



Our Hearts. Our Stories.

Stories of Resilience from Women Living with Heart Disease

Transcript: Joan's Story

Hello, my name is Joan. I'm a 78-year-old retired educator who lives in Ottawa, and I'd like to share my heart story.

I have always had two major factors that lead to heart disease: high blood pressure and cholesterol. Stress has always been a big part of my life. I was a single mom raising four children on my own. I was an educator, I took courses to become an administrator, and I opened up a new high school here in Ottawa as my last job before I retired.

With cholesterol, I overproduce it and apparently this is hereditary. My doctor put me on medication to control cholesterol and to control my blood pressure. Family history is about cancer — both parents died at 65 of cancer — so heart disease was not on my radar.

I retired in 2002 and I thought, I'm going to take time for a healthy me. I joined a gym, I had a personal trainer, I did three classes a week, I went to the gym often on my own, and I ate healthy. I really emphasized becoming a healthier version of me. My husband and I traveled and enjoyed life.

Then in fall of 2017, I was doing the usual classes with peers my own age, and I was struggling and getting out of breath. I thought, this is strange, it's a change. So, I went to my family doctor and I said, what's going on? And he said, Joan, you're 71, you're getting older and this is what happens. And I said, oh OK, I know, I know I'm getting older.

We got through Christmas, and in January I went back to a Zumba class. At that point, I was really struggling breathing. My legs weren't moving fast enough, and I looked around and I saw peers my own age, and they were enjoying it and having fun - and I certainly wasn't having fun. I was not enjoying it. I couldn't even do it because I should exercise. I was just done. I was planning my escape out of the class and trying not to raise alarms, and that's all I could concentrate on.

I went back to my family doctor and I said, something is wrong. So he arranged for a stress test in January 2018, and I was shocked by this change into the heart area. But he said, we'll start going down the list and this is where we'll start. It was new territory for me.

So I went for the stress test - and I failed it. The cardiologist said I needed a nuclear stress test and not to exercise. I was very nervous and scared because I thought, what is happening to me? This is a whole world that I wasn't comfortable in or had any knowledge of.

In March 2018, I had a nuclear stress test, which was more invasive, and that test showed that I had a blockage. I had an angiogram on June 1st, 2018, at the Ottawa Heart Institute. I was prepared beforehand by my cardiologist that I probably would have a stent inserted. I wasn't comfortable with it — I was scared, I was shocked, all the feelings - how is this happening to me? But this is a turning point in my story.

I had the angiogram, and after the angiogram the surgeon that did it took me outside and said to me, I didn't put a stent in. You have extensive blockages, and you need open-heart surgery. I looked at him in disbelief. I almost said, are you sure you're talking to me? It was shock. I was scared. It was an out-of-body experience. I was not prepared for this at all.

I did not have a heart attack. The doctor said he's going to admit me to the hospital because if I go home, I will have a heart attack. And he said, I will talk to your family. So he wheeled me out and my daughter comes running over — mom, mom, you made it and it's all over. And I thought, oh dear. I could see their faces as he told them the news, and my husband and my three daughters were standing there. I'll never forget that look in their faces when they realized that it wasn't over — it was just starting.

I was confined to bed until the surgery. Having been so nervous about an angiogram, now I had to prepare myself for open-heart surgery. Five days later, I was wheeled into the new operating rooms at the Heart Institute and had the surgery. The surgeon did six bypasses, and he was very pleased with the results, and I recovered well.

He came in to see me and he said it went very well, you're recovering well. The difficulty I had was thanking him for what he did. How do you thank somebody for saving your life? It was hard.

I stayed for six more days and then when I was released and went home, I thought, wow, this is so different. Being in the hospital for 12 days, and then going home on my own — the safety net of the hospital, the care, the nursing, the doctors — and then being in the back seat of the car going home to my home, where life had to start over again. It was such an emotional transition — physically and emotionally it was very difficult.

I recovered slowly but I recovered well. I attended rehab and I joined the Women and Heart support group. These two parts were very important in my recovery. The rehab helped build my confidence because I was afraid to even move my chest — I thought it was going to pop open. They helped me exercise and build up my strength. They also helped me realize that I had cardiovascular disease for life — that I wasn't "fixed" and it was going to be over. It was a chronic disease.

The women's support group was really important because these women had their own stories — all different stories — but each woman understood each other's stories. We all had the same feelings. No matter what we went through, we all shared the same feelings.

A year later, mid-May 2019, my symptoms recurred. Where do I go? What do I do? I went to my cardiologist and he thought I was exaggerating — I'm not sure what happened there, but he didn't react. I was really nervous because my symptoms were escalating. I ended up calling the surgeon who did my bypass the year before, saying I need help — I don't know where to go.

That surgeon was wonderful. He arranged to have a cardiologist see me the next day, and that cardiologist said to me, you had symptoms, you had open-heart surgery, you have symptoms again — so something's wrong. I felt such relief that somebody believed me and understood me. That something's wrong — he listened.

I was confused because I had open-heart surgery — I'm fixed, right? And a year later, I'm not fixed? What's going on? Apparently, having a stent a year later is common, and nobody was really surprised that that happened. I was invited back to rehab #2 and I accepted because I knew how important rehab was. The confidence and support I got from there, after the stent and after the shock to my body of what's happening to me again, was really important. They certainly succeeded in helping me through that part of my life.

A year later, spring 2020, COVID hit. We had just returned from holidays and I thought, how am I going to stay healthy during COVID? So, I made a commitment to myself of a 30-minute walk a day, weather permitting, and I did that every day that I could. But after a month, I started not being able to go as far as 30 minutes. And it decreased and decreased until I hit a wall — I was hardly able to go out the front door. I couldn't walk around the block of our own house. I had really decreased my ability for mobility and my breathing.

Where do I go now? How do I get help?

So I went to rehab, because that was the place I was confident they would listen to me and help me. The rehab cardiologist phoned me within a couple of days, and together we developed a program — a walking program. She started me at 3 minutes a day and increased it by half a minute every two weeks if I was comfortable.

She said I had microvascular angina, and that's what was happening right now.

So we worked on this program, and it took me 8 months to get to an 8-minute walk. I still couldn't walk around the block because that was 10 minutes, and I just couldn't do that. But it took me **3 years** to be able to walk around the block where we live.

Rehab has been a very important factor in my life. It was my source of help, my source of support, and other women are really important because they truly understand what you're going through.

Today, I can walk around the block. I can walk, but then I have to rest. I can go downstairs and upstairs — and my husband teases me when I come upstairs and says, "She huffs and she puffs and she blows the house down!" But that's what my life is right now — and I know I can come up the stairs, I can rest, and then I can do something else. But I have to rest in between.

My family is extremely supportive, but peer women who've been through any kind of heart issue are extremely important, because they hear you. They understand you. There's an understanding, a connection that takes place.

We have a large family, and our home was always the centre of celebrations — birthdays, Easter, any celebration — Saint Patrick's Day! And today, I can't do it. We go to my daughter's now. That was a hard transition for me, but you know what? Today, I enjoy not having it at our house and going to someone else's house.

I've joined women's heart groups. I've participated in heart research for women. I'm always looking for information.

My message to you is: Listen to your body. It's your body. You know your body. You know when something is wrong.

Women tend to underestimate and understate symptoms. Women need to overstate symptoms. You need to make sure you get your message across — that something is wrong.

And I wish you a healthy life ahead. Thank you.