activities. Some health care organizations have opportunities for patients to visit and help other patients.
- Consider joining a support group for patients with heart failure or heart disease. Some people find it helpful to discuss their feelings with other people who have similar problems. A support group can provide you with the assistance you need to better cope with your feelings. Your doctor or nurse can help you find a support group, if one is available in your community.

However support groups are not for everyone. So do not feel bad if you try it, and it is not right for you.

## Other Tips for Decreasing Depression and Anxiety



- Get a good night's sleep. Research has shown that people who do not feel rested, or who do not get enough sleep often feel depressed. If you have persistent difficulty sleeping, ask your doctor or nurse about techniques or medications that can help you.
- Make a plan for activities with family and friends. This will help you get out and about, and reduce your isolation.
- Try to get outside everyday, even if it is only for a few minutes. Dress appropriately. On extremely hot or muggy days, go outside during the morning or evening when it is cooler. Similarly, during cold weather, go out during the warmest time of day.
- Treat yourself to something special whenever you are feeling more depressed or anxious. This might mean going to the movies, shopping, or just visiting with friends either in person or on the telephone.

## Seeking Professional Help

If your depression or anxiety is severe, long lasting, or does not get better, you should seek help from a psychologist, psychiatrist, or psychiatric nurse practitioner. These professionals help people manage emotional problems. Your family doctor, or your heart failure doctor or nurse can refer you to one of these specialists. It is important to seek help for depression or anxiety, because these conditions can worsen your overall health.

Medicines can also be used to treat depression and anxiety. If you have moderate to severe depression or anxiety that is long lasting and interferes with daily life, medication may be appropriate. Ask your doctor or nurse about medication, especially if your depression or anxiety persists even though you have tried the techniques described in this module.



## Learn More

You can learn more about how to take control of your heart failure by reading the other modules in this series. You can get copies of these modules from your doctor or nurse, as they become available. Or you can check the Heart Failure Society of America web site at: [www.hfsa.org](http://www.hfsa.org).

The topics covered in the other modules include:

- Introduction: Taking Control of Heart Failure
- How to Follow a Low-Sodium Diet
- Heart Failure Medicines
- Self-Care: Following Your Treatment Plan and Dealing with Your Symptoms
- Exercise and Activity
- Tips for Family and Friends
- Lifestyle Changes
- Advance Directives
- Heart Rhythm Problems
- How to Evaluate Claims of New Heart Failure Treatments and Cures

These modules are not intended to replace regular medical care. You should see your doctor or nurse regularly. The information in these modules can help you work better with your doctor or nurse.

Notes:

