Our Hearts. Our Stories.

Stories of Resilience from Women Living with Heart Disease

Transcript: Joy's Story

Hi, my name is Joy. I live in Ottawa. I'm 66 years old now, but I was 63 at the time of everything I'm about to share.

At the time, I was working full-time. I had no medical diagnoses, wasn't on any medications, and everything seemed fine—except that I had just come off a decade of living a very stressful life. About eight months before I was hospitalized, I noticed that I was getting winded after going up just one flight of stairs. I chalked it up to age, lack of exercise (even though I had a trainer), and carrying some extra weight.

Fast forward to about a week before I was hospitalized—I still had no idea how sick I really was. I had an appointment with a doctor. I didn't have a family physician, so I booked with someone new. I had to park two blocks away, and on the walk to the clinic, I had to stop 14 times just to catch my breath. I arrived gasping for air, thinking it must be walking pneumonia. The doctor gave me a puffer and ordered some tests. I followed through, but for the next five days, I was in hell.

I couldn't sleep at all. I sat upright in a chair, leaning forward, because I couldn't breathe lying down. Every time I drifted off, I would jerk awake. It felt like I was drowning from the inside—my lungs were filling with fluid.

Thankfully, a month earlier I had seen a naturopath because I hadn't been feeling well. Through her, I had connected with a nurse practitioner. On the morning I ended up in the hospital, I had a phone appointment with that nurse. I told her what was happening. She told me to take the puffer and said, "If it doesn't help within an hour, get to the hospital. It sounds like heart failure. I can hear it over the phone."

That was the first time I'd ever heard the words "heart failure."

I took the puffer and, following the cleanse I had started, drank four glasses of celery juice and spring water—great for a cleanse, but terrible for heart failure. Soon I couldn't breathe at all. I had to call an ambulance.

At the hospital, I was diagnosed with Class III NYHA congestive heart failure with an ejection fraction of less than 20%. My heart was fluttering so rapidly and erratically that it wasn't pumping enough blood. My pulse was too weak for machines to detect. My toes looked like sausages—swollen along with my feet and legs, because my kidneys had stopped filtering fluid. In short, I was almost dead.

After eight days in the hospital and shedding 26 pounds of water weight, I was sent home with eight new medications. I was terrified. I couldn't cross the street, let alone go shopping. I live alone and didn't have support in place. For months, I relied on takeout and grocery delivery while my medications were adjusted and I attended countless follow-up appointments.

One saving grace was that I had been enrolled in the remote heart monitoring program. Because heart failure has a high readmission rate, I was required to take my weight, blood pressure, and pulse daily. If anything was off, a nurse would call me immediately.

My cardiologist also ordered an emergency sleep study. It showed I was waking up 37 times per hour—severe sleep apnea. Within a week, I had a CPAP machine, which was a miracle given the global shortage during COVID.

While waiting six months for cardiac rehab to begin, I started my own recovery. I wasn't allowed to go to the pool alone, so I recruited my daughter as my fitness buddy. We went to the pool three times a week. I started by walking five minutes in the shallow end—that alone was exhausting. Then I built up to 10 minutes, then 15, and eventually I could swim a lap. A far cry from the lap swimmer I used to be, but it was progress.

A few months later, during an intake appointment for cardiac rehab, I told the cardiologist about my swimming. He suspected my heart may have returned to sinus rhythm. That afternoon, I was whisked off to my own cardiologist, who confirmed it. They cancelled the planned cardioversion, and I officially started rehab.

Cardiac rehab marked the true beginning of my healing. I took full advantage of everything offered: I saw a dietitian, a social worker, did remote monitoring, completed the full rehab program, and joined the Women@Heart peer support group. I attended all my appointments, wrote everything down, took my meds religiously, and read all the materials over and over—especially since I hadn't absorbed much during my hospital stay.

Rehab was the first place I felt safe again. I learned I *could* exercise. I joined a gym. I changed my diet using the MyFitnessPal app to track calories, macros, sodium, and fluids. I lost another 30 pounds and have kept it off ever since. I still go to the gym 5 to 8 times a week. Takeout and restaurant food are pretty much out of my life now—too much sodium. I cook using spices but no salt, and I meditate regularly. I've drastically reduced the stress in my life.

Through the Women@Heart program, I learned that the average life expectancy after hospitalization for heart failure—especially in my condition—is just 2.5 years. I'm glad I didn't know that right away, because when I found out, I was terrified. But it also lit a fire in me: I realized I had to do more than average if I wanted to stick around.

Now, I'm coming up on three years since my heart failure diagnosis. At my last appointment, my cardiologist essentially "fired" me—I now only go once a year. I'm down to five medications instead of eight, and I feel great.

I want to live a long time. I know this is a chronic and progressive condition, so I need to maintain the habits I've created—every single day. But I also have *quality* of life. And I want that for you too. That's why I'm sharing my story.

Thank you.