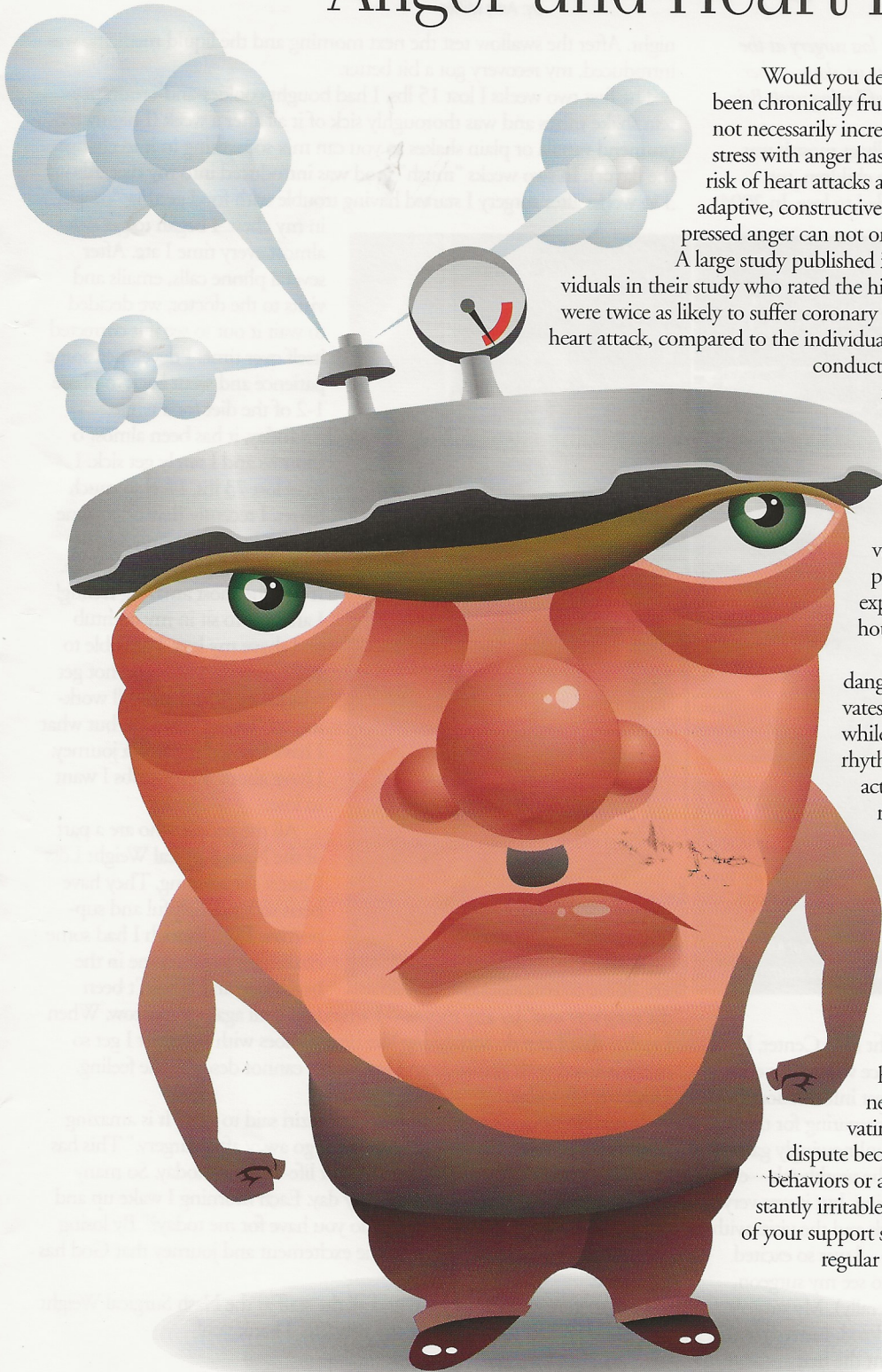


Anger and Heart Disease



Would you describe yourself as an angry individual? Have you been chronically frustrated, irritable, or annoyed? Living with stress does not necessarily increase your chance of heart disease, but responding to stress with anger has been specifically found to significantly elevate your risk of heart attacks and coronary artery disease. Expressing anger in adaptive, constructive ways can be healthy, but explosive anger or repressed anger can not only lead to poor quality of life, it can be lethal.

A large study published in the journal *Circulation* (2000), found that individuals in their study who rated the highest on anger, but who had normal blood pressure, were twice as likely to suffer coronary artery disease and three times more likely to suffer a heart attack, compared to the individuals who reported the lowest levels of anger. A study conducted at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine found medical students who were psychometrically assessed as angry or hostile were six times more likely to suffer heart attacks by age 55 and three times more likely to develop any form of heart or blood vessel disease. Even isolated bursts of rage have been associated with heart attacks. In a Harvard study, patients who suffered a heart attack reported a statistically significant pattern of experiencing an episode of intense anger within two hours of the onset of their heart attack.

Why is an emotion or feeling, like anger, so dangerous to our heart? An angry response to stress elevates the heart rate, blood pressure, and cholesterol, while lowering the trigger threshold for ventricular arrhythmias. Scientists have also found that sudden anger activates stress hormones, such as the “fight or flight response.” Excessive amounts of stress hormones may speed up the process of atherosclerosis, a condition in which fatty plaques build up in the arteries. Conversely, happy people have healthier levels of fibrinogen and cortisol in their blood, making them less vulnerable to cardiovascular disease and other ailments.

Just because you have a reason to be angry doesn't mean you have to be angry. The way in which you react to stress is a choice. Choose to be healthy for your heart, and let your anger and bitterness go. Resolve conflicts that are repeatedly aggravating to you. This might include ending an ongoing dispute because it is simply too risky for your health. Change behaviors or avoid people and situations that make you constantly irritable or frustrated. Talk out your feelings with members of your support system. Begin daily stress management, including regular exercise, meditation, or relaxation exercises. Professional counseling or antidepressant medication might be also helpful.



Dr. Gail Lisson is a licensed clinical psychologist in the states of North Carolina and Florida and is fellowship-trained in health psychology. Her expertise includes working with patients who experience stress related to their medical problems, promoting better medical compliance and health care behavior, and evaluating patient functioning.