Happy Hearts and Good Health

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February is the traditional month for turning our attention to matters of the heart. Throughout history, the heart has served as the symbol of life, love, and healing. We celebrate the heart on Valentine’s Day. Flowers, chocolate, and other gifts express our love and happiness. We should also keep healthy, strong, and fit hearts if we intend to share them with loved ones. Unfortunately, heart disease is a major cause of death in the United States. Approximately every 25 seconds, an American will have a coronary event, and approximately every minute, someone will die, according to the American Heart Association.1 Many of the deaths and a majority of heart disease can be prevented through changes in lifestyle.

Much of the research is related to men, but a recent study suggests that women in their 50s who are white health professionals and who experience high stress at work may be at greater risk. Women were followed for more than 10 years as part of the Women’s Health Study. Job stress was defined as having a demanding job but little or no decision-making authority or opportunities to use one’s creative or individual skills.1

The study suggests that the symptoms of heart disease may differ between men and women. Therefore, early warning signs may go unrecognized. Women are more likely than men to have little or no pain in the progression of heart disease with the symptoms more commonly perceived as heartburn, indigestion, nausea, fatigue, and dizziness.1

Sustaining Work-Life Balance

With the rise in obesity and sedentary lifestyles, Valentine’s Day presents a great opportunity to explore preventive measures for maintaining a healthy heart. While hereditary risk factors cannot be changed, many lifestyle choices have been shown to reduce risk and to strengthen the heart. Studies also show that a positive mental attitude and stress reduction routines contribute to overall good health.2 Furthermore, sustaining a work-life balance is critical.

There was a time when the boundaries between work and home were fairly clear. Today, work is likely to invade our personal lives, making it difficult to maintain balance. The resulting stress can have serious effects on our emotional and physical well-being and on our relationships with family members.

Earlier studies have reported a link between stress at work and the metabolic syndrome, a step down the path toward coronary disease. We know there is a link between stress and cardiovascular disease.

The report further examines the biological mechanism for how stress in the workplace is linked to coronary heart disease and heart attacks.3

We are aware that good health is an expression of many factors including lifestyle and behavioral choices. A person who has an extraordinarily healthy diet but has very high levels of stress may still suffer from cardiovascular disease, regardless of the amounts of omega-3 fatty acids and fresh fruits and vegetables in their diet. Likewise, a person may be a champion athlete, such as a ballet dancer or a figure skater, and yet have diabetes because of an unhealthy diet or inherited genes.

The common profile of heart attack victims is that of people well past middle age. But two new studies, looking at children ages 3 through 18, who were followed into their 30s and 40s, tend to support an emerging and increasingly consistent picture in which lifestyle, starting early in life, is a factor in the development or prevention of heart disease in adulthood.4

The Power of Intention

The quest for good health is influenced by how we think and how we choose to act. Most experts agree that it takes focus and intent to change our patterns and behaviors. This requires physical movement, nutrition, a positive mental attitude, and emotional connections acting in harmony and balance.

If our goal is to get or stay healthy, to look and feel better, we have a much greater chance of doing so if we use the power of intention to make good health a reality. Intention is a mental tool used to achieve goals by putting the mind, body, and being into the experience beforehand and imagining how we will feel. Not just thinking about it, but putting ourselves fully into the experience and allowing our bodies to go through all the positive responses and emotions that might occur. Experts say consciously focusing on a feeling of achieving that sought-after goal before it actually happens will greatly improve our chances of success.2,5

Several studies have documented that if we engage in activities that give us a sense of accomplishment, control, and purpose, we feel validated and glad to be alive. Our brains and bodies are nourished by the positive emotions.2,5,6

Muhammad Ali was famous for his use of intention to achieve his goals. He used all the skills of intention: affirmations, mental imagery, and self-confirmation. His repetitive rhymes had meaning and purpose, and they worked.

The principles of his techniques have been incorporated into athletic training programs all over the world. Focused intention is also encouraged and used in rehabilitation therapies, weight loss
programs, exercise routines, and other types of mental health counseling and cognitive behavior treatment programs.

There is synergism and rhythm of the heart-brain relationship. Our minds and bodies work together to help us pay attention, solve problems, and remember solutions. Our mental efforts support our physiological state. Movement and exercise can enhance our heart function and enhance optimal health.

Humans are capable of an amazing range of emotions. We know certain mental states create a physiological response. If these feelings and reactions are negative and prolonged, then the resulting response in the body can be negative as well. Strong positive feelings tend to induce positive physical and emotional responses that are thought to have significant health benefits.

Emotional health is also dependent on being connected to ourselves and others. The more relationships in our lives the more happiness, joy, hope, optimism, and vitality we will experience. Studies have shown these emotions are good for the heart.

Kind Hearts—The Benefits

We all know that getting our daily required allowance of fruits and vegetables, grains, proteins, and dairy products can give us the nutrients needed for a healthy diet and life. But did you know that random acts of kindness could also be good for your heart health.

Almost any kind deed will do. Sure, we can donate $1,000 to charity, and that would be a wonderful act of kindness, but “paying it forward” is geared toward simpler tasks that are encouraged on a daily basis. Kindness is infectious, and small things can mean so much.

Kindness and developing the habit of appreciation for our own good fortune seems to contribute to better overall health. Kindness expressed to us makes us feel good; giving and helping others encourages connectivity and positivity.

So smile, and donate to a local charity or event. Spend more quality time with family and friends. Let someone jump ahead of you in line. Compliment a total stranger. Clean the snow off your neighbor’s car. Sing with the crowd. Giving is fun and a good thing to do. It makes both the giver and the receiver feel good. Studies show that giving has a strong, positive causal impact on our happiness.

What makes a heart happy? A big hug can help. Hugging reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Health benefits are gained from all positive relationships, not just those of the romantic variety. We are social beings and benefit greatly from a connection to those around us.

Gifts of heart-shaped chocolates, red roses, and red balloons are everywhere during the month of February. They are colorful reminders that Valentine’s Day is a symbol for sharing our hearts with others.

When there is harmony between the mind, heart and resolution then nothing is impossible.

Rig Veda

Make them healthy hearts, living better and smarter, stronger, happy, and fit for life.

References


