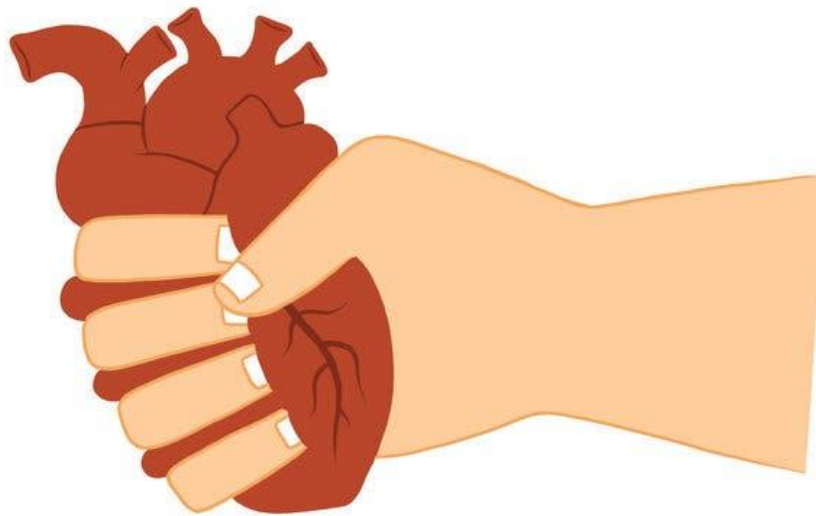


# The Impact of Psychological Stress on Your Heart

The following is an excerpt from the article, “Stress May Be Your Heart’s Worst Enemy,” by Jane Brody of The New York Times, January 3, 2022.

Psychological stress activates the fear center in the brain, setting into motion a cascade of reactions that can lead to heart attacks and strokes.



Credit...Rachel Levit Ruiz

You’re probably familiar with these major risk factors for heart disease: high blood pressure, high cholesterol, smoking, diabetes, obesity and physical inactivity.

Recent studies indicate that chronic psychological stress may be as important — and possibly more important — to the health of your heart than the traditional cardiac risk factors. In fact, in people with less-than-healthy hearts, mental stress trumps physical stress as a potential precipitant of heart attacks and other cardiovascular events.

Psychological stress comes in many forms. It can occur acutely, caused by incidents like the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, or the destruction of one’s home in a natural disaster. Emotional stress can also be chronic, resulting, for example, from ongoing economic insecurity, living in a high-crime area or experiencing unrelenting depression or anxiety.

## **How stress damages the heart**

It all starts in the brain's fear center, the amygdala, which reacts to stress by activating the so-called fight-or-flight response, triggering the release of hormones that over time can increase levels of body fat, blood pressure and insulin resistance. Furthermore, the cascade of reactions to stress causes inflammation in the arteries, fosters blood clotting and impairs the function of blood vessels, all of which promote atherosclerosis, the arterial disease that underlies most heart attacks and strokes.

## **Defusing stress and its effects**

Individuals can minimize their body's heart-damaging reactions to stress. One of the best ways is through habitual physical exercise, which can help to tamp down stress and the body-wide inflammation it can cause.

Given that poor sleep increases stress and promotes arterial inflammation, developing good sleep habits can also reduce the risk of cardiovascular damage. Adopt a consistent pattern of bedtime and awakening, and avoid exposure at bedtime to screens that emit blue light, like smartphones and computers, or use blue-light filters for such devices.

Practice relaxing measures like [mindfulness meditation](#), calming [techniques that slow breathing](#), yoga and tai chi. Such measures activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms the brain and body.