

# Your Heart and Brain Health: Making Decisions That Support Both

## A Guide for People Making **Heart and Brain/Mental Health** Decisions

Your brain and heart work closely together. The **brain** tells the heart how fast to beat and helps control blood pressure. It also sends signals to tell the heart how to respond to activity and stress. The **heart** pumps blood to the brain, carrying the oxygen and nutrients the brain needs to work well. Your emotions and mental health can impact heart health. Heart conditions can impact your thinking, mood, and memory.

Hence, it's important to think about both the brain and heart when making health decisions that involve either one.

Use this guide to help you think about the links between the brain and heart when making your decision by:

- Filling it out in one sitting or coming back to it later (it is okay if you don't fill in everything)
- Sitting down with an important other and discuss your options and what is most important to you
- Using this guide when talking with your health care team.

### There are four steps:



### Clarify your decision

What health decision do you face that may impact the heart and brain?

Is this a new or ongoing decision?

What are your reasons for making this decision?

When do you need to make a choice?

What other health concerns, risks factors, or situations, might affect this decision?

#### Heart concerns you have:

High-blood pressure  
Irregular heart rhythm (e.g., atrial fibrillation)  
History of heart attack or blocked arteries  
Heart failure  
Chest pain or shortness of breath with activity  
Heart valve problems, like a narrowed or leaky valve  
Other:

#### Brain/mental health concerns you have:

Stroke or TIAs (transient ischemic attacks or mini-strokes)  
Anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns  
Dementia or cognitive decline  
Changes in your negative emotions or stress  
Changes in thinking and memory  
Difficulty talking with others or expressing yourself  
Other:

Other health concerns that might affect this decision or be impacted by this decision

(e.g., family history, risk factors):

## Heart and Brain/Mental Health Decision Guide Continued




### Explore your options

| Options you can choose from<br>(includes wait and see/<br>making no change) | Reasons to Choose this Option<br>Benefits / Advantages / Pros<br>including how it relates to heart, brain,<br>and impact on mental health | How much this pro matters to you:<br>0★ not at all<br>5★ a great deal | Reasons to Avoid this Option<br>Risks / Disadvantages / Cons<br>including how it relates to heart, brain,<br>and impact on mental health | How much this con matters to you:<br>0★ not at all<br>5★ a great deal |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| Option 1  |   |   |  |   |
| Option 2  |   |   |  |   |
| Option 3  |   |   |  |   |

**\*Add other options as needed**




|  |          |          |          |               |        |
|--|----------|----------|----------|---------------|--------|
| Which option(s) do you prefer?<br>(check all that apply) | Option 1 | Option 2 | Option 3 | Other options | Unsure |
|--|----------|----------|----------|---------------|--------|

## Heart and Brain/Mental Health Decision Guide Continued






|  <b>3 Explore views of others involved in the decision</b> |           |           |           |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Who else is involved?<br>(e.g., spouse, carer, heart specialist, brain specialist, family doctor, pharmacist, others)                      |           |           |           |
| Has this person talked about how heart and brain/mental health affect each other?  | Yes    No | Yes    No | Yes    No |
| Which option does this person prefer?  |           |           |           |
| Are you feeling pressured by this person to make a particular choice?  | Yes    No | Yes    No | Yes    No |
| How can this person support you?   |           |           |           |

Is there anyone missing from the discussion? (e.g., previous health care provider, other health care provider, people with lived experience, support groups?)

## **4 Identify your needs and plan next steps based on them**

| When it comes to making decisions about your heart and brain health:*   | If you respond NO to the question(s), consider this list of things you could try (✓)   |
|---|--|
|  <b>Do you know the benefits and risks of each option?</b><br>Yes      No               | Ask your care team to explain how your condition involves both the heart and the brain, and how it may impact your mental health.<br>Find out more about the options and chances of the benefits and risks.<br>List your questions<br>e.g., What are my options (including wait and see)?<br>What are the possible benefits and side effects?<br>List where to find the answers (e.g. health professionals, trusted websites of health charities, health organizations, or governments).   |
|  <b>Are you clear about which benefits and risks matter most to you?</b><br>Yes      No | Review the ratings (0-5) in step two  to see what matters most to you.<br>Find people who know what it is like to experience the benefits and risks.<br>Talk to others who have made the decision.<br>Read stories of what mattered most to others.<br>Discuss what matters most to you with your health professionals and others.<br>Ask which option may affect thinking, memory, mood, or stress.<br>Ask whether timing of decisions depends on other decisions and/or health events. |

