

LIVING WITH HEART

Making your cardiac comeback



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VIDANT HEALTH™



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MAKING THE DECISION

Living with heart means full engagement of your mind and body to live life fully. Preventing heart problems or recovering from heart issues takes deliberate and strategic steps.

Taking action starts with a plan. Achieving positive outcomes after a diagnosis of heart disease requires healthy lifestyle changes. The changes necessary depend on the individual but the concepts to ensure success can be applied by anyone.

Setting goals

When you embark on the journey towards heart health, you may start with a very general goal such as “improve my health,” “feel better” or “lose weight.” Although this gets the discussion started, the next step is to make the goal more *Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic* and *Time-based* (SMART).^{*} It may take a little extra time for these additional steps, but ultimately that time will lead to success.

^{*}Source: Doran, G. T. (1981). There’s a S.M.A.R.T. Way to Write Management’s Goals and Objectives, *Management Review*, Vol. 70, Issue 11, pp. 35-36.

SPECIFIC **M**EASURABLE **A**CTION-ORIENTED **R**EALISTIC **T**IME-BASED

Specific: Develop a clear understanding of the goal and purpose.

“Feel better” can be expanded to “Increase my energy level so that I can attend my book club regularly.”

Measurable: This will allow you to determine when you have achieved the goal.

“I want to lose weight” can be expanded to “I want to lose a pound a week.”

Action-oriented: Create specific steps that will help you achieve the goal so the focus can be on the changes, rather than just the goal.

“Improve my health” can be expanded to “To reduce my blood pressure and strengthen my heart, I will begin walking three to four days per week.”

Realistic: Creating a realistic goal will help maintain motivation to continue working towards the goal. If a goal is not realistic it is easy to become frustrated and disheartened.

“I will exercise every day” can be adjusted to “I will try to be active most days of the week.”

Time-based: This is a great time to create smaller goals based on one- or two-week increments to increase your feeling of success.

“I will improve my heart health” can be adjusted to “For the next two weeks I will eat three servings per day of fruits and vegetables.”

Change is a process

Making lifestyle changes is a process, not a destination. There will be moments when you will feel successful and things will be going smoothly; there will also be moments when you struggle with a change or there will be a lapse. All of this is part of the journey to better health and should not shake your confidence in your ability to be successful. Persistence is key.

Achieving complete health involves strategies for your mind and body. Now we will review key steps of a personal action plan that will reduce stress and maximize your well-being.

MIND STRATEGIES

Check your stress level regularly. Catch distress early.

Identifying early distress can allow you to change course and manage it before it gets out of control. Ask for feedback and help from your friends and family about how they think you have been handling bumps in the road lately.



TRY THIS: Rate your stress level (high, medium or low) each week to see if you have been taking enough time to relax and live comfortably and confidently.

Acknowledge changes as challenges. Develop life change tolerance.

Life with cardiac disease prompts changes in your life. Change can be stressful if you focus on keeping everything the same. Since change is a part of life, you can expect it. Viewing these changes as challenges that will ultimately lead to a better outcome will make the process more comfortable.

TRY THIS: Review a recent change you've experienced and look for ways you demonstrated flexibility and made positive efforts to adapt. Consider this as a strategy to accept *change goggles* to help you view change in a more open-minded way.

Identify personal coping assets

Stress and change prompt a review of both the stressor and the resources to cope.

TRY THIS: Take inventory of tactics and people who can help you in a pinch. Develop and engage a network of key people who you can provide support for and receive support from.

Review personal coping history

Most people rarely consider all of the events that they have managed in their life. Stressful life events are part of the common human experience.

TRY THIS: Recall a challenging life experience in the past in which you wondered how you would get through it. Identify specific thoughts and actions that worked well and helped you pass through that experience. The events may have been undesirable but you can learn from the thoughts and actions that helped you. These thoughts and actions demonstrate your own coping strengths.

Engage in goal setting

Looking forward to the events of life provides fuel for coping each day. Goal setting can help you accomplish specific activities or achievements that you would likely encounter.

TRY THIS: Identify one activity, one achievement or feeling that provides meaning and importance to you that you would like to encounter in the next week. Make a plan to take a first step and go for it. This is a strategy for mindful living, helping you live in the moment.

