



# Live Well, Work Well

Health and wellness tips for your work, home and life—brought to you by the insurance specialists at Sullivan Benefits

*Research indicates that those who already have heart problems are at an increased risk of a second heart attack if they are extremely stressed, depressed or hostile. To avoid unnecessary strain on your heart, find ways to reduce the stress in your life.*

## THE HEART AND MIND CONNECTION

Even though the brain and the heart are located far from one another in the body, they are intrinsically connected and have a significant impact on how each other functions.

The two organs communicate via the muscular walls around the heart, which are connected to the brain in the circulatory system. As the brain releases hormones telling the body what to do, receptor cells in your blood vessels pick up these messages. In addition, there are nerve endings that travel from the brain to the muscular walls of the heart. These nerves send messages to the muscle tissue to either relax or contract.

Since these two organs communicate, mental health can have a dramatic effect on heart health and vice versa.

### Stress

The mind's response to a perceived or actual threatening situation is known as stress. The body responds to the stress by increasing:

- Blood pressure
- Respiratory rate
- Heart rate
- Oxygen consumption
- Blood flow to skeletal muscles
- Perspiration
- Muscle tone

When you experience these responses on a regular basis as a result of stress, you are putting your body at an increased risk of heart disease.

### Stress-Reducing Meditation

To combat the potentially life-threatening damage stress could have on your heart, there are several meditation techniques you can try. These techniques aim to achieve a relaxation response to reduce stress, improve the immune system and prepare the body for traumatic situations in the future.

Here are three ways to meditate:

- Go into a quiet environment and sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Then, focus your attention on one thing such as a word, phrase or sound. Repeat that one thing over and over again. If you find that your mind wanders, refocus back. Do this exercise for 20 minutes to escape the stressors of your life.
- Progressive relaxation is another useful exercise. Lie down or sit in a quiet area. Focus your attention on the muscle groups in your feet and slowly move through each group until you reach your head. As you go through each muscle group, try to imagine that you are actually breathing through those organs. As you “exhale”, release the tension from the group. As an alternative, you may tighten the muscles in each group for several seconds, and then physically release the tension.
- A third meditation exercise is to imagine that you are clearing your body of the toxins that you want to get rid of. For instance, visualize that you are ridding your arteries of plaque. Concentrate on releasing that energy, which will ultimately reduce the tension in your mind.

