Mental health and coronary heart disease

Recent research by the Heart Foundation of Australia has concluded that there are strong links between depression, social isolation, the lack of quality social support and coronary heart disease (CHD) similar to the more conventional risk factors such as smoking, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure.

What is meant by depression, social isolation and quality social support?

A person may be depressed if, for more than two weeks they have felt sad, down or miserable, lost interest in things that they would normally enjoy, and experienced three or more symptoms of the following:

- **Physical** – tired all the time, can’t sleep.
- **Behaviours** – not going out, not getting things done at work, relying on alcohol and sedatives.
- **Thoughts** – thinking that “nothing good ever happens to me”, “I’m worthless”.
- **Feelings** – guilty, unhappy, disappointed, no confidence.

Social isolation is when a person feels lonely. However, if a person feels part of social relationships that provide friendship, love and meaning that also create a sense of belonging, these social links have a major influence on their mental and physical health.

People from culturally and linguistically diverse [CALD] backgrounds are sometimes more prone to isolation and depression because many have fewer social networks in their new country. Many elderly people from CALD backgrounds report higher degrees of isolation and depression and in some ethnic groups even higher suicide rates. This is mainly due to their extreme isolation, lack of support networks, language barriers, inappropriate or inaccessible health and welfare services, low socio-economic status and accumulative stresses associated with the immigration experience.

Facts about mental health and coronary heart disease

- Depression, social isolation and lack of social supports are significant risk factors for CHD.
- Within the first 12 months after a heart attack psychological factors such as depression can treble the risk of having another heart attack independent of other factors.
- About 800,000 Australian adults and 100,000 children and young people suffer depression each year.
- Depression affects on average one in five people in Australia at some point in their lifetime.
- Depression is common but can be easily identified and treated.

Additional facts about mental health and coronary heart disease in CALD communities

The overall health of immigrants deteriorates as their length of stay in Australia increases. There is a gradual increase of deaths from coronary heart disease of immigrants with the increased length of stay in Australia due to food habits and lifestyle changes. Coronary heart disease and diabetes are two major health problems facing many CALD communities in Australia. For example data for diabetes-related deaths in Australia are very high for males and females born in Egypt, India, Germany, Malta, Poland, other Europe, and females from Italy and for men born in Greece.

For more information

- Talk to your GP
- For counselling services call Lifeline on 1300 13 11 14