Activate positive thinking

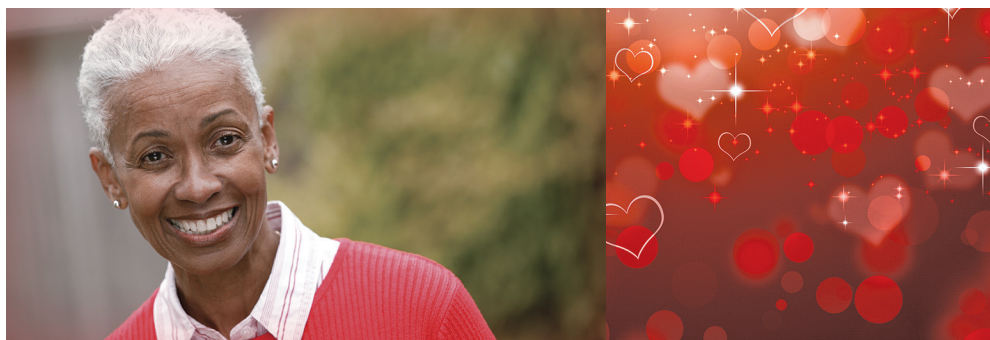
The power of positive thinking involves realistically evaluating the events of life and choosing to emphasize the desirable and valuable aspects of the world around us. Looking for the strengths in others and ourselves can often provide a renewed sense of purpose in our everyday life.

TRY THIS: Take a moment to recognize the most desirable qualities of two people in your life. Make a plan to communicate to them your admiration of these qualities at least once this week; this may create a positive boomerang effect that helps you, too.

Learn heart smart knowledge

The volume of information about caring for your heart has rapidly increased in the last decade. Understanding the disease, the medications, the devices, the doctors and the impact can be overwhelming. Becoming an expert is not necessary but every nugget of knowledge that you learn can reassure you that you can gain some control over the process.

TRY THIS: Know your diagnosis and your medications. Teach your close friends and family about what you're doing to manage the changes. They will benefit from knowing that you are working at managing the challenges and you will benefit from increasing your knowledge and ability to discuss your condition, even with experts.



BODY STRATEGIES

Plan some pleasant events

To break the cycle of stress and distress, make and follow a plan of pleasant and peaceful activities. Although it may seem difficult, when you start doing fun or rewarding activities again, you may start feeling a bit more like your usual self.



TRY THIS: Think of something that you used to enjoy, that you have not done in a while. Examples of easy, inexpensive, pleasant events are listed below to get you started:

- Visit old friends or relatives
- Drive out on the open road
- Ride a bicycle
- Eat an ice cream cone
- Listen to music you enjoy
- Treat yourself to a favorite meal

Maintain your physical activity level

Some heart patients are surprised to learn that regular physical activity is important. Physical activity helps maintain a positive, upbeat mood, regulates our energy level and builds our strength.

TRY THIS: Ask your doctor or nurse about safe levels of activity, given your specific physical condition and capabilities. Plan a three-week trial of regular walking. Take time to notice how it feels during and after your walk. You may find that it has a calming effect on your mind and body. After three weeks, consider continuing the activity as part of your regular schedule.

Get some sleep

Some heart patients find it challenging to rest or to get comfortable when they feel their heart beating. Two types of rest can help: quality sleep and relaxation.

TRY THIS: Maintain a consistent sleep-wake schedule. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day, even on the weekend. Use your bed only for sleep and for romance, so that it is not associated with other wakeful activities, such as watching TV, working on a laptop computer or reading. A warm bath or shower shortly before bed can be relaxing and sleep-enhancing. A very dark, quiet, relatively cool bedroom environment is best for sleep.

Relax and take care

Taking care of other people is an honorable task that we all value. However, taking better care of yourself can result in better care for those you take care of.

TRY THIS: Identify some actions that are self-soothing (e.g. quiet time, prayer, warm bath) and plan at least one activity a day for a week. Review the effects after one week and plan the next week.

Involve friends and family ties

Your loved ones can be an important part of a wellness plan.

TRY THIS: Join your life teammate in a common challenge together. Discuss something that you both want to achieve. Plan to work together to overcome the challenges and win.

Pay attention to feeling alive and well

Experiencing cardiac disease can remind you what it feels like to feel ill, to be vulnerable and feel unsure about how to help yourself. Moments in life that prompt feeling “alive and well” are the opposite and should become more of your focus.

