

HOW TO OFFER YOUR HEART THE LOVE IT DESERVES

The heart is not just a mechanical pump that needs physical maintenance; it's also the seat of emotions and needs mindful support.

Heartfelt, heartache, big-hearted ... the heart is often used to describe many of our deepest emotions. But did you know that there's a powerful link between your emotional health and your heart? Since September is Heart Awareness Month, let's have a heart for this incredible organ by considering the impact of our thoughts and feelings, and understanding how to look after ourselves.

HEARTS AND MINDS

It turns out your heart actually has its own 'brain' – the intrinsic cardiac nervous system – and what we feel is conveyed between the heart and brain. In addition, how our bodies physically react to emotional things also impacts the heart. For example, stress causes a rise in cortisol and adrenaline, raising blood pressure and triggering the heart to beat faster. On the other hand, hormones like oxytocin, released in response to positive touch, can have a protective effect on the heart. Clearly, our hearts and minds are intrinsically connected.



HAPPY HEART HOW-TO



Of course, a healthy heart needs a healthy lifestyle, including exercise (at least 150 minutes of moderate activity per week) and a healthy diet. You should also keep your blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels in check, and avoid smoking and excessive alcohol.

But heart health goes beyond the physical; we also need to focus on emotional wellbeing. Your greatest personal resource that can be developed is your capacity to self-regulate emotions. Here's how to get going.

Happy disposition, happy heart

It may seem flippant, but adopting an attitude of seeking out the good is priceless. Don't pretend that tough times don't exist, but consciously strive to live a joyful life. This is thought to reduce the physical effects of stress. While stress may not cause heart disease, it is a well-known risk factor that contributes to the development of heart disease. Try medication for increased physical and emotional wellbeing.

Make connections

As social beings, connecting with others is thought to be as important to our health and happiness as food and water. Spend time with people who make your heart 'sing' – whether it's friends, family or co-workers – and make a concerted effort to be present in the moment with them. Tell your loved ones how you feel, share a good hug and make a commitment to spending time together more often. Even having a pet helps, because stroking or cuddling an animal boosts the production of happy hormones.

For support in improving your heart health, reach out to your employee health and wellness programme.

References

American Heart Association
National Institutes of Health
Psychology Today
The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa

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Let us stay mindful of caring for one another and ourselves