

# **SENIOR FITNESS**

## **When Heart Patients Choose Medication Over Lifestyle Changes – Stubbornness or Depression?**

**By**

**Jim Evans**

**DEAR JIM:** My wife has been hospitalized – I don't know how many times – for heart problems over the past several years, and she is taking enough medications to kill a horse. All this time her doctor has been trying to convince her to exercise and lose some weight, but instead, she just asks him for another prescription to make her feel better. She pops her pills without a miss, but she won't walk as far as the mailbox and is getting as big as a house. In fact, she has become almost totally bedridden. We've been married for more than 50 years, and I care for her very much and don't want to lose her. What can I do to help her?

**DISCOURAGED IN DURHAM**

**DEAR DISCOURAGED:** Since you mentioned horses, you also know the old saying that you “can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him (or her) drink.” It's time for you to take charge or your wife's condition will only continue to deteriorate, and her quality of life will diminish with her deteriorating physical condition.

Surprisingly, your wife's attitude is not unique. According to a recent article in the *European Heart Journal* (27:434, February 2006), researchers monitored several hundred heart patients to determine if they would make the necessary lifestyle changes to improve their symptoms or prevent future hospitalizations. They found that more than 90% complied with taking medications and keeping their doctor appointments, BUT fewer (83%) followed dietary recommendations, lowered sodium intake (79%) or restricted fluids (73%), and only 39% engaged in exercise and only 35% weighed themselves at least 3 times per week. Unfortunately, it seems most heart patients would rather take the easy way out than take any responsibility for their own recovery.

Is it stubbornness or depression? Usually it's just stubbornness in the beginning – most people just don't seem to like to exercise - but it often turns into depression with time.

What can you do? Check with your wife's physician to see how many of her medications are absolutely necessary and have him/her check the dosage levels on each. If your wife has gained weight since she first started taking some of her prescriptions, she might be storing some of the medication in the fat cells of her body, and it might be prudent to reduce the dosages of some prescriptions to adjust to her slower metabolism.

Ask the doctor about the possibility of prescribing a mild anti-depressant to elevate her mood and, perhaps, improve her attitude about increasing her physical activity. Exercise produces its own natural anti-depressants in the form of endomorphins that can have a positive effect on her mental and physical well-being, but she may need something from the doctor to help get her started.

And, finally, encourage your wife to stand in front of the couch or her bed and just walk in place. Hold her hand and walk with her at first to build her confidence and share in the experience. Engage in conversation to distract her from the task at hand and, if you run out of things to talk about, turn on the TV. Try to walk in intervals of 5-10 minutes, gradually increasing the time until she can walk unassisted for 20-30 minutes at a time. As soon as she is able, start walking outdoors. Hold hands and go for a walk around the block, through the park, on the beach, or in the shopping mall. Compliment her and encourage her every step of the way. She should start feeling better within a few weeks as her mobility and energy level improve, and your relationship should be stronger because of it.

Now is the time for you to be proactive with the tender, guiding touch that only a spouse or significant other can provide. Love and affection – combined with lots of patience - can sometimes accomplish great things if channeled in the right direction instead of languishing in frustration.

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