

## Hostility may be Hostile to your Heart

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### Coronary Disease

Is it just me or is civility a dying commodity? It seems that our culture is trending more and more toward the "in your face" style of relating to one another. Witness these pop culture trends: much of the humor in movies and sitcoms is a "put-down," disrespecting or "dissing" kind of slamming something or more often someone. Political contests are often "take off the gloves" smear campaigns instead of informative or inspiring. Disruptive protests are regaining popularity and promise to become even more violent. Football and basketball stars "trash talk" each other after plays and baseball players use potentially lethal weapons to threaten and intimidate. I'm afraid we're forgetting how to be civil. How would I define civility? It's treating everyone and everything you come in contact with gently and with respect. It often requires suppressing that natural hostility that every once in a while seems irrepressible. Which brings me to the medical spin on the topic of civility and its antithesis, hostility. If you've read many of my articles you know that I have an interest in the mind-spirit-body connection. More and more research in this area is giving us new insights into the many ways that our emotional state affects our health. The latest comes from the Kaiser-Permanente health care organization in Oakland. They studied 400 young adults over a ten-year period measuring "hostility levels" with a standardized test, while performing medical and social histories and physical exams at prescribed intervals. They also measured coronary artery arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) by electron beam imaging in each subject at the end of the study. The results were fascinating. Those study participants who had the highest "hostility" scores also had the highest risk of coronary disease. In fact, those with hostility scores higher than the average were six times as likely as those with below average hostility scores to have hardening of the coronary arteries. This association held even when the researchers statistically "controlled" or took out factors such as smoking, blood pressure, age, sex, race, and education. Incidentally, factors that were associated with decreased hostility levels were increasing age, educational level, female sex, white race, and less use of alcohol. Surprisingly, hostility scores decreased over the study period in almost all subjects! Did the study subjects learned to answer the questions to look better to the researchers? Maybe, but I'd rather think that simply making the subjects aware of their hostility triggered a conscious effort on their part to think and behave in a more civil manner. Civility is probably a boring concept to many of us. But like many other boring life-style traits, it appears to likely improve one's health. Hostility on the other hand, aside from the risk of personal injury incurred in a confrontation, may significantly shorten one's life expectancy. And judging from the results of this study, hostility can be overcome, or at least reduced by simply being aware of it and trying to change. In my opinion, civility also can improve your quality of life. Just try being civil next time you feel the anger boiling up. My guess is that when it's all over you'll feel better about the whole thing. And so will your heart.