



# ASK DR. BOB

## Scared To Death

**Since October is the month of ghosts and goblins, I thought it would be of interest to finally answer the question of whether or not someone can really be “scared to death.”**

Recently, there was an article in the New England Journal of Medicine about the concept of myocardial stunning due to sudden, emotional stress. Although this is a relatively rare phenomenon, the study did evaluate 19 individuals, 18 of which were women who developed sudden and severe cardiac symptoms from various types of emotional trauma.

The myocardial stunning resulted in chest pain, low blood pressure, heart failure and even significant rhythm disturbances. The emotional stressors that precipitated this sudden cardiac complication were variable and included deaths of friends and family, a fierce argument, a car accident, a court appearance and even a surprise reunion party.

Of the 19 individuals studied, even though many had coronary risk factors, only one had evidence of clinically significant coronary disease on angiography. Echocardiograms did confirm impaired heart muscle functioning, and all had abnormal EKGs.

The study found that exaggerated sympathetic stimulation appeared to be a central cause for the heart condition. This sympathetic stimulation included elevated levels of adrenalin, our fight or flight hormone. Because of the preponderance of women, the authors felt that there may be a biological susceptibility to stress induced heart dysfunction in women, the basis of which is unknown. All recovered within several weeks.

The good news is that in four years of follow up, there have been no cardiac deaths, no recurrence of this syndrome, and no decline in their overall cardiac condition. Thus, it appears full recovery is the usual norm.

So the answer to the question of whether or not you can be scared to death is an unequivocal yes. Be sure to have fun on Halloween, but perhaps exercise a little restraint with your scare tactics.