



Living with Heart

Making your cardiac comeback.

 ECU HEALTH

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Making your cardiac comeback

Heart disease impacts patients and families and prompts some of life's biggest challenges and lifestyle changes. Living with this disease calls for the motivation of one person backed by a supportive team. Here at the East Carolina Heart Institute at ECU Health Medical Center, we are committed to comprehensive care for our patients.

Dr. Sam Sears and his team provide leadership and clinical services to our patients to address the full recovery process. He has devoted more than 28 years of clinical practice to helping heart patients make a cardiac comeback and get the joy of being a true survivor — living with heart.

It is our hope you will find this helpful and that you will share the information with others whom you think would benefit.

Wishing you a lifetime of good heart health.

Mark D. Iannettoni, MD, MBA

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Making the decision

Living with heart means full action of your mind and body to live life fully. Stopping heart problems or recovering from heart issues takes planned and strategic steps. The unexpected heart event can be shocking and “out of the blue.” It can leave you feeling “stuck” about how to move forward toward recovery.

Taking action starts with a plan. Reaching certain results after a diagnosis of heart disease calls for healthy lifestyle changes and teamwork.

*Source: Doran, G. T. (1981). There's a S.M.A.R.T. Way to Write Management's Goals and Objectives, Management Review, Vol. 70, Issue 11, pp. 35-36.

SPECIFIC
MEASURABLE
ACTION-ORIENTED
REALISTIC
TIME-BASED

Setting goals

Many patients start with a very general goal such as “improve my health,” “feel better” or “lose weight.” Although this gets the process started, the next step is to make the goal more *Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic and Time-based (SMART)*.^{*} It may take a little extra time for these extra steps, but in the end that time will lead to success.

Specific: Grow a clear understanding of the goal and purpose.

“Feel better” can be expanded to “Increase my energy level so that I can go to my book club regularly.”

Measurable: This will allow you to find out when you have reached the goal. “I want to lose weight” can be changed to “I want to lose a pound a week.”

Action-oriented: Make specific steps that will help you reach the goal so the focus can be on the changes, rather than just the goal.

“Improve my health” can be changed to “To lower my blood pressure and strengthen my heart, I will start walking three to four days per week.”

Realistic: Making a realistic goal will help keep up motivation work towards the goal. If a goal is not realistic, it is easy to become upset and disheartened.

“I will exercise every day” can be changed to “I will try to be active most days of the week.”

Time-based: This is a great time to create smaller goals based on one- or two-week steps to add to your feeling of success.

“I will improve my heart health” can be changed to “For the next two weeks I will eat three servings per day of fruits and vegetables.”

Change is a process

Making lifestyle changes is a process, not a destination. There will be moments when you will feel successful and things will be going smoothly. Also, there will also be moments when you struggle with a change or there will be a lapse. All of this is part of the journey to better health and should not shake your trust in your gift to be successful. Persistence is key.

Reaching complete health involves techniques for your mind and body. Now we will review key steps of a personal action plan that will cut down stress and boost your well-being.

Mind Strategies

Check your stress level regularly. Are you under stress?

Heart conditions trigger change. Change can be stressful. Being aware that you are under stress can help you take steps to address it. You can change course and handle it before it gets out of control. Ask for feedback and help from your friends and family about how they think you have been handling bumps in the road lately.



Try this: Rate your stress level (high, medium or low) each week to see if you have been taking enough time to relax and live restfully and confidently. Start a conversation with loved ones about stress: both yours and theirs. This can start a shared approach to managing the changes.

Acknowledge changes as challenges. Make life change tolerance.

Life with heart disease aids changes in your life. Change can be stressful if you focus on keeping everything the same. Since change is a part of life, you can expect it. Viewing these changes as challenges helps lead to a better result and make the step more comfortable.

Try this: Review a recent change in your life and look for ways you showed flexibility and made good efforts to change. Think of this as a plan to accept *change goggles* to help you view change in a more open-minded way. Being flexible in your approach can increase your sense of control.

Find personal coping assets

Stress and change prompts a review of both the stressor and the support to cope.

Try this: Take record of tactics and people who can help you in a pinch. Build and involve a group of key people who you can give support for and get support from. This might even be called your *“support roster”* that involves people who help you thrive.

