

# CONNECTIONS

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## Anxiety in Women May Mask Heart Disease Symptoms, Researchers Say

by FEI Workforce Resilience

Women with an anxiety disorder may have less blood going to their heart when exercising, according to a new study—and researchers suggest doctors may sometimes miss signs of heart disease in these women.

In women who had never been diagnosed with heart disease, researchers found that those with anxiety were 75 percent more likely than women without anxiety to have reduced blood flow to the heart during activity.

Study author Kim Lavoie says the findings may indicate that anxiety symptoms such as chest discomfort or palpitations—which can overlap those of heart disease—may mask heart disease in women. This could lead to misdiagnosis, she said.

"If you're a woman and you say you're tired, short of breath, and really anxious about it, and you have no pre-existing heart disease, it's possible that doctors are confounding the two problems," said Lavoie, a professor of psychology at University of Quebec at Montreal and director of the Chronic Disease Research Division at Hopital du Sacre-Coeur de Montreal in Canada.

"Doctors may be more likely to attribute those symptoms to anxiety than heart disease," she added. "So, in other words, a diagnostic bias may occur."

The study was published online Feb. 23, 2016 in the journal *Circulation: Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes*.



Hello City Employees!

February is American Heart Month, and it is around this time we often see an increase in literature on heart disease and promotions for heart-healthy behavior and wellness checks. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, heart disease is the leading cause of death for men and women in the United States. Stress and anxiety also impact our heart's health, so we have included some literature on mental health at work, and the benefit of silence for your mind and body.

We also hope you will consider sharing in Library Lovers' Month with us, and submit the name of helpful resources you have come across that could benefit the work/life balance of others. Peace and all Good!



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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Hailey Krueger'.

In the study, the researchers said anxiety disorders appear to be more common in women than in men, and there is a link between these disorders and worse cardiac outcomes.

Heart disease kills about the same number of women as men in the United States every year and is the leading cause of death in American women, causing one in every four female deaths, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Women can experience different symptoms from men during a heart attack. For example, women are more likely to describe chest pain that is sharp or burning and more frequently have pain in the neck, jaw, throat, abdomen or back, the CDC says.

When a mood or anxiety disorder is added into the mix, a woman's true health status can be misinterpreted, Lavoie's research suggested.

For the study, the researchers looked at more than 2,300 patients, including 760 women, who underwent an exercise stress test and a psychiatric interview.

The exercise stress test looked for reduced blood flow (ischemia), which can cause a shortage of oxygen to the heart, and the effects of gender and mood/anxiety on this condition.

Lavoie and her team found that women with anxiety were far more likely to show ischemia than women without anxiety. They found no similar effects in men.

Dr. Karla Kurrelmeyer, a cardiologist at Houston Methodist DeBakey Heart and Vascular Center in Texas, said physicians have been working for years to decipher the link between anxiety and heart disease, "because we realize there's a connection between being distraught or anxious and it affecting the nervous system."

Kurrelmeyer agreed with Lavoie that the women with anxiety who exhibited reduced blood flow to the heart might actually have had heart disease that previously went undiagnosed.

"Women with anxiety should be treated seriously because frequently they have ischemia . . . and doctors need to do more diagnostic testing to make sure symptoms are due to anxiety instead of obstructive coronary artery disease," said Kurrelmeyer, who wasn't involved in the new research.

Lavoie said women with anxiety or depression who are concerned about heart disease can ask their doctor to order tests to check their heart health.

"Clinicians need to recognize that anxiety presents with the same symptoms as heart disease and can mask the symptoms of heart disease if you don't rule that out with objective tests," she said.



# Mental Health at Work

by FEI Workforce Resilience

**Mental health problems affect many employees**, a fact that is usually overlooked because these disorders tend to be hidden at work. According to the U.S. National Comorbidity Survey, a nationally representative study of Americans ages 15 to 54, 18 percent of employed respondents said they experienced symptoms of a mental health disorder in the previous month. According to the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, more than one in four American adults has a diagnosable mental health disorder, and one in seventeen has a serious disorder such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, but chances are co-workers or managers don't know who they are.

**The stigma attached to having a psychiatric disorder is such that employees may be reluctant to seek treatment.** Despite the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other protections against workplace discrimination, most individuals do not feel comfortable coming forward. As a result, mental health disorders often go unrecognized and untreated—not only damaging an individual's health and career, but also reducing productivity at work. Adequate treatment, on the other hand, can alleviate symptoms for the employee and improve job performance.

**What to do?** While some of these facts might seem alarming, the most common workplace mental health issue is stress. The good news is that there are many positive lifestyle choices we can make to help us cope with stress and be mentally healthier:

1. Eat a balanced diet. It has been proven time and time again that there is a direct link to diet and mental health.



2. Exercise regularly and keep active. Exercise helps to lift our mood, as well as gives us more energy. It also helps us to feel better about ourselves and improves our physical health.
3. Relax and take time out for yourself. Find time each day to do something that you really enjoy—even if it is only half an hour.
4. Drink only in moderation. Remember that excessive drinking can lead to anxiety, depression and can uncover or accelerate an existing mental health problem.
5. Get enough sleep. Try to make sure you have a healthy sleep pattern by going to bed and getting up at the same time every day.

**Recognize stress and talk about your problems.** If you feel you may be suffering from stress, talk to someone like a trusted friend or colleague about how you are feeling. Coping techniques may ease some stressful symptoms, but some problems can seem too overwhelming to handle, and that's when it is time to seek additional help to get through the tough times. There are many people and services available to help you do just that.

# 5 Health Benefits of Being Silent for Your Mind and Body

by Medical Daily

We live in a loud world where TV, music, and smartphones fill the void with white noise. Silence and solitude are broken by the buzz of technology while we call, text, and email to feel less alone. However, how often do we take the time to sit and enjoy silence?