## Heart and Brain/Mental Health Decision Guide Continued

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>When it comes to making decisions about your heart and brain health:*</b></p>   | <p><b>If no, things you could try (✓)</b></p>   |
| <p> <b>Do you have enough support and advice to make a choice?</b></p> <p>Yes      No</p> | <p>Discuss your options with a trusted person (e.g. health professional, family, friends).</p> <p>Find help to support your choice (e.g. funds, transport, childcare).</p> <p>Ask for coordinated appointments or case manager to reduce multiple visits.</p> <p>Ask providers to share brain–heart information with each other.</p> <p>Ask whether you need to see a heart, brain, or mental health specialists.</p> <p>If you feel <b>PRESSURE</b> from others to make a specific choice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on the views of others who matter most.</li> <li>Share this guide with others.</li> <li>Ask others to fill in this guide to see where you agree and disagree. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you disagree on facts, get more information.</li> <li>• If you disagree on what matters most, consider the other person's views.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Take turns to listen to what the other person says matters most to them.</p> <p><b>In the end, this is <i>your</i> decision.</b></p>   |
| <p> <b>Do you feel sure about the best choice for you?</b></p> <p>Yes      No</p>       | <p>Work through steps two  and four  focusing on your needs.</p> <p>Ask for more time or different ways of getting information if thinking or memory problems make decisions harder.</p> <p>Bring someone to your appointment to help with communication and follow-up questions.</p>  |
| <p><b>Are there other things making the decision difficult?</b></p> <p></p>             | <p>People facing decisions that impact both the heart and the brain may feel they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Don't have enough information about how the heart and the brain affect each other</li> <li>Don't have a clear diagnosis that explains both heart and brain issues together</li> <li>Worry that their health providers aren't communicating or working well together (e.g., mixed messages from different providers)</li> <li>Have too many separate appointments with different health providers</li> <li>Struggle to get in to see heart, brain, or mental health specialists</li> <li>Don't talk about heart, brain, or mental health concerns during appointments</li> <li>Worry that finances or insurance limits their options</li> <li>Feel delayed waiting for results from tests, treatments, or upcoming appointments</li> <li>Need more time to understand information they've been given</li> <li>Need more time before they can make a decision</li> <li>Have too much information to take in</li> </ul> <p><b>If any of these concerns feel familiar, speak with your health care provider(s) so that you can work together on next steps.</b></p> |

\*Adapted from The SURE Test © 2008 O'Connor & Légaré.

## For More Information – Heart and Brain Resources and Supports

These resources may help you learn more about your condition, find support, and connect with people who understand what you're going through.

### 1. Heart and Brain Health Information

**Heart & Stroke Foundation:** <https://www.heartandstroke.ca/>

Reliable information on heart disease, stroke, prevention, and recovery.

**University of Ottawa Heart Institute - Patient & Visitor Calendar:**

<https://www.ottawaheart.ca/patients-visitors/calendar>

Education sessions, support groups, webinars, cardiac rehab information.

### 2. Support Groups & Peer Support

**HeartLife Foundation:** <https://heartlife.ca/>

National patient-led cardiovascular community offering peer groups and lived-experience resources.

**University of Ottawa Heart Institute:** <https://www.ottawaheart.ca/patients-and-visitors/tools-and-resources/patient-support-groups>

Free support groups that help heart patients and families learn, share experiences, and receive expert guidance.

### 3. Mental Health Education & Self-Help Tools

**ConnexOntario:** <https://www.connexontario.ca/>

24/7 navigation for mental-health, addiction, and crisis services (phone, text, chat, email).

**Ontario Mental Health Support:** <https://www.ontario.ca/page/find-mental-health-support>

Directory of helplines, crisis services, youth programs, and community mental-health supports.

**Canadian Mental Health Association:** <https://ontario.cmha.ca/provincial-mental-health-supports/>

**Anxiety Canada:** <https://www.anxietycanada>

Evidence-based self-help tools and programs for anxiety and OCD.

**Mental Health Commission of Canada:** <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/>

National organization offering research-based mental-health programs, tools, and training.

**Mood Disorders Society of Canada:** <https://mdsc.ca/>

Supports people living with depression, bipolar disorder, and other mood disorders.

Guides to provincial programs, BounceBack, distress lines, and community mental-health services.

### 4. Additional Community & Caregiver Supports

**211 Ontario:** <https://www.211ontario.ca/>

Directory of local community, social, government, and mental-health services.

**Ontario Caregiver Helpline:** <https://ontariocaregiver.ca/>

Support for caregivers (phone and live chat): 1-833-416-2273.