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Moms With Heart: Motherly Advice About Living With HD

There's nothing easy about being a mother, but being a mother with heart disease is another story altogether. These three women give their own perspectives about how heart disease has shaped their lives — and their approach to motherhood.

Pam Lessley, St. Louise, MO: From Despair to Divine Intervention

On March 8th, 2007, Pam Lessley was told that she needed immediate heart bypass surgery. She had just a few hours to call family and friends and tell her employer that she would need to have at least ten weeks off work — beginning the next day. She was sent home to get ready, told not to have sex, and had to scrub herself with antiseptic sponges. Lines and numbers had been drawn on her legs at the hospital, and the scrubbing began to remove the ink. Pam remembers, “As I watched my husband redraw the numbers/lines, I lay there quietly, thinking “Is this really me?”

So began Pam’s long battle of acceptance — of her diagnosis, her fears, and her weaknesses — and learning to be honest about how all three were reshaping her life. When she returned to work, she didn’t feel ready, but thought she would just power through, as she had done years before as a busy working mother. At the age of 57, she was used to being in control of her life, but she now felt paralyzed by fear. “I just didn’t have the physical energy or the cognitive capabilities,” recalls Pam. “The more I tried, the more anxious I became and the higher my blood pressure would go. It was a vicious cycle. I was scared all of the time.”

Despite the fact that Pam was surrounded by supportive family and friends that she calls home, the emotional impact of Pam’s heart disease was taking a serious toll. Her husband was empathetic, but Pam’s increasing panic attacks and a revolving door of medications that made her feel like someone else, meant that it was like living with a different person. Her grown children tried to help, but didn’t understand the extent of the problems since they didn’t see her every day. Says Pam, “I just kept praying, ‘God help me.’”

For Pam, that divine intervention finally came, in the form of Kathy Kastan’s book *From the Heart*, which eventually led her to the WomenHeart website and a connection with Marilyn in Maryland, another woman of the same age who had been through bypass surgery. “I finally found someone who understood,” Pam says. Five weeks of Cognitive Behavior Therapy soon followed, and she learned to “accept and embrace” her heart disease. The icing on the cake was the welcome news that her first grandchild was on the way.

It was a long road to acceptance, but there were rich rewards along the way. Even Pam's daughter sees the benefits, saying to her mom "It brought us closer. It made me aware of how lucky I am to have you and dad as parents." This is music to Pam's ears: "What else does a mother want to hear except that!"

Kimberly Carbaugh, Cleveland, OH: Modeling a Heart-Healthy Life

Learning to live with heart disease has never really been an issue for Kimberly Carbaugh. Born with a congenital atrial septal defect, she was diagnosed at the age of seven, went through open heart surgery, and had a pacemaker implanted when she was eleven. Now 34, her heart disease progressed to complete heart block a few years ago, requiring the replacement of the pacemaker.

Because two of Kim's sisters also have congenital heart disease, it was a fairly commonplace part of her family's life. "We understood, but did not dwell on, the fragility of life," recalls Kim. "I think that the presence of heart disease in 3 out of 4 siblings created an even deeper bond between my sisters and me." Now a mother herself, Kim remembers fearing that she would pass on her congenital heart defect to her daughter. "My daughter does not have a heart defect, but having her offered me the most important reason in my life to stay healthy," says Kim. "I think that being a mom has made me hyperaware of maintaining a healthy lifestyle to ensure that I am alive and healthy for as long as possible."

For Kim, this means being a role model for her daughter, by taking her out walking on the trails near their home and introducing lots of healthy new foods into her diet. However, she does fall into common traps typical of moms — like putting herself last on the list: "I still find myself doing that - putting my daughter, my husband, my siblings, my job and everything else ahead of myself. It is important for our emotional and physical well-being to carve out time for ourselves." She has also found that cherishing special moments with her daughter are truly heart-healthy, saying "Look into your children's eyes every day, tell them you love them and give them a big hug. One look into my daughter's eyes and one hug from her melts away the stress of the day."

Marie Warshauer, Indianapolis, IN: How to be Sensibly Selfish

"My children were 15, 13, and 11 at the time. They were terrified at first." These are Marie Warshauer's memories from the fall of 2001, when she was diagnosed with coronary artery disease and quickly scheduled for an angioplasty. It was bad timing — not that there's ever actually a good time for heart disease — but her family was also right in the middle of moving into an apartment while their home underwent a major renovation. "My husband went into a "stoic" mode and our family flocked in to help and take over the day-to-day activities," remembers Marie.

As a result of Marie's health issues, her family has become more protective of her. She learned to delegate more and the kids learned to pitch in more. "We are all more sensitive to one another," Marie says, "and value our time together much more than we ever did." Following her own diagnosis and surgery, Marie sought therapy to help

her adjust to her new life with heart disease. Most of all, she found that meeting other women with heart disease helped her feel less alone: "It changed everything for me to know that others felt like I did."

Marie's family has become acutely aware of heart disease over the past seven years, and pays attention to the latest news. Their caring behavior has made it possible for Marie to learn how to listen to her instincts and take care of herself, and she believes that women can stay heart-healthy by "being selfish." "Plan something just for you that makes you feel good about being you," advises Marie. "Maybe a manicure weekly, a walk, exercise, lunch with a friend, a nap. It does not have to be excessive, but if you take time for yourself then it will be easier for you to help others."