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Mind, Body, and Heart

Stress, Sleep, and Recovery

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Quick Summary

Your heart is deeply connected to your emotional state and nervous system. Managing stress, prioritising sleep, and maintaining social connections are clinical necessities for cardiovascular health. This guide explains how stress affects your heart, why 7-8 hours of quality sleep is essential, simple breathing exercises to regulate your nervous system, and the protective power of social connection.

Understanding Stress and Its Impact on Your Heart

Stress, anxiety, anger, and depression are not just feelings; they have direct biological effects on your cardiovascular system. When you experience chronic stress, your autonomic nervous system activates the “fight or flight” response, releasing hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. Over time, this damages your arteries, raises blood pressure, promotes inflammation, and accelerates heart disease.

Anger, in particular, causes blood vessels to constrict, increases heart rate and clotting, and sustains harmful cardiovascular stress when unresolved. Anxiety keeps your body in a state of alertness, disrupting sleep and raising heart rate. Depression affects your motivation to care for yourself, worsening heart health through both biological and behavioural pathways.

Recognising and addressing these emotional factors is as important as managing cholesterol or blood pressure.

Key Takeaway

Chronic stress and negative emotions cause measurable harm to your heart. Addressing your emotional health is essential for cardiovascular recovery and prevention.

Building Psychological Resilience

Some people cope better with stress due to psychological resilience — the ability to find meaning, maintain hope, and use effective coping strategies. Resilience is linked to lower stress hormones, better autonomic balance, and healthier behaviours.

There is no single way to build resilience. Approaches vary widely: cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), mindfulness meditation, gratitude practices, social support, faith-based activities, or physical exercise. The best approach is the one that aligns with your values and fits your life.

If stress or emotions affect your heart health, talk to your healthcare team about psychological therapies like CBT or mindfulness, and explore activities that bring you meaning and connection.

The Vital Role of Sleep in Heart Health

Sleep is a biological necessity, not a luxury. Consistently getting 7 to 8 hours of quality sleep nightly is critical for your heart. During deep sleep, your blood pressure naturally dips, your autonomic nervous system recovers, and inflammation decreases. Poor or insufficient sleep disrupts these processes, raising blood pressure, increasing inflammation, worsening insulin resistance, and elevating cardiovascular risk.

Sleep disorders such as sleep apnea or chronic insomnia further impair heart health and require medical evaluation.

When to Seek Help	
Factor	What It Means
Ideal duration	7-8 hours nightly
Minimal insomnia	Trouble falling asleep ≤2 times/week
Minimal disruptions	Waking ≤2 times/week
No regular medication use	Avoid chronic pharmaceutical sleep aids
Restorative quality	Feeling refreshed ≥5 days/week

Practical Tips for Better Sleep

- Maintain a consistent sleep-wake schedule every day, including weekends.
- Create a wind-down routine 60-90 minutes before bed, avoiding screens and stimulating activities.
- Optimise your bedroom: keep it cool (15-19°C), dark, quiet, and comfortable.
- Avoid caffeine after early afternoon and limit alcohol close to bedtime.
- Limit heavy meals within 3 hours of sleep.
- Reduce blue light exposure in the evening by turning off devices or using blue-light filters.
- Exercise regularly but avoid vigorous activity close to bedtime.
- Seek medical advice if you suspect sleep apnea or have persistent insomnia.

Cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is the gold-standard treatment for chronic sleep difficulties and can improve blood pressure and heart health.

When to Seek Help for Sleep

If you experience loud snoring with gasping, excessive daytime sleepiness, persistent difficulty falling or staying asleep, or feel unrefreshed despite adequate sleep time, discuss these symptoms with your doctor for evaluation and treatment.

Breathing Exercises to Calm Your Heart and Nervous System

Controlled breathing is a simple, effective way to activate your parasympathetic nervous system ("rest and digest"), lowering heart rate and blood pressure while reducing stress hormones.

Practising slow, deep breathing regularly can improve heart rate variability (a marker of cardiovascular resilience) and enhance your body's ability to regulate blood pressure.

