

LIVE LONGER and STRONGER

“I never thought it could happen to me”

Heart disease and stroke can affect anyone.

These survivors are sharing their stories so you can protect yourself.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID TSAY



“Moments after my daughter was born, I was blindsided with a headache. No one knew what it meant.”

Melynda Rackley

Melynda is grateful to be here for her 2½-year-old daughter, Kayla.



The New Mom

MELYNDA RACKLEY, 26, Jacksonville, FL

As I was wheeled into the operating room for a C-section on August 5, 2012, I was filled with anticipation. I was so excited to become a mother.

Kayla emerged weighing 6 lbs 7 oz with a head of beautiful black hair. But moments later, I was struck with a viselike headache, as if my brain were trying to break out of my skull. Then I noticed I couldn't feel my mom's hand, which was squeezing mine. The doctors attributed both symptoms to my epidural and injected medication into my IV. The headache vanished for a few seconds, but re-emerged almost immediately.

Three hours later, my left arm was still numb—I couldn't hold Kayla—and my speech slowed down. Doctors ran tests, and the results were so serious that they took my family into the chapel to break the news. A blood clot had caused a stroke, and almost the entire right half of my brain was saturated with blood. My chance of survival was small. I needed to be transferred to a nearby hospital—without Kayla.

The ambulance ride felt like an episode of *Grey's Anatomy*. The whole experience was surreal. My

grandmother had had a stroke, but she was in her 60s with hypertension. I was 23, healthy, and supposed to be celebrating the happiest day of my life.

When I got to the new hospital, I was given blood thinners and monitored for swelling. After two weeks, the clot dissolved, and I headed to a rehabilitation facility to regain my strength—I still couldn't move my left side. Seeing stroke patients in their 70s walking faster than I could left me so depressed that some days I couldn't even get out of bed. Thoughts of my daughter, who I'd seen only a few times, encouraged me to power through the draining rehab.

Almost three years later, feeling has returned everywhere except the bottom of my left foot. Cognitive therapy helped me through some memory difficulties, and I was able to start graduate school for professional counseling. Kayla and I love reading and visiting the park. The only pill I take is a multivitamin, and I see my neurologist annually.

My new purpose

I volunteer with the American Stroke Association, sharing my story and teaching others to recognize stroke symptoms, like a sudden headache and altered speech. Kayla and I live on the second floor of an apartment building, and every time I walk up the stairs, I remember what I went through and thank God for helping me survive.

Baby Your Heart

During and after pregnancy, blood naturally becomes more hypercoaguable (or sticky), increasing the risk of clots that could lead to heart attack or stroke. Your heart rate rises and blood volume doubles, too. Most women will emerge fine, returning to their prepregnancy state within about six weeks, but pregnancy can unmask heart disease in a woman with underlying factors, says American Heart Association spokesperson Kathy Magliato, MD. Be sure to make it to every checkup and report symptoms such as dizziness, shortness of breath or jaw, arm or chest pain.

The Medical Professional

DEB RAFFERTY, 57, Columbus, OH

As a registered nurse with years of ER experience, I knew that men and women experience heart attack symptoms in different ways. Yet when I found myself going back and forth from the bedroom to the bathroom with nausea, diarrhea and heartburn early one Saturday morning in February 2012, I didn't think it was serious. I didn't smoke or drink, had normal cholesterol levels and a healthy weight. But when a full body sweat suddenly set in, I wondered if it was a heart warning sign. I asked myself, *Does your arm hurt?* (another telltale heart attack symptom) and noticed a distant achiness in my left shoulder. "Call 911," I told my husband, as I lay down on the bathroom floor to wait.

Once the paramedics arrived, they hooked me up to blood pressure equipment and an EKG monitor. My heart rate was 44, which is below normal (the average range is 60 to 100). I asked them if I had any ST elevation, which is an indication that the cardiac muscle was sustaining damage. When they said yes, I immediately knew I was having a heart attack.

The cardiologist at the hospital discovered my right coronary artery was 99% blocked and used two stents to open it back up. He

Deb is dedicated to teaching nurses about a condition not always recognized in heart patients.

said I could go home in a few days, but lingering pressure in my chest and back motivated a nurse to push for a follow-up EKG the next day. Before I knew it, I was being rushed into emergency surgery. My right coronary artery was again blocked.

Turns out, I had spontaneous coronary artery dissection (SCAD), a condition in which the artery wall unexpectedly tears, impeding blood flow. I needed open-heart coronary bypass surgery: Doctors used a vein from my leg to bypass the damaged portion of the artery.

“I told my husband to call 911 as I lay down on the bathroom floor.”

