



Our Hearts. Our Stories.

Stories of Resilience from Women Living with Heart Disease

Transcript: Daphne's Story

Hi, my name is Daphne. I started my heart journey with a sneeze about a year ago. This sneeze was very forceful - in fact, I thought my chest was exploding. I thought, "This is a very strange COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) symptom. Maybe I should call Telehealth and check it out." Fortunately for me, they were a bit smarter than I was. They said, "Sit down, we're sending an ambulance," and I landed in the Sunnybrook ER (emergency room).

I live in Toronto (Ontario), and Sunnybrook is the main hospital closest to me. I was in the ER for the better part of 12 hours with many tests, not presenting at all like I had a heart attack. I turned to my kids and said, "See, I'm a horse. This is nothing - just COPD." They decided to run further tests because it was strange, and they did a CT (computed tomography) scan. When the results came back, they found that I had a Type A aortic dissection in two places and that I needed to have emergency open-heart surgery.

I was lucky again because the surgeon on call was an aortic specialist. After eight hours, I came out of that surgery with Teflon and a repaired aorta, thinking, "OK, well, this is a new beginning." I felt relieved. I don't remember the five weeks that I was in the hospital and rehab. I barely remember coming home.

I do remember how hard it was for me to accept the fact that I was unable to do even the most basic things, like showering and having to ask for help. Being a very independent person, that was very difficult. I got through that and got really excited about going to cardiac rehab after four months. I thought to myself, "OK, now the recovery is going to be good. I can ditch my Rolls Royce," which is what I called my walker.

As soon as I started rehab, I was in for a follow-up CT scan at the six-month mark post-surgery. My surgeon was being thorough, making sure everything was OK. And lo and behold—lightning does strike twice. My aorta was dissecting again, this time on the descending aorta. Thankfully, I did not have to have open-heart surgery. I was repaired with stents, but that second surgery, while physically much less demanding, was emotionally devastating.

I really did not know whether I could trust my body or what was going on. I didn't know how to get on with my life, and if this was my new normal, I was not a happy camper. Around that time, I was invited to be part of the "Engaging Women in Cardiac Rehab" group. While I found it really good to be part of a research group, what I didn't realize—something maybe even more important than anything else I had done up until then—was that I was with a group of women who shared common issues.

That support, that emotional support, is what got me through several months of really, really low moments. At this point, I'm back in rehab—the physical part of rehab—but I'm also actively looking for peer support. I'm actively looking to be a contributor in my community to make a difference because I just feel so lucky and so fortunate. I just need to give back.