Dear Alice,

When I hear someone make a negative comment about me it sometimes sticks and for some reason my chest will begin to hurt. A friend of mine said it was emotional shock. For a while the feeling went away, but then it got worse. Now the pain will range from my heart to my left arm, depending on how badly (depressed) I feel. In general, I want to know if I should be concerned or if it's just as my friend says: "emotional shock," that's just gotten worse.

Please help,
"Solace"

Answer

Dear “Solace,”

Hearing someone make negative remarks about you can certainly be an emotional blow, and you’re wise to pick up on the physical pain you’re experiencing to make sure there’s no cause for concern. Before answering your question, it’s good to note that pain radiating from your chest could be a sign of a serious health condition, so consider visiting your health care provider if it becomes severe. When it comes to the relationship between depression and physical pain, the research is currently mixed. The two may be related in other ways, though; there’s some evidence that there are some psychological conditions that may be associated with physical symptoms. Read on for more detail about this connection.
You know when you feel it, but pain can be a difficult experience to capture, measure, and describe. By triggering an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience, it’s a way for your body to alert you that there’s actual or potential physical damage in the body. Somatization, which is the presence of physical symptoms without a determinable cause, can be exacerbated or caused by depression, anxiety, and sometimes interpersonal conflicts. Some of these symptoms include pain, faintness, dizziness, hot or cold spells, difficulty breathing, nausea, indigestion, upset stomach, and numbness, tingling, or weakness in the body. The symptoms often have no underlying physical causes, but they are very much real. When these symptoms start to cause a lot of distress or disruption in daily life and last at least six months, a health care provider may indicate a diagnosis of somatic symptom disorder.

Another way that pain relates to emotional or psychological distress is through panic attacks. During a typical panic attack, people may experience intense fear that rises suddenly and lasts for several minutes to an hour. This experience may be accompanied by physical symptoms, including chest pain or discomfort. A significant portion of the cases of chest pain (unrelated to a heart condition) is caused by another type of panic attack, called a non-fearful panic attack (NFPA). Unlike typical panic attacks, individuals who experience NFPA tend to experience discomfort (thus, more bodily symptoms) rather than fear and anxiety.

“Solace,” it bears repeating that physical pain radiating from the chest area (or the heart) into other areas of your body could be a sign of a serious health problem. If your pain becomes severe, consider visiting a health care provider. For physical conditions that can cause chest pain, take a look at Sharp chest pains — Heart attack? Stress? Heartburn? While pain in your chest and arm may seem like a recent onset, and the trigger seems specific and acute, it could have a more chronic root cause that becomes worse when experiencing psychological and social stress.

In addition to some further investigation of the physical stress you’re experiencing, it’s also worthwhile to address the emotional stress you’ve described. As a first step, you may try some relaxation techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation, deep or controlled breathing, guided imagery, and distraction to help manage your stress. You may also consider talking with a mental health professional or health care provider to help you figure out the cause of your chest pain. However you choose to proceed, fortifying yourself with positive thinking and self-affirming thoughts may help deflect any negativity you encounter.

Alice!

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Published date:
Nov 21, 2008

Last reviewed on:
Aug 12, 2016

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