

**Five** *on*  
**Friday**

*Musings on Mental Health*

## **Heart Health & Mental Health**

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*This Sunday is Valentine's Day, and Valentine's Day is all about love, cupid and fluttering hearts.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*All year long, another story about our hearts is taking place - the story of heart health and mental health. While mental illness is the leading cause of disability worldwide, heart disease is the leading cause of death worldwide. And the data increasingly suggest that these two health conditions are intimately linked.*

**1. How are heart disease and mental illness connected?** In a word: closely. Just last month, the American Heart Association issued a statement in their flagship journal, *Circulation*, entitled [Psychological Health, Well-Being and the Mind-Heart-Body Connection](#) asserting that mental health can have a positive or negative impact on our health and the risk factors for heart disease and stroke. The bi-directional relationship appears to be particularly strong for depression and heart health. People with heart disease have elevated rates of mental disorders, and vice versa; people with serious mental disorders, particularly major depressive disorder, have an increased risk of heart disease. The data on [depression](#) are so clear that it is recognized as an independent risk factor for coronary heart disease.

**2. What do we know about depression following cardiac operations and heart attacks?** Depressed mood is [common](#) following certain kinds of cardiac surgeries, even for people who do not have a history of serious mental illness. Up to 15% of patients with cardiovascular disease, and up to 20% of patients who have undergone surgery for cardiac illness, [experience depression](#). When a person has both heart disease and depression, the prognosis for both conditions can worsen. The good news is that treating one health condition can reduce the risk associated with the other.

**3. Is our mental health based in our heads or our hearts?** It is not either/or. [Our heart and brain are in continuous dialogue with each other](#) — a conversation that gives rise to what we ultimately call our mental health. Our emotions alter the signals that the brain sends to the heart, and our hearts send essential signals to our brains based on the feelings we are experiencing. We talk about our hearts skipping a beat when startled or a racing heart when anxious. It's true. When we experience feelings like anger, frustration, anxiety and insecurity, the brain recognizes these patterns as negative or stressful feelings, and our heart rhythms can become more erratic. Conversely, when we experience emotions like love, care, appreciation and compassion, the heart produces harmonious rhythms that resemble gently rolling hills, indicating cardiovascular efficiency. Our brains get the message that our nervous system is in balance.

**4. What can addressing mental health do for our heart health?** In everyday life, practices of kindness, gratitude, and appreciation promote positive mindset and positive wellbeing. By recalling a time when we felt sincere appreciation and recreating that feeling, we can increase our heart rhythm coherence, reduce emotional stress and improve our heart health. Meditation works in a similar way. For those who have had more serious heart disease, addressing depression and mood disturbances following a heart attack or surgery will promote a fuller recovery and improve prognosis both in terms of quality of life and longevity. Psychotherapy can help us gain awareness, shift mindset, and develop coping skills that improve mental health and thereby improve heart health as well.

**5. Back to Cupid.** Valentine's Day is a day devoted to celebrating the people we hold most dear. Strong social networks and close emotional attachments reduce our risk of heart disease. What's more, such relationships predict better health outcomes if we do fall ill. In Mexico, Valentine's Day is called *El Dia del Amor y la Amistad* - the Day of Love and Friendship. Most fitting, given that both [romantic relationships](#) and [platonic friendships](#) confer these health benefits.

*It's not too late to send someone you love an e-card for Valentine's Day. The kindness and connection will be good for their heart health and mental health - and for yours, too!*