

# In matters of the heart, she keeps the mind strong

After a heart attack, the patient fears they'll drop dead at any moment. This fear and stress hinder the recovery process.

By BEN FINLEY  
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Shortly after Rick Stallard suffered a heart attack in June, he found himself in a Newtown Township psychologist's office.

He settled into the therapist's stuffed, flower-embroidered couch. She asked him to close his eyes and imagine a place where he feels safe. "Let's go there," she said from the recliner across from him.

Stallard, a general contractor and music store owner who lives in Newtown Borough, took deep breaths. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five, he counted. He imagined the oxygen flowing into his

percent blocked. He told his body to heal itself. "We all have internal healing energy. We just don't plug into it," said psychologist Dr. Arathi R. Rao during a recent interview.

What might seem like "new age" hocus-pocus is treatment for heart disease. It is quickly gaining acceptance in the medical community.

Rao is a cardiac psychologist, one of the few working in Bucks County. Since her husband underwent quintuple bypass surgery a few years ago, Rao dedicated her practice to people who suffer from heart disease. She teaches them how to reduce stress, thus improving their chances of physical recovery and longer life.

Heart disease encompasses a range of disorders affecting the heart. The most common is coronary heart disease, where arteries bringing oxygen to the heart become narrow or blocked. It

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Psychologist Dr. Arathi R. Rao has offices in Newtown Township and Upper Southampton.

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# Heart: Relieving the stress and anxiety

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is the single largest killer of Americans, according to the American Heart Association.

Cardiologists at St. Mary's Medical Center in Middletown refer their patients to Rao. She has offices in Newtown Township and Upper Southampton.

"Other [psychologists] at the hospital work with some of the patients. [But] her stress management programs and personal expertise give her an edge," said Scott Hartman, manager of the cardiac rehabilitation center at St. Mary's Medical Center. "She's following a program that's been developed through years of research and she puts her own touch on that."

Rao's program is stress management. After a heart attack, stress and depression are common, Rao said. But some patients are slow to admit it. They're scared — their families are scared — that they'll drop dead at any moment. This fear and other stresses hinder the recovery process.

"If you don't take care of the emotional aspect, you're putting yourself at risk," she said. "The whole thing is about relieving stress and anxiety."

But to relieve stress you have to know what it is. Recognizing it can

be challenging.

"I was the type of person that if I didn't get it all done I thought there was something wrong," said Stallard, who suffered a heart attack in June. "It took me a little while to even say to myself, 'Gee, I really had a heart attack' . . . After having a heart attack and coming close to death, you have a whole different perspective. You want to understand what is going on medically and emotionally."

Stallard's family doctor referred him to Rao. "I wouldn't say I was skeptical so much as I was not educated and not aware [of stress management]. When you learn what emotion and stress factors do to the body, it's really eye-opening."

Everyday stresses from such minutia as finding a parking space can build up and lead to serious harm. Heart rates increase. Stress hormones, such as cortisone, are released. Platelets in the blood clump up. Over a sustained period of time, these fight or flight responses wear the body down and set the heart up for trouble.

"Just being stressed in as of itself is not a bad thing," Rao said. "But repeated activation of stress response, lack of calming after stress response, hostility, depression — you just don't calm down — this is the key."

ease, he inserts tubes and balloons into the blocked arteries so blood can flow freely to the heart.

"I'm well equipped to treat patients physically but I'm not as well equipped or trained to treat them psychologically," he said. "It's not just about the mind or the body. It's a combination. You have to treat both."

Shah said there's a strong connection between mental health, a patient's recovery and the likelihood of him having another heart attack.

"Patients that have gone through [Dr. Rao] appear to be much more accepting with what is going on, and that in turn helps to reduce their cardiac events," he said.

Western medicine is starting to accept the long held Eastern belief that reducing stress improves physical health, Shah said.

"It's sort of a mind over body paradigm," he said.

But Shah stopped short of declaring cardiac psychology a proven science. Not enough studies have been done, he said.

One study released in 2002 showed that stress management for patients with coronary heart disease yielded positive results.

The findings, better long-term health and smaller medical bills, according to researchers at Duke University Medical Center and the American Psychological

Association.

At St. Mary's cardiac rehab center, Rao often gives talks on the benefits of stress management.

Recently a group of 20 cardiac patients came to listen.

Relaying the importance of her therapy, she mentioned her family's experience after her husband suffering a heart attack.

"It was a huge shock when this happened to my husband," she said. "You think 'why me?' We feel that our identity is taken away. It's hard to ask for help."

Rao explained what stress does to the body. She said that exercise, prayer, meditation and imaging techniques will reduce anxiety.

Then Rao lowered the lights and had them imagine a safe and relaxing spot in their mind. "Perhaps it's an ocean. Perhaps it's a lake."

Sitting comfortably was Chris McCarron of Middletown. The 48-year-old horticulturist had a heart attack recently. He heard a psychologist was coming in to talk about stress management.

"It really comes home when you think about it," he said. "Most people deny their physical health and emotional health. A heart attack makes you just stop and listen more."

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"It's not just about the mind or the body, it's a combination. You have to treat both," says psychologist Dr. Arathi R. Rao.

Rao's methods include deep breathing exercises, guided imagery (the body healing itself), and cognitive re-framing — perceiving heart disease with a positive attitude.

Stallard was impressed. "I find myself now, since the first time I've gone there, implementing those into my daily life — where it wasn't even a thought before," Stallard said. "I feel better than I have in years."

Dr. Rakesh Shah, an interventional cardiologist at St. Mary's Medical Center refers patients to Rao. To treat people with heart dis-

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