

# This Valentine's Day, Be Good To Your Heart

by Lisa Zola

Since Valentine's Day is a day that is symbolically associated with the heart, it seems fitting to write an article about how to care for your heart. Statistics show that heart disease is still the number one cause of death in the United States despite all of the advances we have made in medicine.

Additionally, stress, anxiety and depression have all been implicated as contributing factors in heart disease and are some of the top reasons why people visit their health care provider.

What seems to be missing and what I think is the key to a healthy heart, and to a happy life for that matter, is following a healthy lifestyle. In fact, our health problems have become so chronic in nature that until we change our usual approach in how we treat disease which is typically with medicine and surgery, AND until lifestyle changes are initiated, those with heart disease will continue to progressively worsen and ultimately die of their heart disease, and those with other ailments will not be much better off.

However, there is good news in all of this. A person with heart disease can actually halt the progression and even reverse it, as demonstrated in the "Lifestyle Heart Trial" study conducted by Dr. Dean Ornish. A true pioneer in the field of medicine, Dr. Ornish has shown reversal of heart disease in patients who followed therapeutic lifestyle changes consisting of dietary modification, physical activity, weight reduction and stress reduction. He has subsequently developed a program specifically for reversing heart disease without drugs or surgery.

It is important to keep in mind that the whole person needs to be treated, not just the disease or symptoms, which simply are red flags and the body's way of saying that there is a disconnection of some sort in the Mind-Body-Spirit connection. Your heart not only needs to be nourished physically but emotionally and spiritually as well. All three of these components must be integrated to achieve optimal health.

As far as physical health is concerned, your heart requires the proper nutrition, exercise and rest. Nutritional recommendations for heart health include eating a low-fat diet and choosing healthier fats while minimizing saturated fat intake and avoiding foods that contain those dreaded hydrogenated fats altogether. As a muscle, your heart needs exercise to keep it healthy and strong just like any of the other muscles in your body. Physical activity is not only good for your heart but also has numerous other health benefits including helping to lower cholesterol and blood glucose levels, promoting joint, cartilage and bone strength, maintaining flexibility, assisting with weight loss, and elevating mood. The truth is that in many cases, diet and exercise should and can replace surgery in treating heart disease.

Emotionally, stress has been linked to heart disease, but don't let that stress you out! There is a very simple remedy, and I am not talking about paxil or prozac. I am referring to breathing. Usually when we are anxious, nervous or uptight, our breath-

ing becomes more rapid and shallow.

When faced with stressful situations, our bodies prepare for the "Fight or Flight Response," a response in which the adrenal glands pump out cortisol and adrenaline to prepare the body for action. These stress hormones which are released into the body cause an increase in heart rate and blood pressure.

Alternatively, slowing down and deepening the breath induces the "Relaxation Response," a physiological state of quietude and counteracts the stress response. Add a half smile to your breathing which stimulates the release of serotonin, or what I like to call "joy juice" and you will get that feel good feeling too. Simply take three slow, deep belly breaths with a half smile on your face and see how much better you feel. This technique can be done several times a day or as often as is needed and takes only a moment.

The last component for caring for your heart is to nourish it spiritually with love. Love is an energy that arises spontaneously in the hearts of each and everyone of us and is our essential nature. It is always ready to flow. However, if we are not experiencing love right at this moment, it is not because we are failing to create it, but because we are preventing it from arising. Love is always there waiting for us to surrender to it. And, when we do, it rewards us with the greatest fulfillment of all: that connection with our Higher Being, Divine Spirit, Source, or God. If you sometimes find it difficult to make that heartfelt connection try practicing gratitude by writing down the things you are thankful for. Remember too, like the beautiful lotus flower that blooms from the murky water, there is growth through adversity.

Ultimately, how we treat our heart is in our own control, whether we have heart disease or not. Developing therapeutic lifestyle changes is a process that takes place over time, but the rewards naturally lead to a healthy vital heart and happiness on the physical, emotional and spiritual levels. So, this Valentine's Day, do yourself a favor and be good to your heart!

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