After a week in the hospital, I returned home on a cocktail of heart medications, barely able to walk from one room to another. Very slowly, I rebuilt my stamina, and now, three years later, I’m back to swimming or walking at least four times a week. I try to stick to a Mediterranean-focused diet, with more fish and less beef and pork than before.

My nursing practice has changed: It’s too emotionally difficult for me to look at EKGs, even if they aren’t my own. So, I focus on other tasks, like collecting preadmission info from patients, and I developed a SCAD presentation for nurses.

♥ What I learned

This experience taught me to listen—closely—to my gut. Despite my tendency to not want to make a fuss over things (I actually apologized to the medics when they arrived!), and even though the cardiologist wanted to release me, the nurse knew something wasn’t right. If either of us had ignored our instincts, I wouldn’t be here today.





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The Fitness Fanatic

ESSENCE HARRIS-BANKS, 40, New Orleans

Ten years ago, I was your typical 30-year-old, burning the candle at both ends: I worked full time for a utility company and was a personal trainer in my off-hours. I was also earning my MBA and raising my 3-year-old son as a single mom. I stayed fit by working out up to five days a week.

I started experiencing heart palpitations and shortness of breath while on the treadmill in July 2004, and I chalked it up to fatigue. But when I felt totally winded after

“I was in the prime of my life—and I had coronary artery disease.”

carrying my son to his room a few weeks later, I knew something was wrong. My doctor did blood work and an EKG, which came back normal. He diagnosed me with anxiety and suggested Xanax. Yet, these symptoms were so odd for me that I didn’t fill the prescription and sought a second opinion soon after.

When I walked into the cardiologist’s office, he looked surprised and said, “Essence, what are you doing here?” (He knew me from the gym.) A stress echo test, which required working up to running fast at a high incline on a treadmill, revealed abnormalities, and he scheduled an emergency angiogram. During the procedure he found almost complete blockages in two major arteries. He immediately inserted three stents to keep my

Essence combines spinning, cardio and Pilates for stress relief.



arteries open. I couldn’t believe it—I was in the prime of my life, and I had coronary artery disease.

Thankfully, my dedication to fitness paid off with a swift recovery, but I had to slow down in general. I began doing yoga for stress reduction. Then I made a list of activities—like volunteering at school and serving on various boards—and started crossing off items that weren’t adding value to my life. I refocused my energy on a new heart mission and underwent training by WomenHeart to run

a patient support group at Tulane Medical Center near my home. I also started the nonprofit Heart N Hands to educate young girls about heart health.

♥ I want women to know
Small changes to your life—like doing some yoga every morning or saying “no” once in awhile—can benefit your heart. I’ve lived with CAD for 10 years and have a much stronger appreciation for these little modifications. Many people think heart disease is the end of the world, but for me, it was just the beginning.

The Volunteer-Turned-Patient

MARIAM GIARDINI, 37, Westlake, OH

In 2007, the local chapter of the American Heart Association asked me if I'd host a cut-a-thon fundraiser at my hair salon. Even though I didn't have heart disease, I thought it was a great cause. So I held the event and gave discounts to clients who dyed their hair red. I also started doing the annual Heart Walk.

Then, at a party in the fall of 2010, I passed out as my husband, Christian, handed me a glass of wine. When I came to less than a minute later, I had difficulty speaking, but orange juice perked me up, so we chalked it up to low blood sugar (I'd only eaten a salad due to a busy day).

“When I learned that I needed open-heart surgery, I broke down.”

Three weeks later, I passed out again in the car while my husband was driving. He thought I had fallen asleep, so he didn't call 911 until we got home and he couldn't wake me up. This time, it took longer to revive me. Paramedics couldn't find anything wrong and urged me to see my doctor, who referred me to a cardiologist. He decided to do an ultrasound first, before a stress test. He found a silver dollar-size hole between my heart's upper chambers, which was moving blood back and forth rather than circulating it throughout my body.

The doctor called it the biggest hole he'd ever seen and said that if we had proceeded with the stress test, I could have gone into heart failure. No wonder I felt nauseated and was fainting—only half of my blood was

moving through my body! My heart had also ballooned to three times the normal size from the stress, which is why I felt my heartbeat through the side of my ribs.

When I learned that I'd need open-heart surgery to repair it, I broke down. I was scared and didn't understand how this could happen; I had no family history of heart disease. But my faith carried me through the six-hour procedure, as well as the

two-month recovery at home. And three months post-surgery, with my doctor's blessing, we started trying for (and conceived) baby number two. One month later, my heart was back to normal size.

♥ A reinvigorated role

Now that I'm on the patient side, I became a national volunteer for the Go Red For Women campaign. I want all women to know that they shouldn't put off getting medical attention, as I did.