Silence and solitude give us the space to think, act, and play “catch up” with our mind, and can be very healthy for our physical and mental wellbeing. It’s time to go to our quiet and peaceful place, and feed our mind and body so we can reap these five benefits, backed by science.

## Improves Memory

Going for a walk in the park alone can cause brain growth in the hippocampus, leading to better memory. A 2011 study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* found adults who walked for 40 minutes three times a week for a year had brain growth in the hippocampus—an area of the brain associated with spatial memory. Immersing ourselves in nature helps the brain to focus and have better memory consolidation.

## Stimulates Brain Growth

Sitting in silence could also boost brain growth by creating new cells. A 2013 study published in the journal *Brain Structure and Function* found at least two hours of silence could create new cells in the hippocampus region. This is essential since the hippocampus is linked to our ability to learn, remember things, and even our emotions.

## Relieves Stress

Noise has a pronounced physical effect on the brain, which can lead to elevated levels of stress hormones. This happens when sound waves reach the brain as electrical signals via the ear, which then causes the body to react to these signals. The amygdala—associated with memory formation and emotion—is activated, and this leads to the release of stress hormones.

A 2006 study in *Heart* found silence can release tension in the brain and body in just two minutes. Researchers found it was more relaxing than listening to “relaxing” music. This was based on changes in blood pressure and blood circulation in the brain.

## Fights Insomnia

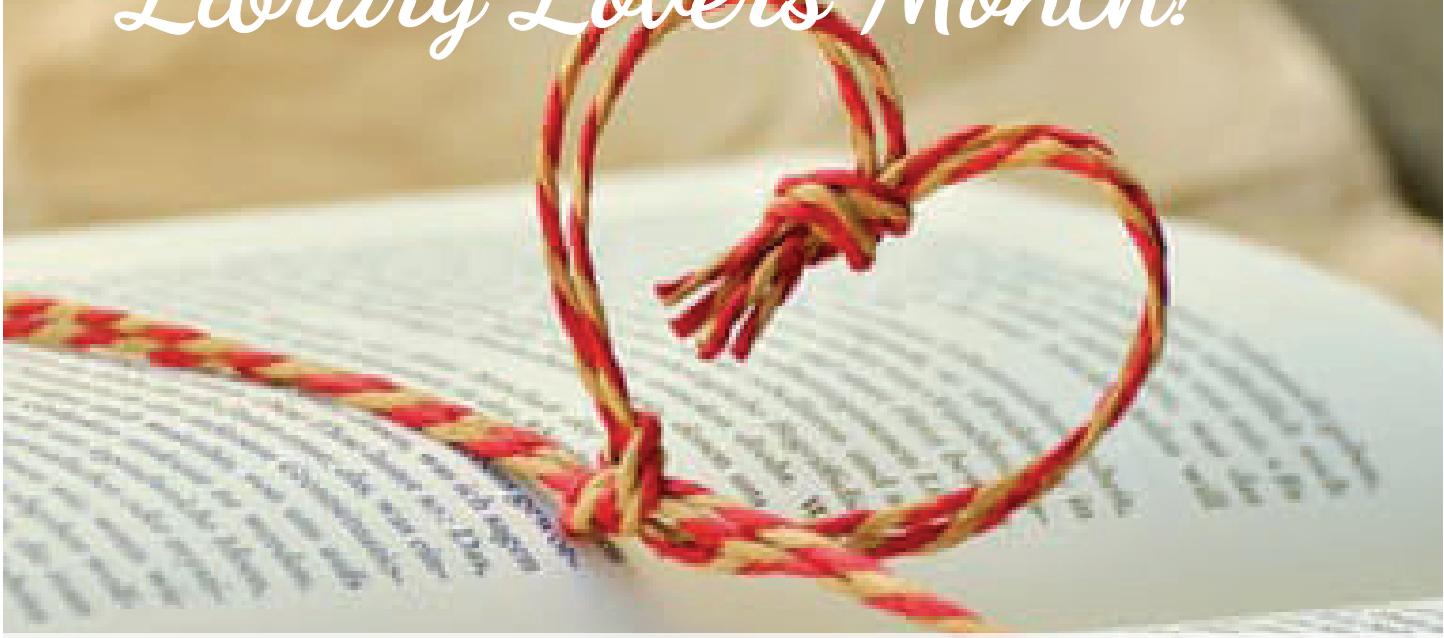
Spending a few minutes a day in silence can lead to improved sleep, especially for insomniacs. A 2015 study in *JAMA Internal Medicine* found older adults who had trouble sleeping experienced less insomnia, fatigue, and depression after doing mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation involves focusing on our breathing and then bringing our mind’s attention to the present without thinking about the past or the future. It helps to break the train of everyday thoughts to provoke a relaxation response.

## Heightens Sensitivity

There are retreats that promote the power of silence by refraining from reading, writing, or eye contact. One hundred scientists went on a retreat for research and found shutting off speech heightens awareness in other areas. They practiced the technique of vipassana meditation, which promotes overall wellbeing. This begins with breathing, which is then transferred to sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts, intentions, and emotions.



# February is Library Lovers Month!



Please share your favorite book, article, or video about workplace issues or work/life balance by sending an email to [samos@cityofmadison.com](mailto:samos@cityofmadison.com). The EAP Office would like to share your recommendations in a future issue of *Connections*.

Please provide the title of the book or a link to an article or video. If you can provide a few sentences explaining why you are recommending the item, it would be very helpful. Also, let us know whether we can share your name and department, along with your review, in a future newsletter.

*Thanks for reading,  
we hope you found the information useful!*

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