

Low mood after cardiac surgery is common — and treatable

Feeling flat, tearful or irritable after heart surgery doesn't mean you're ungrateful or weak — it's one of the most common parts of recovery. And it's treatable.

Returning to everyday life

Educational draft. Clinical review pending. Quotations retained from the original text are not verified member testimonials.

Feeling flat, tearful or irritable after heart surgery does not mean you're ungrateful or weak — it's one of the most common parts of recovery, and it's treatable. Low mood after major surgery is a normal response to an extraordinary event: the physical toll of the operation, anaesthesia and medicines, disrupted sleep, and the psychological weight of what you've been through. Your body has been through an event; your mind is still catching up.

What it can look like

- Crying more easily — or feeling numb, and unable to cry at all.
- Irritability, often aimed at the people helping you most.
- Trouble sleeping, or sleeping all the time.
- No appetite — or comfort-eating everything in sight.
- Anxiety about every twinge, and the fear that every symptom means the heart is failing.
- Guilt: “I should be grateful I'm alive” — as if being grateful cancels the sadness. It doesn't.

Why it happens

Partly physical: anaesthesia, pain and healing genuinely affect mood chemistry. Partly personal: surgery is a loss — of independence, of certainty, sometimes of the body you recognised. Partly social: people around you may expect you to be fine now that you're home, which leaves no room for how you actually feel. None of this is a character flaw.

What actually helps

Telling someone — your partner, a friend, your team. Sleep, daylight and short walks. One small thing that used to bring you joy, done without expecting the joy to come at first. And asking for help if it persists: many teams can connect you with someone who specialises in recovery-related mood, and talking therapies genuinely help. If the low mood is severe, medication may be part of the answer — and that conversation belongs to your team, never to a forum or a relative's well-meaning advice.

What to ask your team

Take it to your team

Ask: I've been feeling really low — is this a normal part of recovery for me? Who can I talk to — is there counselling, a support group, or someone I can see? How will I know if this needs treatment? And ask them to check in on your mood at follow-ups — it's as legitimate as checking your wound.

Call for help if

The low mood lasts more than two weeks without lifting; you can't get out of bed most days; you feel hopeless about the future; or you have any thoughts of harming yourself or not wanting to be here. Those thoughts are not weakness — they're a signal that you need urgent support, and you deserve it. Tell someone you trust, and contact your team or emergency services — today.

A last word

You did not fail at recovery because you feel low. You're a human being who went through something enormous, and mood is part of the healing that deserves the same honesty as your scar. What helps, what treatment looks like and what happens next belong to your own team — made with you, at your pace.

Questions to take to my team

☐ Could we discuss my mood, anxiety and sleep as part of recovery?

☐ Who can support me if I feel unable to cope?

For discussion and personal reference. Your care team's individual instructions take priority. For an emergency, contact your local emergency service; do not wait for a community reply.