Review personal coping history

Most people rarely think of all the events that they have got by in their life. Stressful life events are part of the common human experience.

Try this: Think back to a challenging life experience in the past in which you wondered how you would get through it. Recall and think of specific thoughts and actions (*coping checklist*) that worked well and helped you pass through that experience. The events may have been undesirable but you can learn from the thoughts and actions that helped you. These thoughts and actions show your own coping strengths. Most people under-rate their ability to cope, and reviewing your life experiences can remind you of your coping skills.

Engage in goal setting

Looking forward to the events of life gives fuel for coping each day. Goal setting can help you carry out specific actions or success that you would likely come across.

Try this: *Look forward!* Name one event, one success or feeling that gives meaning and value to you that you would like to come across in the next week. Make a plan to take a first step and go for it. This is a plan for mindful living, helping you live in the moment.

Start positive thinking

The power of positive thinking involves realistically evaluating the events of life and choosing to point out the good and useful aspects of the world around us. Looking for the strengths in others and ourselves can often give a renewed sense of purpose in our everyday life.

Try this: *Pick positive people.* Take a moment to see good qualities in two people in your life. Make a plan to talk to them about your respect of these qualities at least once this week; this may create a good boomerang effect that helps you, too. Identify your own best qualities as a follow up and look to magnify them.

Learn heart smart knowledge

The volume of information about caring for your heart has quickly grown in the last decade. Understanding the disease, the medications, the devices, the doctors and the impact can be overwhelming. Becoming an expert is not needed, but every nugget of knowledge can help you gain some control over the process.

Try this: Know your diagnosis and your medications. *Be a heart teacher.* Teach your close friends and family about what you are doing to handle the changes. Consider teamwork to help you bounce back.



Body Strategies

Plan some pleasant events

To break the cycle of stress and worry, make and follow a plan of pleasant and peaceful actions. Even if it may seem hard, when you start doing fun or rewarding activities again, you may start feeling a bit more like your normal self.

Try this: *Plan quality of life!* Think of something that you use to enjoy, that you have not done in a while. Examples of easy, inexpensive, pleasant events are listed below to get you started:

- Visit old friends or relatives
- Drive out on the open road
- Ride a bike
- Eat an ice cream cone
- Listen to music you enjoy
- Treat yourself to a favorite meal



Keep up your physical activity level

Some heart patients are surprised to learn that routine physical activity is important. Physical activity helps keep a positive, upbeat mood, regulates energy level and builds our strength.

Try this: *Safe and Active.* Ask your doctor or nurse about safe levels of activity, given your set physical condition and capabilities. Plan a three-week test of routine walking. Take time to notice how it feels during and after your walk. You may find that it has a calming feeling on your mind and body. After three weeks, consider continuing the activity as part of your routine plan.

Get some sleep

Some heart patients find it is hard to rest or to get comfortable when they feel their heart beating. Two types of rest can help: quality sleep and relaxation.

Try this: Keep up a steady sleep-wake schedule. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day, even on the weekend. Use your bed only for sleep and for romance, so that it is not linked to other wakeful activities, such as watching TV, working on a laptop computer or reading. A warm bath or shower shortly before bed can be calming and sleep-enhancing. A very dark, quiet, fairly cool bedroom setting is best for sleep. *Plan to rest and rest with a plan!*

Relax and take care

Taking care of other people is a worthy task that we all value. After all, taking better care of yourself can result in better care for your loved ones.

Try this: *Plan for Peace of Mind.* Name some actions that are self-soothing (e.g. quiet time, prayer, warm bath) and plan at least one activity a day for a week. Review the results after one week and plan the next week.

Involve friends and family ties

Your loved ones can be a vital part of a health plan.

Try this: *TEAM: Together everyone accomplishes more!* Join your life teammate in a common challenge together. Discuss something that you both want to reach. Plan to work together to beat the challenge and win.

Pay attention to feeling alive and well

Having heart disease can remind you what it feels like to feel ill, to be vulnerable and feel unsure about how to help yourself. Moments in life that make feeling “alive and well” are the opposite and should become more of your focus.

Try this: *Alive and Wellness!* Keep in mind people and activities that help you feel alive, refreshed and cared for by your loved ones. Plan time to get together to celebrate your relationship and the brilliance of relating.

