

Keeping the Heart Whole

The heart is more complex than a vital organ. It's said to be the origin of our love, compassion, and innermost feelings. And so, keeping the heart whole is very important, and knowing how to go about it is essential. Let our experts lead you down the path to a healthier – and more loving – life.

By Kathleen Harte Simone

“Good relationships don't just happen. You have to work.”
Marianne Harms, LCSW
Center for Personal Reflection, Ottsville

SUSTAINING LOVE'S FLAME

According to Marianne Harms, LCSW, there are concrete behaviors to help maintain a loving relationship, the most important being that both partners have to feel safe knowing that they will not be judged,

or judge each other. Once safe, couples can then move ahead – and continue working – to keep the flame burning. Marianne shares her expertise:

Tips to Keep Your Love Flowing:

- ♥ Tell your partner you appreciate them. “Every day, saying things like ‘I want to thank you for doing the dishes tonight,’ for example, goes a long way. And mean it too.”
- ♥ Practice “Random Acts of Loving” at least once a week. “Once, I found on the door knob, a silver bracelet tied to a ribbon with a note stating ‘I’m so lucky to have you in my life.’ It was a beautiful random act of loving that I’ll never forget.”
- ♥ Observe the four transitional times of the day to make connections. “When you first wake up, when you leave to start your day, when you return from your day’s events, and when you go to bed, are four important times to really connect with your partner.”
- ♥ Practice Communication Exercises. “Your partner sits in a chair and you walk around. Every time you face him or her, you say a favorable attribute such as ‘I just love your eyes.’ Then, switch roles. It may sound corny, but it’s amazing how connected you become!”
- ♥ Write down how you see your ideal relationship and compare notes. “Include your thoughts on finances, friends, sex, chores, how often you will see your grandchildren, when and where to vacation and retire, for example. You may have gaps in how you see things, so use dialogue and come to agreement on all issues. If it becomes hard to agree, I suggest that you meet with a professional relationship therapist who can guide you through this important step.”
- ♥ Introduce new sexual behaviors. “Seniors are still very interested in sex, and they should be. So try a new position or a new oil, take a shower together, or watch a romance movie together, for example. Be sensitive to each other’s needs and willing to try new things.”
- ♥ Live life together! “Play, dance, exercise, laugh, really talk, read to each other, explore the city or countryside together, go on a date!”

GROWING THE HEART

How do we grow the heart?

We do for others, and as the saying goes, our heart grows.

Some remarkable volunteers highlighted below demonstrate how by sharing their time, their capacity to love has multiplied!

For six years, Florence and Richard Peters of Fairless Hills have served as volunteer mentors for two high school boys.

“What do we do? We talk and talk and talk!” Richard said. “The boys have had some anger and anxiety issues over the years, and they have really made great progress. Just having someone to talk to, to show that they care is all that some of these children need.”

The Peters, who have raised two children and now enjoy the company of their five grandchildren, consider the boys part of their extended family, although they don’t see them outside of their weekly visits. “The boys look forward to seeing us. Sure, they like the presents for their birthdays and Christmas, but most of all they appreciate our attention to them,” Florence added, “And they love the hugs!”

“We’ve succeeded in helping to show these boys the right path,” Richard added, “It’s satisfying to see that they will contribute to society. It’s just wonderful!”

To join the 800+ Bucks County RSVP volunteers who provide more than 175,000 hours of service each year, contact RSVP at 215-340-1210 or your local senior center.

After an early retirement three years ago, Gary J. Purpura, Sr. of Churchville dropped by the Council Rock Senior Center and found home. “I met a lot of really nice people, joined right in, and started helping out. Now, I’m there every day for 3 – 4 hours, coordinating the billiards and table tennis leagues. And, I’m there for anyone who needs me physically and mentally, just willing to lend a hand and an ear. The seniors are so appreciative. It’s very gratifying.”

Gary has also volunteered with the Bucks County Senior Games and the State Games in Shippensburg for several years, and is a successful participant at both, bringing home dozens of medals. More importantly, Gary returns each year with a sense of accomplishment knowing that he helped to keep the Games alive and well.

“I’m in relatively good health and my children are grown, so now I can enjoy my grandchildren and help others. It’s a good place to be in life. It makes me feel great that my friends at the center can’t wait to see me every day, and I can’t wait to see them and lend a hand!”

