

WORDS OF Wellness

emotional ~ physical ~ financial ~ social ~ spiritual ~ environmental ~ intellectual ~ occupational

February 2024

Dedicated to supporting heart health and preventing heart disease, “Go Red Day” is February 2nd, 2024, and is focused on raising awareness about women’s heart health. When we think of “heart,” we also think of *connection, caring, and compassion*, which are important to the social and emotional dimensions of wellness.

A Heart Healthy Lifestyle: There are many ideas about the basics—eat healthy, move more, and make stress benefit you. But it can be hard to sort through all the conflicting information. It can be even harder to figure out how to create your own wellness habits.

Healthy Eating: It seems like every week or so, someone on the news is saying “eat this” or “don’t eat this,” but then reporting the opposite later. Here are a few trustworthy ideas that you can consider!

- **Fruits and vegetables:** According to the *Harvard Heart Letter*, eat brightly colored fruits and veggies—think blueberries, tomatoes, and beets, for example. Try eating at least 5 fruits or vegetables a day.
- **Sugar:** Try to cut down or eliminate sugary beverages like soda.
- **Water:** Many people don’t get enough water during the day. Not taking in enough fluids can result in declines in mental, emotional, and physical health, such as being less alert, feeling moody, having headaches, and becoming constipated.

Move More!: Current recommendations are to get about 150 minutes each week of moderate activity such as walking—a popular and effective way to move more.¹ That’s 30 minutes a day, five days a week. Walking is a great physical activity that has many physical and mental health benefits. It can help you reduce health risks, improve thinking, and decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety. Moving more can be a valuable strategy to help you make stress work for you. A pedometer, a fitness tracker, or a smart phone app can help you track how much you walk. Many people can benefit from three 10-minute walks during the day. You can also track other steps counted as you go through your daily activities. Set a walking or step goal and share with someone you trust. You may want to challenge yourself to add a few steps every day or increase your average steps.

Make Stress Benefit You! Stress is often described as a bad thing, but stress can be good. Facing and overcoming difficulties makes you stronger. Learn to recognize when you feel stressed. Discover how to take advantage of the energy and motivation stress can provide. Long-term stress, however, can be a problem. The American Heart Association suggests four areas for stress control:

- Be kind to yourself! We all talk with ourselves so, when you do, choose words that are positive, forgiving, gentle, and grateful.
- Take a break and walk or just sit for a minute and take a few deep breaths.
- Plan activities that give you pleasure and joy.

- Set time to breathe/relax every day.

Wellness: Wellness is a conscious, deliberate process that requires being aware of (and making) daily lifestyle choices. We know from our own experience, and from supporting others, that making choices is not always so easy. Sometimes we get discouraged. Many people give up their New Year's resolutions by mid-February. **Stay hopeful!**

Recognize that challenges and difficulties are part of life. Show self-compassion during the times when things don't go as you had planned. Continue to work on or adjust your plan. Your heart health can be strengthened by taking action—no matter how small. Find ways to adjust your daily habits so you can move a little more, eat a few more healthy foods, drink a bit more water, and make stress work for you.

Hope: Hope is described as a bit more specific than optimism. While optimism is an overall sense that the future will be positive, hope is more a feeling right now of confidence that “I can get where I want to go.” While the two are related, optimism could result from feeling lucky, not capable, while hope includes a belief in one's own capacity to make a better future. As with optimism, research on hope has consistently shown links to good health, longer life, productivity, academic success, and well-being. Jerome Groopman, in his book *The Anatomy of Hope*, describe “real” hope as having a positive point of view despite accepting negative realities. Hope exists right alongside doubt and fear—it does not erase them.

Hope seems to come from four core beliefs:

1. The future will be better than the present.
2. I have the power to make the future better.
3. There are many paths to my goals.
4. No goal path is free of obstacles.

Building Hope and Optimism: What can we do to become more hopeful in the face of difficulties? Shane Lopez, in his book *Making Hope Happen*, suggests 3 main strategies that are built on the 4 core beliefs:

1. Set meaningful goals based on your strengths!
2. Take action towards your goals to increase your sense of agency and control over your future!
3. Identify (and follow) many pathways towards your goals, knowing that they will not all be easy or successful.

During this month (and throughout the year) challenge yourself to see the positive in yourself and events you encounter. Reach out for support when you hit a roadblock. Try or create Plan C D or E when you encounter a challenge.

Remind yourself of your strengths.

Praise yourself for what you do accomplish.

Remember: You *can* take steps today to make a better tomorrow.

Social Wellness: Like all other dimensions, people's sense of social wellness varies greatly. Personal relationships are important. For many people, healthy relationships involve reciprocity and equality—meaning giving *as well as* receiving. We need to be able to express our needs and ideas with people who support and care about us, and we should attempt to listen to others with an open mind. Social support comes in different forms. Some people in our lives provide emotional support, making us feel cared for and loved. Others provide practical help, such as a ride, a second pair of hands for complicated tasks, or motivation as an exercise buddy. We may get “information support” from people, which might involve things like someone telling us where to find a bargain, which bus to take, or how to cook quinoa. Having a lot of varied people in your life can be beneficial, though having a wide social network does **not** always equate to feeling connected. Similarly, being alone is not the same as feeling lonely.

Loneliness and Isolation: Many people are lonely, which affects social wellness and contributes to poor health, a shorter life, depression, and are vulnerable to telemarketing fraud. People can become isolated due to medical or mental health issues (whether one's own or a family member's) or due to the duties of caring for others. The author of *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, recommends four steps to combat loneliness:

1. Extend yourself by reaching out to others a little bit at a time.
2. Plan to reach out to talk or help others.
3. Connect with groups of other people who you have something in common with others, whether that be a local music event, live role-playing games, sports, a book group, an exercise class, or a spiritual community.
4. Expect the best! Approach activities with a sense of hope and optimism. Positive attitudes appeal to others and can be self-fulfilling prophecies.

Isolation can take a toll on both mental and physical health. Actively seek opportunities to connect, whether it's through a heartfelt conversation, a virtual gathering, or a simple act of kindness. Even short connections can have a big impact on reducing feelings of isolation. Seek support to help counteract negative expectations about others and about social events.



Emotional Wellness and Heart Health:

Consider the profound impact that connections with others have on our emotional wellness and heart health. Think about how you can prioritize meaningful connections to prevent isolation, nurture your emotional wellness, and promote a healthier heart.

Celebrate the interconnectedness of emotional wellness and heart health. By creating and maintaining meaningful connections, we not only uplift our spirits but also contribute to the health of our heart. The health of your heart is closely tied to the quality of your connections. Strong social ties have been linked to a lower risk of heart disease. Positive social interactions can lower stress levels, decrease blood pressure, and contribute to an overall healthier cardiovascular system.

The positive effects of social connections on mental health are significant. Engaging with friends, family, or even fostering new connections can alleviate feelings of loneliness and contribute to a more positive emotional state. Reach out, share your thoughts, and be present for those around you.

- Take a moment to reach out to someone you care about. A text, a call, or a handwritten note can make someone's day—and yours too.
- Expressing gratitude fosters positive connections. Take time to appreciate the people who bring joy and support into your life.

Throughout February and this year, consider initiating at least one meaningful connection each week. It could be with a friend, family member, or even a colleague. Notice the positive impact on your emotional wellness and, the health of your heart.

For more information about [social wellness](#) and ways to [connect](#).



For more information about wellness resources, contact pswarbrick@cspnj.org or check out our website at cspnj.org/wellness-institute