



## **Change of heart**

**How you react to situations, rather than the situations themselves, is the key to a healthy heart**

If you're worried that every stressful working day is taking you closer to a heart attack, you don't need to be. The National Heart Foundation of Australia has found no consistent evidence that life events, work-related "stressors", anger, hostility, anxiety disorders or panic disorders are linked to the development of coronary heart disease.

Good news? You'd think so. But cardiologist Dr Alan Goble of the Heart Research Centre in Melbourne believes that many people are disappointed with this finding.

"If your heart problems are the result of work-related stress, you can argue that it's not your fault," he says. "This is much nicer than the thought that you're putting yourself at risk by eating too much, exercising too little and smoking - behaviours you have the power to change."

However, as Dr Goble is quick to point out, these are exactly the kinds of behaviours which can be triggered by stress. So while stress may not pose a direct threat to your heart, the way you respond to stress could do just that.

"If stressful situations drive you to exercise more, they could actually be beneficial," says Dr Goble. "On the other hand, if you react by smoking more or by sitting, drinking, brooding, eating and putting on weight, you could be raising your cholesterol levels and blood pressure enough to accelerate arterial disease, blood clot formation and heart attacks."

## **Not bulletproof**

As joint owners of Knaris Holdings, a property management and development company, Nick Curruli and his father do everything from acquiring land and supervising the building process to taking care of the business itself. Curruli often feels there aren't enough hours in the day – and that used to mean no time for exercise or eating well. Then, five years ago, a health scare brought him up short.

"I thought I was bulletproof until I got an infection around my heart," he says. "That really made me take stock. I decided I had to take care of myself and started going to the gym, but I just wasn't getting results. Being a stress eater didn't help, either."

Luckily, Curruli had friends who were concerned enough to make his 40th birthday present a month with personal trainer Justin Cantelo.

"At first I was quite depressed – I thought a personal trainer was a waste of time and money," says Curruli. "But, because it was a gift, I had to go along with it. That was 14 months ago, and I'm still seeing Justin twice a week. In that time I've lost 13 kilos. I've got more energy, I feel better, I find it easier to concentrate and my work performance has definitely improved. And I've had no more heart problems."

Curruli admits it took a while to embrace the experience.

"At first I was the worst possible client," he says. "I used to lie about what I was doing between visits. But we started gently, and Justin was always very supportive as well as firm.

"At the end of the day it has to be your own decision to change your lifestyle, but a trainer can help you stay motivated," he continues. "For instance, Justin encouraged me to find a goal I could work towards. I decided on the Manly Soft Sand Classic Cup, which is a nine kilometre run on soft sand. At the time I couldn't walk from one end of Manly to the other, but I did it – and got a huge sense of achievement."

### **It's all in the mind**

As principal and head trainer of VitalFit ([www.vitalfit.com.au](http://www.vitalfit.com.au)), Cantelo uses a combination of exercise, nutrition and motivation to coax success out of his clients.

"The first thing you have to change is your mindset," he says. "You need to establish a habit for exercise – and this can be as simple as walking to the bank or gardening as long as you do it for ten minutes every day.

"You can then introduce more structured exercise, and this is when motivation and goal setting become really important. If you're not into what you're doing, it's easy to find excuses. A trainer can help with the motivation, and also help you use your time effectively. For instance, 30 minutes or more of strength training three times a week is good for the heart as well as the muscles, and can have significant results."

When it comes to nutrition, Cantelo provides a plan based on CSIRO guidelines. He recommends sticking to whole foods wherever possible and provides his client with healthy meal options for all kinds of situations, such as travelling and running late.

"The real key is identifying people's belief systems and helping them to change," he says. "If you believe you're destined to be overweight and unhealthy, you probably will be."

## **Don't become a statistic**

In 2002, heart, stroke and vascular diseases killed 50,294 people – that's 37.6 per cent of all deaths. But there's much you can do to reduce your personal risk.

- **Limit your intake of saturated fats** Cut down on fatty cuts of meat, full fat milk and cheese, butter, cream, commercially-baked products such as biscuits and pastries, deep fried fast foods, coconut oil and palm oil. You may also want to limit your intake of cholesterol-rich foods such as egg yolks and offal.
- **Become more active.** If you find it hard to get motivated, consider a personal trainer, starting with three half-hour sessions a week to establish the habit. Be prepared to try a few until you find someone you can work with for the long term.
- **If you're depressed, see your doctor.** There is strong evidence that people who experience depression are at greater risk of developing coronary heart disease.
- **Find a confidante.** Social isolation is also a risk factor for coronary heart disease.
- **Stop smoking.** You'll find help and support at [www.quit.org.au](http://www.quit.org.au)
- **If don't drink, don't start.** Alcohol may reduce heart attacks, but it can raise your blood pressure. This could increase your chances of having a stroke.