MAINTAINING A HEALTHY HEART

According to the American Heart Association, cardiovascular disease is the No.1 killer of American men and women. Cardiovascular diseases, including diseases of the heart, brain and blood vessels, manifest themselves in the form of heart attacks, heart failure, stroke and high blood pressure to name a few. That’s nothing to take half-heartedly.

What can you do to maintain a healthy heart?

Renee Sangrigoli, MD, F.A.C.C., stresses the following:

- ♥ Identify the risk factors for cardiovascular disease including high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, smoking, family history, and obesity.
- ♥ Be aware of early warning signs of heart disease, including: chest discomfort which may extend to the neck, jaw, or arms and is sometimes accompanied by shortness of breath, decrease in exercise capacity, increased fatigue, and palpitations or symptoms that resemble gastric reflux disease to name the most common.
- ♥ Schedule yearly screenings with your family doctor including a thorough history and physical, along with risk factor assessment. Care should be sought for any new or unusual symptoms.
- ♥ Implement lifestyle modification as the first step toward prevention. Aerobic exercise, such as walking, running, swimming 3-5x weekly, and a heart-healthy diet low in saturated fats and cholesterol are essential.

STRENGTHENING FAMILY RELATIONS

“People in healthy relationships are not only happier, but more resilient. Building on healthy relationships – with our family, friends, and peers – is essential.”

Marc Duome, Psy.D., clinical psychologist and neurologist
Liberty Health Group, St. Mary Medical Center, Doylestown Hospital

“Grieving teaches us how to love the person who is no longer with us – to love them in new ways.”

Inez Bing, M.Ed., Grief and Loss Counselor, Doylestown

“The more positive connections we have, the better off we are. It not only keeps us more fulfilled, but it also helps us bounce back from illness or injury. This is especially important for older people,” says Marc Duome, Psy.D. So how do we foster good relationships? Dr. Duome recommends that we look to ourselves, and practice the following:

Preparing for Good Relationships:

- ♥ Take an inventory of your relationships. “Maintain the good relationships and help them grow. They are valuable. Realize that it may be necessary to limit relationships that are ‘toxic.’”
- ♥ Refuel yourself. “Find a person, experience, or event that will help you refresh yourself during a stressful time. People in your life can really help lift you and your relationship will grow too.”
- ♥ Reprioritize. “What is important to you at a particular time will affect who is important to you. Understand that this is perfectly okay. Taking care of yourself will help you take care of others in your life.”
- ♥ Maintain proper perspective of roles in a relationship. “A mother should always be a mother. A daughter should always be a daughter. A grandparent should be a grandparent, not assuming the role of a parent. When this balance is kept, the relationship will flourish.”
- “Life changes often bring joy, but sometimes depression. It doesn’t have to be that way. Seek professional help during times when life changes bring family stress and damper relationships,” Dr. Duome urges.

MENDING A BROKEN HEART

“Grief is a natural and normal part of life, affecting every part of you – your mind, body, and spirit,” says Inez Bing, M.Ed. “It’s not an easy process and it takes time, but ultimately, the goal is not feeling the grief. It’s remembering how your loved one brought you joy. Love transcends everything.” Inez shares some helpful advice:

Ten Steps to Help Cope with Loss:

1. Accept the reality of loss. “Your loved one is not coming back in body, but they are with you always,” Inez stresses.
2. Give yourself permission to grieve. “It’s natural and necessary.”
3. Accept your feelings. “Don’t try to bury them, they won’t hide.”
4. Don’t compare yourself to others. “There’s no right or wrong way to grieve.”
5. Express your sadness and angry feelings. “Cry, hug, talk and talk more.”
6. Develop a support system. “This is probably the most important step. It’s imperative that you have someone to speak to, to share your feelings.”
7. Seek counseling and outside help. “If you need help, if your support system is not enough, seek professional counseling. We’re here to help you.”
8. Find ways to remember your loved one in less painful ways. “Fond memories will help peace and comfort.”
9. Be gentle with yourself. “Take care of your well being. This includes staying away from drugs and alcohol.”
10. Postpone major life changes. “For at least a year, stay where you are and keep things constant. You need constancy during your grief.”