Simple Breathing Techniques

Technique	How to Practice	Benefits
Deep Diaphragmatic	Sit or lie comfortably. Breathe slowly through your nose, letting your abdomen rise and fall.	Promotes relaxation and parasympathetic activation
Pursed-Lip Breathing	Inhale through nose for 2 counts; exhale through pursed lips for 4 counts (like blowing a candle).	Reduces breathlessness, calms anxiety
Box Breathing	Inhale 4 counts, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4; repeat 2-5 minutes.	Improves focus and calmness
4-7-8 Breathing	Inhale 4 counts, hold 7, exhale 8 with a whoosh sound; repeat 3-4 cycles.	Helps with sleep onset and acute stress
Mindful Breathing	Sit quietly, observe natural breath without changing it, gently return focus when mind	Cultivates awareness and reduces rumination

Start with 5 minutes daily, gradually increasing as comfortable. Consistency matters more than duration.

Safety Notes

Consult your doctor before starting breathing exercises if you have severe heart disease, uncontrolled blood pressure, respiratory conditions, or anxiety disorders. Stop if you experience chest pain, dizziness, or shortness of breath.

The Protective Power of Social Connection

Strong social relationships are essential for cardiovascular health. Loneliness and isolation are associated with poorer cardiovascular outcomes and deserve clinical attention. Social support improves medication adherence, encourages healthy behaviours, reduces depression, and buffers stress. This applies to connections from family, friends, community groups, faith communities, or even virtual contacts.

Who Is Most at Risk of Isolation?

- Recent widows or widowers
- People living far from family
- Those who have relocated after retirement

Ways to Build and Maintain Connection

- Attend cardiac rehabilitation programmes to meet others recovering from heart events.
- Join support groups or activity-based groups (walking, cooking, hobbies) where socialising happens naturally.
- Use technology to maintain contact with distant family and friends.
- Engage with faith or spiritual communities if meaningful to you.
- Accept help and invitations from family and friends; small gestures like phone calls or shared meals matter.

When Connection Alone Is Not Enough

If you or someone you love experiences persistent sadness, loss of interest, changes in appetite or sleep, feelings of worthlessness, or thoughts of self-harm, seek professional mental health support promptly.

Next Steps: Working with Your Healthcare Team

Your mind and heart are inseparable. If stress, sleep problems, or social isolation affect you:

- Tell your doctor openly about your emotional and social health.
- Ask for referrals to psychological therapies such as CBT or mindfulness programmes.
- Discuss sleep concerns and request evaluation for sleep disorders or CBT-I.
- Explore cardiac rehabilitation and support groups for social connection.
- Seek urgent help if you experience severe depression, anxiety, or suicidal thoughts (call 999 in emergencies).

Emergency Contacts

- NHS 111 (non-emergency medical advice)
- Samaritans: 116 123 (emotional support)
- For emergencies, call 999 immediately

Summary

Your heart health depends on managing stress, prioritising restorative sleep, and nurturing social connections. These factors influence your body's biology as much as medications and procedures do. Breathing exercises offer a practical tool to calm your nervous system. Aiming for 7-8 hours of sleep nightly supports cardiovascular recovery.

Social connection is essential, not optional. Addressing these areas alongside medical treatment supports your whole-person healing and improves outcomes.

Your heart listens to your mind and your life. Caring for both is the path to true heart health.

Sources and Further Reading

This guide is adapted from **Heart Saviour** by Dr Francesco Lo Monaco and checked against current NHS guidance on metabolic syndrome. Individual targets for blood pressure, glucose, cholesterol, weight, liver health, and kidney health should be agreed with a qualified healthcare professional.

Important Medical Disclaimer

This guide is for educational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. It is not a substitute for professional medical diagnosis or treatment. Always consult your healthcare provider before making changes to your medications, lifestyle, or treatment plans. If you experience severe symptoms such as chest pain or shortness of breath, seek emergency medical attention immediately (call 999 in the UK).



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A Calm Place To Begin

If you would like to discuss a symptom, a family history or a preventive heart assessment, you are welcome to contact the clinic.

The National Heart Clinic
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Also consulting at
BMI Syon Clinic, Brentford
Clementine Churchill Hospital, Harrow



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more or make an enquiry.

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