Raise a red flag if needed

Sometimes the feelings of depression and anxiety can be too much. Some patients even start to question the value of life or have thoughts about hurting themselves. If you notice these types of feelings, your doctor needs to know. Feelings of suicide are signs that your needs are not being fully met. It is not always easy for others to know how you feel unless you tell them straight. It takes courage to ask for help. These feelings can be overcome with some recognition of the challenges and a plan of action to handle them.

Try this: If you tell your doctor about these feelings and thoughts, you can start getting some help. Some symptoms include:

- **Sadness:** Feeling sad, having the blues or having crying events on more days than not
- **No fun anymore:** No longer enjoying activities that used to be fun
- **Harmful thoughts and feelings:** Thoughts of hurting or killing yourself, or bad feelings of despair
- **Avoidance:** Avoidance of activities, people, intimacy or situations that may raise your heart rate
- **Excessive anxiety:** Feeling nervous, anxious, jittery or tense more often or not being able to get worries out of your mind

Relationship Strategies

Comprehensive heart health involves relationships. Psychological research has shown that social support and close relationships help your chances of a full recovery. It is often challenging to improve relationships with your loved ones.

Let us review some key methods using the TLC approach:

- **T**ime for friendship
- **L**ove and intimacy
- **C**ommunication



Time for friendship

Set the stage for the good stuff

The growth of friendship needs many elements such as shared understandings and values, empathy and time together. Research has shown that closeness, or having the time or thought of someone, is the best predictor of close relationships. We all have limited time, so how we spend time with others can be very important.

Try this: Plan a day with a loved one or friend. Plan an activity with some action but with the skill to talk during it as well. For example, walking the mall, taking a walk, or bowling are activities that plan for action plus communication.

Catch them in the act

Being a friend takes some effort. Sometimes, we do not know what helps other people because we are too busy to notice or we do not get feedback. We all answer to praise and this method just is about thanking people around us for their support.

Try this: Name a person who has gave you support. Plan to thank them right away and swiftly after their next helpful act. This will help them and you carry on supportive actions in the future.

Keep meaningful rituals

Creating meaning and steady ways of dealing with major life events can provide order and a plan when overwhelmed by feelings. Rituals that celebrate successes and admit losses help give direction when feelings run high.

Try this: Name a ritual to mark life successes and losses. They can be silly or serious: it may be a snow cone for a success or a rock-throwing into the river for a disappointment. You may have these rituals already in place but this gives you a set plan for the highs and lows of life.

Review coping history of your life team

We have all felt problems in life and had to cope. Most relationships have also faced challenges and successes. Reviewing past successes reminds us that we can cope. Research has shown that most people underestimate their skill to cope. This plan is a reminder of those abilities.

Try this: Recall a challenging life experience in the past that you and a loved one overcame. Maybe you were not perfect, but you and your loved one made it through. Review and thank your teammate for supporting you. Commit to future success together.

Love and intimacy

Large public research studies have always shown the best part of relationship satisfaction is the quality of a couple's friendship. While some people may feel that love and intimacy are taboo subjects not to be discussed with others, sexual activity is most likely relevant to your health and well-being, and is an totally appropriate topic of discussion with your partner, doctor or psychologist.

Return to talk of intimacy

Fear can lead us to hide sexual intimacy after a heart health issue. Having an open and honest talk about sex and intimacy with your partner and your health care team can help. Keep in mind that sex is a common worry among many patients. Sexual activity is safe. It is considered a gentle form of exercise. While many may think only of sex when talking about intimacy, there is in fact more to intimacy than just intercourse. Intimacy is a continuing process, not just one event. The following are general guidelines for sexual activity.

Try this:

- Choose activities that are comfortable for both you and your partner.
- Rest before and after sexual behavior.
- Reserve sex for times when you feel fresh and relaxed.
- Abstain from heavy eating or drinking before sex.

Discuss intimacy with your health care providers. Talking about sexual function can be embarrassing to some people. However, health care providers are very accustomed to it. There are a number of ways to start the discussion but sometimes it helps to have a first question.

Try this:

"I have heard heart conditions could get in the way of intimacy." "Are there any medical concerns about returning to sexual activity?" "How do I reassure my partner that I can safely return to sex?"

