**Heart Healthy Tip - Be Your Own Best Valentine!**

Imagine having someone in your life who truly understands and respects you, is always there for you, and is mindful of your well-being no matter what. Who came to mind? Sometimes it is much easier to accept those gifts from someone else. But just for a moment, imagine that someone is you.

Self care isn’t selfish, it’s essential. Serving others is what life is all about; however, it’s also important to be good to yourself. Just the thought of indulging in 15 minutes of “me time” can kick up feelings of guilt for someone with a servant driven heart. There is a reason why flight attendants tell us in an emergency, to put on the oxygen mask first; we can’t give what we don’t have. Self care actually makes us better caregivers. Failing to allow ourselves to do so can affect quality of life, harm relationships, and most importantly, have a negative impact on health.

February is American Heart Month and a perfect time to review heart healthy tips. There seems to be a common theme when talking about a healthy lifestyle that typically centers around dietary changes, exercise, and lowering stress. It’s really not something we can treat like a buffet and only take what we like best. We need to get to a point where we regularly treat ourselves to balanced servings of habits that encompass both mind and body; a connection that can’t be overlooked. It’s to our benefit to get there, but we don’t have to get there in one giant leap. We also can’t rely solely on prescriptions to do all the work for us. It’s necessary to do our part, and be willing to make changes in order to get different results.

So, if you’re ready to give yourself some love, check out the tips below and pick one to get started with. Many will be familiar and others may come as a surprise, starting with #1.

**Brush & Floss**: According to the Cleveland Clinic, research suggests that the bacteria that cause gum disease can also raise the risk of heart disease. This isn’t a recent discovery but it’s often missing from the traditional heart health “to-do” list.

**Accentuate the Positive**: There is a lot of research to support the benefits of a positive outlook. One such article from Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, states “Maintaining a positive outlook on life may help you stay healthier longer.” (Also, being positive feels much better than constant negativity. You and everyone around you will benefit).

**Exercise is essential:** There is no getting around it so sneak it in if you can’t devote a block of time to it and work your way to 30 minutes 5x per week. Don’t compare yourself to others. Do what’s best for you. If you’re unable to work one part of your body due to injury or mobility issues, focus on what you can do. Every little bit adds up to better fitness.

**Know your numbers:** Keeping your blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol, and triglycerides in check is important for good heart health. Learn what is optimal for you and strive to get there. If you’re already there, keep up the good work!

**Change your Stress response:** Life is never completely stress free butchronic stress can raise the risk of heart disease. We can’t always change what’s causing it but with practice we can change the way we respond to stressful situations. It’s not easy but so worth it once you do.

**Stand up:** In answer to the question, “is standing better for your heart than sitting?” Harvard.edu bluntly states: “Literally. Spending less time sitting and more time standing lowers blood sugar, cholesterol, and weight — all of which translates into a lower risk for heart disease”.

**Follow the 1% rule:** Going from zero to 60 in one big burst can cause more harm than good. For example if you haven’t exercised in a year, don’t pick up at the same level where you left off a year ago. Doing so can be a recipe for injury. Likewise, if you want to increase hydration and right now are drinking 16 ounces of water a day, don’t kick off your new regime with a gallon a day. If instead you make improvements 1% at a time, think about where you’ll be 100 days from now!

**Be Kind to Yourself:** The following statement from an article in “Psychology Today” makes a good point. “When you’re kind and supportive of yourself, you feel better and do better. After all, nobody ever did better after making themselves feel worse!”

**Be your own best Valentine!:** Think of the things that make your heart happy and do more of whatever that is. As you give yourself some love by moving towards the gift of better health, share that love by asking someone to go there with you or be your accountability partner.

**Eat chocolate!:** Dark chocolate that is - and the darker the better. It’s rich in powerful antioxidants and a perfect Valentine’s Day treat!

I intended to include a “recipe makeover” version of tiramisu that’s topped with dark chocolate covered strawberries but ran out of space. It sounds delicious and could make a great Valentine’s Day dessert! If you’d like a copy of the recipe, please email me at joann@wellnessfusion.net. I’d be happy to share it with you.

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