

The Catholic Doctor is In: Broken Heart Syndrome

In the late 1980's I saw a young lady in her late 40's who came to the emergency room having a heart attack. I performed an emergency coronary angiogram and to my surprise she had no coronary artery blockage to cause the heart attack, but she still had a very large area of damaged heart. She gave the history of being in the middle of a very contentious divorce. Several weeks later I performed more testing and the large area of heart that I thought was irreversibly damaged had completely recovered. I was perplexed. I thought that maybe, just maybe, the stress of the divorce proceedings had something to do with her presentation.

A few years later in 1991, unknown to me at the time, an article was published in a Japanese Cardiology Journal describing a small series of patients that presented to the hospitals in Japan with large heart attacks during emotionally stressful circumstances, but like my patient they had no coronary blockage. The most common provoking scenario in Japan was this occurring just after an earthquake or significant tremor which are fairly common in Japan, and of course cause great emotional stress. They all had the very same large area of the heart that appeared to be damaged (For those of you with a medical background--- it's the anterior-apical segment of the left ventricle that becomes akinetic to dyskinetic). Cardiologists in the USA did not really notice this relatively obscure article at that time, but in the late 1990's and early 2000's reports were published here in American cardiology journals describing this same strange phenomenon.

In Japan it became known as Takatsubo Cardiomyopathy. Takatsubo means octopus trap which has a shape similar to what the left ventricle looks like when it contracts in systole when one has this type of heart attack (I may have now crossed over into minutia, providing you with more information than you really wanted to know). In the U.S. it became known as "Broken Heart Syndrome" or "Stress Cardiomyopathy". The cause is almost invariably intense emotional stress such as the death of a loved one, divorce, or natural disaster. Interestingly, the "Broken Heart Syndrome" occurs much more often in women. The mechanism believed to be responsible for the damaged heart is catecholamine (adrenaline) excess that causes lack of blood flow and oxygen to a large area of the heart muscle and that area subsequently stops contracting and is stunned rather than permanently scarred as in typical heart attacks. Amazingly, just several weeks after these people present there is a miraculous recovery and the heart returns to normal function with no long term damage. But it can indeed kill you with about one in ten dying in the first few days of the process before recovery is given a chance to begin.

In the 1990's I saw a few more cases. As we began the first decade of the new millennium, I began to see more and more cases and in the last 5 years the number of episodes I have seen has grown exponentially. As a scientist I now have to ask the question: Why are there so many more "Broken Hearts" now as compared to 20 or more years ago. Here is my theory. There has been an incredible growth of media and social media including computers, laptops, smart phones, and I-Pad like devices. We are constantly being bombarded by friends, family, and acquaintances with e-mails, texts, and Facebook posts. All this creates emotional stress and therefor dramatically increases the opportunity to HAVE an emotional crisis.

There is hardly such a thing as solitude anymore! If there is no solitude then how do we pray? If we don't pray how do we promote our spiritual growth? If we don't pray then how do we expect to receive the gift of Holy Spirit that can calm the soul? If we don't pray then how do we share and give our burdens and troubles to the Lord?

As we read the bible we find that there has been many opportunities for "Broken Heart Syndrome" in scripture but none greater than Mother Mary standing at the foot of the Cross as her Son Jesus is dying. When you have great burdens here on earth consider praying to Mother Mary in heaven to intercede for you, because she, more than anybody, has had some experience in this area.

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