Look for intimacy beyond sexual activity. Feeling close and connected to your loved one provides support for the long run. Sex is only one type of intimacy. Finding small moments of connection daily reminds you of the strength of a relationship. This is the fuel to help you through recovery from heart disease and stress.

Try this: Activate some small touches during the day to express love. These may be a longer look into your loved ones eyes, holding hands, or a brief kiss. A small touch might even include the opportunity to have an admiration moment, where you tell your loved one how much you appreciate them. Heart disease recovery is not a spectator sport; the whole support system is involved. Finally, express confidence in the future together to reassure your loved ones about the long run.

Communication

Communication is universally cited as critical to relationships. Good communication benefits both the giver and receiver of communication. The challenges to communication are many in today's world, even though we have never had more ways to communicate with cellular technologies and the internet.

Communicate with key principles in mind

We can use the **R-I-N-G** plan as a reminder of the key aspects of supportive communication for our loved ones dealing with heart disease.



Try this:

Reassure: We are a strong team and we will keep you safe. All of us working together as a team will maximize your quality of life.

Instill hope: I expect that we will be able to successfully manage the challenges that come up.

Normalize: Stress is an expected part of living, including living with a heart condition.

Go plan: What can we do this week to return to living life to the fullest?

Engage in goal setting

Planning for the future can communicate that you are looking forward to the events of life. Goal setting with loved ones can pull all of your support system into help. Consider the specific activities, achievements or feelings that you would like to encounter.

Try this: Discuss a shared goal with your family about an activity that is meaningful to everyone. Make a plan to take a first step and strategize how to achieve it together.



Living with heart is a team sport

But it begins with one person — you

If you have heart disease, you can live — really live — with heart disease. If someone you love has heart disease, you can be the secret to making the most of his or her life and yours. The impact of heart disease leaves no one untouched; at the same time, surviving in spite of heart disease can be very empowering. Put your inner strength to work to demonstrate to yourself and those around you that you can live life to the fullest, even with heart disease.

Dr. Sears video links

On PBS – Second Opinion TV show

<http://secondopinion-tv.org/panelist/samuel-f-sears-phd>

TED style talk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tefpOg01mfs>

Dr. Sears web links to research publications:

Orchid ID: orcid.org/0000-0002-7863-3591

Sall, K. E., Griffith, A. M., Midgette, E. P., Winters, A. R., Tripp, C., Nekkanti, R., & **Sears, S. F.** (2022). Cardiac psychology training in a rural health care setting: East Carolina Heart Institute. *Health psychology: official journal of the Division of Health Psychology, American Psychological Association*, 10.1037/hea0001167. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0001167>.

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A portrait of Samuel F. Sears, Ph.D., ABPP, a middle-aged man with glasses, wearing a white lab coat over a light blue shirt and a patterned tie. He is smiling and standing in front of a brick building. The lab coat has a logo for the East Carolina Heart Institute on the left and a name tag on the right that reads "Samuel F. Sears, Ph.D. Cardiovascular Sciences".

Samuel F. Sears, Ph.D., ABPP



About the author

Samuel F. Sears, Ph.D., ABPP is a Professor in the Departments of Psychology and Cardiovascular Sciences at East Carolina University. He also serves as Associate Director of the ECU Cardiology Fellowship. Dr. Sears is a board certified clinical health psychologist and continues to practice and teach health psychology in cardiology clinics at the East Carolina Heart Institute at East Carolina University since 2007.

Dr. Sears is considered by many as the world authority on the psychological care and quality of life outcomes of patients with implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) patients. He has published over 200 articles in the medicine and psychology research literatures and has well over 10, 000 citations. In 2021, Expertscape.com named Dr. Sears one of the *top 50 experts/ prolific authors* in the world on implantable defibrillators over the last 10 years amongst the 27,847 authors on the topic.

Dr. Sears was awarded the O. Max Gardner Award in 2013. This annual award is given by the Board of Governors of the 17-campus University of North Carolina system to the faculty member who “has made the greatest contribution to the welfare of the human race” in the past year. The award is considered the highest honor bestowed to a faculty member in the UNC system.

Dr. Sears continues to practice and teach health psychology in cardiology clinics at East Carolina Heart Institute at East Carolina University. He received his bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees in clinical health psychology from the University of Florida.

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