

Positive outlook may help heart disease patients heal

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Study found optimists more likely to take meds, exercise and eat healthy.

(HealthDay)—Heart disease patients with a sunny disposition are more likely to exercise, stick with their medications and take other steps to ward off further heart trouble, a new study suggests.

Researchers said the findings add to a large body of evidence linking a positive approach to better heart health.

Specifically, the results support the theory that healthier habits are a key reason that positive [people](#) tend to have less heart trouble.

It all makes sense, according to James Maddux, a senior scholar at the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

"Over the years, we've learned a lot about this complex process called self-motivation," said Maddux, who was not involved in the study.

When faced with a challenge—a diagnosis of heart disease, for example—people who are generally positive will become "task-oriented," Maddux explained. "They'll think, 'OK, what do I need to do to address this challenge?' " he said.

In contrast, people who tend to be more negative often feel there is little they can do about life's challenges—including a diagnosis of heart disease, Maddux suggested.

"Your disposition affects your ability to set goals and to put those plans in motion," Maddux said.

The good news, he added, is that even a lifelong pessimist can learn to change his or her outlook.

Lead researcher Nancy Sin, a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Healthy Aging at Pennsylvania State University, agreed. "Is it possible to change? I think so," she said.

Sin pointed out that her team's findings do not prove that heart disease patients' positive outlook directly led to healthier habits. In fact, it's likely a two-way street, she said: Physical activity, for example, typically makes people feel better mentally and emotionally, as well.

So people who tend to land on the pessimistic side might start with small steps that could do their hearts and minds good, Sin suggested.

"Take a walk every day," she said. "Have a conversation with a good friend. Take a moment just to think about what you're grateful for in your life."

The findings, published recently in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*, were based on surveys and physical exams of over 1,000 adults with [heart disease](#).

Participants rated themselves on a standard scale of positive and negative emotions: They were considered to be more positive if they agreed that they were enthusiastic, determined, strong, interested and active.

In general, Sin's team found, those positive people were anywhere from one-quarter to 50 percent more likely to be getting regular exercise, sleeping well and sticking with their heart medications, compared to their less-positive peers. They were also less likely to be smokers.

And when people's positive outlook increased over the next five years, so did their likelihood of adopting healthy habits, the study found.

"We can't say that positive emotions led to those healthier behaviors," Sin said. But again, she added, the important thing is that the two are connected, and may feed each other.

Maddux agreed. "Everything is so closely connected, there is no chicken and no egg," he said.

To be sure, a person's general disposition has a genetic component, Maddux noted. Some people are programmed to see the glass as half-empty, while others will naturally see it as half-full.

"But we also know that people can change," Maddux said.

If you have a [chronic health condition](#) and can't find the motivation to make lifestyle changes or take medications, that doesn't mean there's "something wrong" with you, according to Maddux.

"It just means you need more support," he said.

He suggested talking to your doctor about ways to overcome the obstacles you're facing. Support groups can also help, Maddux added, because you'll be around other people dealing with similar challenges.

"You can find some practical help with integrating these changes into your life," he said.

More information: The American Heart Association has more on [healthy lifestyle changes](#).

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