TRY THIS: Consider people and activities that help you feel vibrant, refreshed and cared for by your loved ones. Plan time to get together to celebrate your relationship and the brilliance of relating.

Raise a red flag if needed

Sometimes feelings of depression and anxiety can be overwhelming. Some patients even begin to question the value of life or have thoughts about hurting themselves. If you notice these types of feelings, your doctor needs to know. Feelings of suicide are signs that your needs are not being fully met. It is not always easy for others to know how you feel unless you tell them directly. It takes courage to ask for help. These feelings can be overcome with some recognition of the challenges and a plan of action to manage them.

TRY THIS: If you tell your health care professional about these feelings and thoughts, you can begin getting some help. Some symptoms include:

- **Sadness:** Feeling sad, having the blues or having crying episodes on more days than not
- **No fun any more:** No longer enjoying activities that used to be enjoyable
- **Harmful thoughts and feelings:** Thoughts of hurting or killing yourself, or severe feelings of hopelessness
- **Avoidance:** Avoidance of activities, people, intimacy or situations that may raise your heart rate
- **Excessive anxiety:** Feeling nervous, anxious, jittery or tense more often than not or being unable to get worries out of your mind

RELATIONSHIP STRATEGIES

Comprehensive heart health involves relationships. Psychological research has indicated that social support and close relationships improve your chances of a full recovery. It is often challenging to improve relationships with your loved ones.

Let's review some key strategies using the TLC approach:

Time for friendship • **L**ove and intimacy • **C**ommunication



Time for friendship

Set the stage for the good stuff

The development of friendship requires multiple elements such as shared understandings and values, empathy and time together. Research has demonstrated that proximity, or having the time or attention of someone, is the best predictor of close relationships. We all have limited time so how we spend time with others can be very important.

TRY THIS: Plan a day with a loved one or friend.

Plan an activity with some action but with the ability

to communicate during it as well. For example, walking the mall, taking a walk, or bowling are activities that allow for action plus communication.

Catch them in the act

Being a friend takes some effort. Sometimes, we don't know what helps other people because we are too busy to notice or we don't get feedback. We all respond to praise and this strategy just refers to thanking people around us for their support.

TRY THIS: Identify a person who has provided you support. Plan to thank them directly and swiftly after their next helpful act. This will help them and you continue supportive actions in the future.

Preserve meaningful rituals

Creating meaning and systematic ways of dealing with major life events can provide order and a plan when overwhelmed by emotions. Rituals that celebrate successes and acknowledge losses help provide direction when emotions run high.

TRY THIS: Identify a method to mark life successes and losses. For example, it may be a snow cone for a success or a rock-throwing into the river for a disappointment. You may have these rituals already in place but this provides you with a set strategy for the highs and lows of life.

Review coping history of your life team

We have all experienced difficulties in life and had to cope. Most relationships have also faced challenges and successes. Reviewing past successes reminds us that we can cope. Research has demonstrated that most people under-estimate their ability to cope. This strategy is a reminder of those abilities.

TRY THIS: Recall a challenging life experience in the past that you and a loved one overcame. Maybe you were not perfect but you and your loved one made it through. Review and thank your teammate for supporting you. Commit to future success together.

Love and intimacy

Large national research studies have consistently demonstrated the best predictor of relationship satisfaction is the quality of a couple's friendship. While some people may feel that love and intimacy are taboo subjects not to be discussed with others, sexual activity is highly relevant to your health and well-being, and is an absolutely appropriate topic of discussion with your partner, physician or psychologist.

Return to discussion of intimacy

Fear can lead us to avoid sexual intimacy after a heart condition. Maintaining an open and honest discussion about sex and intimacy with your partner and your health care providers can help. Keep in mind that sex is a common concern among many patients. Sexual activity is safe. It is considered a gentle form of exercise. While many may think exclusively of sex when discussing intimacy, there is actually more to intimacy than just intercourse. Intimacy is a continuing process, not just one event. The following are general guidelines for sexual activity.

TRY THIS:

- Choose activities that are comfortable for both you and your partner.
- Rest before and after sexual behavior.
- Reserve sex for times when you feel fresh and relaxed.
- Abstain from heavy eating or drinking before sex.

Discuss intimacy with health care providers. Talking about sexual function can be embarrassing to some people. However, health care providers are very accustomed to it. There are a number of ways to start the discussion but sometimes it helps to have a first question.

