

Doctors seeing more broken hearts

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Photos by Michael Fagans / The Californian

Marge Weaver's heart symptoms were a mystery.

The 60-year-old Bakersfield teacher had been feeling especially fatigued, with tightness in her chest and a demeanor she described as "zombie-like."

All signs pointed to an arterial blockage, but an echocardiogram, or heart ultrasound, showed a strange ballooning in the pumping chamber. There was another clue. Weaver had recently experienced high levels of stress in her third-grade classroom, which got worse when, she said, a supervisor pressured her.

"She had a broken heart," said Dr. Vinod Kumar, her Bakersfield cardiologist. "We were skeptical at first, but no longer. This is real."

Broken heart syndrome, or stress-induced cardiomyopathy, is a reversible condition that can be brought on by intense emotional trauma, such as a loved one's death, a natural disaster, a devastating financial loss or a fight with the boss. The phenomena mimics a heart attack's symptoms, but it is caused by a section of the heart freezing and failing to pump blood.

Kumar and other cardiologists say they're seeing more and more of the malady, which affects about 1 to 2 percent of people who appear to have heart attack symptoms. That increase could be because doctors increasingly are aware of the unusual diagnosis, or that people are simply getting more stressed out.

"As doctors, we're often not attuned to emotions," said Dr. Tamara Horwich, an assistant professor of medicine/cardiology at UCLA. "But we have to be attuned to how big of a role our emotions and stressors play."

A decade ago, the symptoms often would baffle doctors, she said. Patients would have all the symptoms of a heart attack but there would be no blockage in the coronary arteries. When doctors would talk to the patients, they would learn of a recent, intense emotional event.

Broken heart syndrome was first described in Japan in the early 1990s, where it is called takotsubo cardiomyopathy, according to UptoDate, an online medical reference site. The disorder is much more common in women, especially post-menopausal women, though the reasons for that aren't entirely clear.

With a heart attack, part of the heart muscle dies. But, in broken heart syndrome, the heart muscle is simply stunned by an adrenaline surge. That means there's a good prognosis for recovery, and the heart can often return to normal, said Dr. Michele Hamilton, the director of the Heart Failure Program at Cedars-Sinai Heart Institute. Even so, patients need to see a doctor to diagnose if they're experiencing a regular heart attack since the symptoms are so similar, she said.

The triggering emotional event is often a stress that's out of one's control. That's why a CEO who is accustomed to a stressful life wouldn't be at much at risk as someone who had an unexpected run-in with her boss.



The Heart Center – Bakersfield, California

For Dr. Hamilton, the most striking example was a patient who had a small dog that was suddenly attacked and killed by a larger dog.

"You can imagine that being a tremendous stress," she said.

That patient, a woman in her 60s, came to the hospital with two-thirds of her heart muscle not working. The angiogram showed no blockage, though, and she was put on medications. Over the next several months, her heart recovered completely.

In Bakersfield, another woman suffered from broken heart syndrome after some unexpected workplace drama. The 57-year-old woman, who didn't want her name used, said she got angry with a colleague, and expressed her frustration by yelling. This led to a reprimand by her boss, and a note in her file.

"It really caught me off guard," she said. "I have a good work record and I always go that extra mile to be conscientious."

The upsetting events kept her awake into the early morning hours, her chest tight and her breathing troubled. The next day, she could barely walk from the parking lot to the hospital's door.

When she got her diagnosis, she was stunned.

"I thought 'my husband's always good to me, I don't have a broken heart,'" she said, laughing. "But I went home and googled it and found excellent information about it."

Now, if there's a problem at work, she takes a walk to the back of the office, and practices some deep-breathing techniques.

Weaver, the teacher, ended up retiring after her broken heart diagnosis. The stress just wasn't worth it, she said.

"Now, I have energy and I'm smiling and enjoying people's company," said Weaver, now 63.

Weaver said her broken heart has helped her learn not to internalize pressures, and keep her daily stresses in perspective.

That's a smart plan, says Dr. Kumar, who still sees Weaver for regular check-ups. He advises patients to do yoga, meditate and try to stay calm, even if someone else is yelling.

Weaver is doing just that -- and more. She's been enjoying her free time with family, going on hot-air balloon rides, river rafting and cruising down the bike trail on a tricycle.

All of that positive emotional energy has done wonders in mending her broken heart, she said: "Emotions are one of the biggest contributing factors to health."

