

## ALTERNATIVES

Complementary and alternative therapies

# Helping patients with heart failure manage stress

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HEART FAILURE (HF) is the number one reason elderly Americans are hospitalized. Research has shown that psychosocial factors, especially anxiety and emotional stress, are significant prognostic indicators. By using mind-body and behavioral techniques to reduce stress, you can help your patient relax and cope with his condition better.

### Tips and techniques that work

Use these suggestions to help teach your patient how to deal with stress.

- *Slow down.* Pull up a chair, sit down, and let him know you have time for him.
- *Listen supportively.* Let your patient know you're really hearing him by making eye contact, nodding when appropriate, and restating or paraphrasing his words. If he's stable, ask open-ended questions to find out what's on his mind. Try weaving silences into your discussion—even for 15 or 30 seconds—to give him more time to collect his thoughts and share his deeper concerns.
- *Teach him this three-step relaxation technique.* First, ask him to try diaphragmatic breathing. Have him lie down in semi-Fowler's position with a pillow under his head and his knees bent. Tell him to put one hand on his abdomen, just below his rib cage. Then, instruct him to breathe in and out slowly using his abdominal muscles. He should see the hand on his abdomen rise as he inhales and fall as he exhales. Have him repeat this exercise three or four times to slow down his breathing and relax his body.

Second, ask him to concentrate on

feeling the bed support his weight; tell him to be aware of how his muscles soften and get warm and heavy.

Third, ask him to focus silently on a calming phrase or word. Tell him that his mind may wander; when it does, he should return his focus to the relaxation phrase.

- *Use nonverbal communication.* Lightly touching the patient's shoulder and smiling at him communicate compassion and interest in what he's saying. So does moving to the same physical level, rather than standing over him, which connotes authority.
- *Teach him to pace himself.* Many patients with chronic HF have periods of stability and relative wellness punctuated by discouraging exacerbations of disease symptoms. Teach your patient to manage fatigue and avoid other chronic symptoms by alternating periods of activity and rest. For practical purposes, encourage him to view activity as time when his feet are on the floor and rest as time when his feet are off the floor. This perspective can help him balance appropriate activity and exercise with frequent breaks for rest. Days of illness in the hospital simply require longer periods of rest balanced by many smaller activity periods.

The take-home message? Listen to your patient with HF, validate his concerns, and teach him how to manage his stress and fatigue. By teaching him skills he can use to maintain his health and well-being at home, you'll help him avoid serious HF exacerbations and improve his quality of life. <>

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