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Beyond Physical Recovery: Integrating Psychological Assessment into Cardiac Rehabilitation After Acute Coronary Syndrome

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Introduction: Acute coronary syndrome (ACS) is a potentially life-threatening event with consequences extending beyond cardiovascular impairment. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may develop following ACS and frequently remains unrecognized during recovery. The 2025 European Society of Cardiology (ESC) Clinical Consensus Statement on Mental Health and Cardiovascular Disease emphasizes the multidirectional relationship between mental and cardiovascular health and advocates integrating mental health assessment into cardiovascular care. Cardiac rehabilitation provides a unique opportunity to address both physical and psychological recovery.[1,2] This study aimed to evaluate the occurrence of PTSD following ACS and highlight the importance of psychological assessment within cardiac rehabilitation.

Patients and Methods: A prospective observational case-control study included 504 patients following ACS who participated in a three-week inpatient cardiac rehabilitation program at the Special Hospital for Medical Rehabilitation Krapinske Toplice, Croatia. Psychological screening was performed using the PTSD Checklist–Civilian Version (PCL-C). Patients with positive screening results underwent psychiatric evaluation according to DSM-5 diagnostic criteria. Clinical characteristics and cardiovascular parameters were assessed as part of the rehabilitation program.

Results: Among 504 patients, 80 (15.9%) screened positive for PTSD using the PCL-C questionnaire, while the diagnosis was subsequently confirmed by psychiatric evaluation in 51 patients (10.1%). These findings demonstrate that PTSD represents a clinically relevant psychological consequence of ACS among patients undergoing cardiac rehabilitation. The difference between positive screening results and confirmed diagnoses further highlights the importance of combining standardized psychological screening with specialist psychiatric assessment. Cardiac rehabilitation offers a structured setting for identifying psychological disturbances that might otherwise remain undetected during routine cardiovascular follow-up.

Conclusion: Recovery following ACS should address both cardiovascular and psychological health. The observed occurrence of PTSD highlights the importance of considering systematic psychological screening as part of comprehensive cardiac rehabilitation. In line with the 2025 ESC Clinical Consensus Statement, integrating psychological assessment into cardiovascular care may facilitate early recognition of patients requiring specialized mental health support. A multidisciplinary approach involving cardiologists, psychiatrists and rehabilitation professionals may strengthen patient-centered secondary prevention and promote a more holistic approach to recovery following ACS.

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