



*Palo Alto Medical  
Foundation*

A Sutter Health Affiliate

## **South Asians, Stress and Depression**

### **How can stress and depression affect my health?**

Stress is known to contribute to heart problems and increase risk of death. Emotional upset, especially anger, is the “trigger” reported most often for a heart attack. People with more stress and worries also have more problems after a heart attack.

Depression is also a risk factor for heart disease, and has been associated with diabetes and metabolic syndrome. In fact, women who are depressed are twice as likely to develop heart disease as those who are not depressed.

### **What are the symptoms of stress and depression?**

Signs of stress and depression are very similar and may include:

- *Stress*
  - Change in sleeping patterns, such as inability to sleep
  - Mood swings
  - Feeling angry, afraid, nervous or helpless
  - Crying frequently
  - Lack of energy
  - Unusual eating patterns, such as eating too much or a loss of appetite
  
- *Depression*
  - Inability to sleep, early-morning waking, oversleeping or needing too much sleep
  - Persistent sad, anxious or “empty” mood
  - Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
  - Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
  - Decreased energy, fatigue
  - Appetite and/or weight changes
  - Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities
  - Difficulty concentrating
  - Restlessness, irritability

### **How can I manage stress or depression?**

Good health habits can have a protective effect against stress and depression. Regular physical activity relieves stress and depression and

lowers the chance of heart disease.

Taking part in a stress management program may decrease the chance of more heart problems for those who have heart disease. By attending stress management programs, you can discover new ways of facing everyday challenges.

### **What are some ways to lower stress?**

- Take a deep breathe to help your muscles relax.
- Close your eyes and rest.
- Think of relaxing things.
- Exercise or take a walk.
- Eat right and limit foods with fat, sugar and salt.
- Talk to a friend about your troubles.
- Change the things that cause you to stress.
- Focus on the good things in your life.

If you find yourself feeling down or “blue” for a long time, talk with your doctor about how to get help. Seeking the support of your family and friends can help. Exercise is a great way to help reduce depression and stress. Check with your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medications. Ask your health care team or doctor for additional suggestions about how to manage your stress or depression.

### **About South Asians and Stress and Depression**

Some studies have shown that South Asians are less willing to seek mental health services and prefer to try and work issues out within the family. Suicide rates within the South Asian community are higher than among other populations. Young South Asian women, in particular, have higher rates of suicide than South Asian males and the general U.S. population. Mental illness is not usually described as a precursor to suicide, but family conflict, depression, anxiety and domestic violence may be contributing factors. A study of mental health professionals and patients made some conclusions about the cultural influences on depression and care outcomes of Asian Indians with depression. This study stated that religious belief in suffering as a punishment for past deeds contributes to decreased initiative to seek help from a doctor. Cultural stigmatization of mental illness is also a barrier to early recognition of symptoms and seeking intervention.

In South Asian communities, there is often a cultural stigma attached to mental illness that may intensify the family's difficulty in accepting a family member's condition and developing trust in a doctor. Families tend to seek episodic help and do not see the need for continued therapy.

There are also stressors in family relationships and gender roles, as well as expectations that influence a person's desire and ability to seek help. Language differences, meanings and patterns may often affect communication with health care providers. Trained interpreters who have the knowledge and sensitivity to address the distinct cultural needs of South Asian patients and families are often helpful. Mental health practitioners of South Asian origin may be most knowledgeable and more trusted by South Asian patients because of their understanding of the culture and sensitivity to the cultural norms.

A study of older South Asians found that adaptation to the surrounding culture affects well-being. Satisfaction with friendships and your cultural or ethnic identity relates to a sense of belongingness and your well-being. Religious activities also help give meaning and purpose for coping with life's stressors. Increasing opportunities for social interaction in Asian Indian elder communities is important to help older individuals become more adaptive and handle stress that occurs with moving to a new country late in life.

Visit [www.pamf.org/prana](http://www.pamf.org/prana) for more information on South Asian health.

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