TRY THIS:

"I have heard heart conditions could get in the way of intimacy."

"Are there any medical concerns about returning to sexual activity?"

"How do I reassure my partner that I can safely return to sex?"

Look for intimacy beyond sexual activity. Feeling close and connected to your loved one provides support for the long run. Sex is only one type of intimacy. Finding small moments of connection daily reminds you of the strength of a relationship. This is the fuel to help you through recovery from heart disease and stress.

TRY THIS: Activate some small touches during the day to express love. These may be a longer look into your loved ones eyes or a brief kiss. A small touch might even include the opportunity to have an admiration moment, where you tell your loved one how much you appreciate him or her. Heart disease recovery is not a spectator sport, the whole support system is involved. Finally, express confidence in the future together to reassure your loved ones about the long run.

Communication

Communication is universally cited as critical to relationships. Good communication benefits both the giver and receiver of communication. The challenges to communication are many in today's world, even though we have never had more ways to communicate with cellular technologies and the internet.

Communicate with key principles in mind

We can use the **R-I-N-G** plan as a reminder of the key aspects of supportive communication for our loved ones dealing with heart disease.

TRY THIS:

Reassure: We are a strong team and we will keep you safe. All of us working together as a team will maximize your quality of life.



Instill hope: I expect that we will be able to successfully manage the challenges that come up.

Normalize: Stress is an expected part of living, including living with a heart condition.

Go plan: What can we do this week to return to living life to the fullest?

Engage in goal setting

Planning for the future can communicate that you are looking forward to the events of life. Goal setting with loved ones can pull all of your support

system in to help. Consider the specific activities, achievements or feelings that you would like to encounter.

TRY THIS: Discuss a shared goal with your family about an activity that's meaningful to everyone. Make a plan to take a first step and strategize how to achieve it together.



LIVING WITH HEART IS A TEAM SPORT

But it begins with one person — you

If you have heart disease, you can live — really live — with heart disease. If someone you love has heart disease, you can be the secret to making the most of his or her life and yours. The impact of heart disease leaves no one untouched; at the same time, surviving in spite of heart disease can be very empowering. Put your inner strength to work to demonstrate to yourself and those around you that you can live life to the fullest, even with heart disease.

Dr. Sears video links

On PBS – *Second Opinion* TV show

<http://secondopinion-tv.org/panelist/samuel-f-sears-phd>

TED style talk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tefpOg01mfs>

Recent Dr. Sears publications for heart patients

Cutitta, K., Ladd, R., Buzenski, J., Fairbrother, D. & Sears, S.F. (2015). Heart smart guide for young patients with cardiac devices. *Circulation*, 131, e330-e334.

Ford, J., Sears, S.F., Shea, J.B., & Cahill, J. (2013). Coping with trauma and stressful events as a patient with implantable cardioverter defibrillator. *Circulation*, 127, E426-430.

Rosman, L., Cahill, J.M., McCammon, S.L., & Sears, S.F. (2014). Sexual health concerns in patients with cardiovascular disease. *Circulation*, 129: e313-316.

Sears, S.F., Woodrow, L.K., Cutitta, K., Ford, J., Shea, J.B., & Cahill, J. (2013). A patient's guide to living confidently with chronic heart failure. *Circulation*, 127, E525-528.

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Samuel F. Sears, PhD



..... **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Samuel F. Sears is a professor in the Department of Cardiovascular Sciences at The Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University. He simultaneously serves as a professor in the university's Department of Psychology and as director of its doctoral studies program.

Dr. Sears is considered a world authority on the psychological care and quality of life outcomes for patients with implantable cardioverter defibrillators (ICDs). He has published more than 150 articles in the medicine and psychology research literatures and lectures all over the world on a regular basis. Recently, Dr. Sears created a smart phone app called "ICD Coach" that is the first-ever app for cardiac patients focused on successful coping.

Dr. Sears was awarded the O. Max Gardner Award in 2013. This annual award is given by the Board of Governors of the 17-campus University of North Carolina system to the faculty member who "has made the greatest contribution to the welfare of the human race" in the past year. The award is considered the highest honor bestowed to a faculty member in the UNC system.

Dr. Sears continues to practice and teach health psychology in cardiology clinics at East Carolina Heart Institute at East Carolina University. He received his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in clinical health psychology from the University of Florida.



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