

OPTIMIZE YOUR HEART

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I Hope My Story Is Your Inspiration

On April 19, 2018 I did what most normal 44-year-old men do at four o'clock in the morning. I got up to go to the bathroom. What happened next was anything but normal. My entire right side went numb, and I collapsed, barely able to make it to my bed. I woke my wife and told her something was wrong. Something didn't feel right. Little did I know, I was having a mini-stroke.

Having a mini-stroke didn't feel right because I did not expect it to strike at such a young age. Of course, most of my adult life I had been aware of the risks I faced for cardiovascular disease. I had high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, I was obese, and just one day shy of his 54th birthday, my father died of cardiac arrest. All of those were warning signs, but having a stroke at age 44 never crossed my mind.

What had crossed my mind was the possibility of having a heart attack once I reached my mid-50s. Just eight months before my 4 a.m. wake-up call I decided to

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get into better shape. I changed my diet, started working out with a personal trainer, and lost 50 pounds. I really believed that I had started to reverse my likelihood of having any acute cardiovascular condition. And yet, I was having a mini-stroke? Surely, that was a misdiagnosis. It wasn't, and my condition was about to get worse. Much, much worse.

Just a few hours later, as is common after a mini-stroke, things escalated. I had a full-blown stroke. Two clots in the carotid artery on the left side of my neck were blocking the flow of blood to half of my brain. The clock was ticking. If the clots were not removed quickly, I could permanently lose all mobility on the right side of my body. Worse case, I would die. Thankfully, hospitals in the Raleigh-Durham region of North Carolina are some of the best in the world. After a quick helicopter transfer, Duke University Hospital neurologists evaluated me with a series of CT scans and MRIs and decided I was a candidate for a new thrombectomy procedure that just recently finished clinical trials and had only been used on two percent of all stroke patients nationwide. The odds were seemingly not in my favor.

As they prepped me for surgery, I watched the frenzy going on around me. I saw the anguish in my wife's eyes but was not sure why. My brain could not comprehend even the simplest of questions asked of me during my evaluation, yet right before I was given the anesthetic that would send me into what could have been my final sleep, a sense of clarity and peace washed

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over me. I prayed to God that I trusted that my life was in His hands and if my time was up, then I look forward to being in His presence. God had other plans for me.

When I awoke, I felt different. I felt somewhat normal. I could move my right arm and leg. The next few hours involved test after test, evaluation after evaluation. My mobility slowly returned. My speech was more coherent. I wasn't even a full day post-surgery when I started to eat and move around my ICU room unassisted. The following day, I walked out of the hospital unassisted. The neurologists were amazed. They called it a "remarkable recovery." It was a miracle.

Still baffled by what caused my stroke, an investigatory MRI and angiogram were conducted on my heart. The results showed that I'd also had a small heart attack and one of my major arteries was 70 percent blocked. A stent opened it back up and they implanted a heart monitor to keep an eye on things for a few more years. A heart attack and a stroke? How on earth had I survived?

To this day, I believe that if not for my decision, just eight months earlier, to improve my heart health, I would not have recovered as fully as I did. I may not even be here. After I passed the 90-day recovery window where the risk is greatest for a second stroke, I decided to double-down on my heart health. I added more strength training, started running, completing two half-marathons, and even hit the mountain bike trails a few times each week.

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Not only did I increase my physical activity, I tightened up my diet even further. My friends would come to know me as the Salmon Guy, as it appeared salmon salads were all I would allow on my plate—and post photos to Instagram. I lost an additional 50 pounds in body fat and gained over 15 pounds of additional muscle.

It was then that I realized the new mission laid out before me: to help others improve their heart health.

I became an ambassador for the American Heart Association and American Stroke Association. I wrote dozens of articles. I spoke at medical conferences and fundraisers. I shared heart health tips on social media. I ultimately studied to become a certified personal trainer and weight management specialist so that I could help anyone, at any age, reduce their risk of a heart attack or stroke.

And yet, something was still missing. As a personal trainer, I could only help so many clients each week. I needed a broader, deeper reach. It was time to write a book.

There are hundreds of articles, websites, and books that provide a wealth of information about cardiovascular disease. Even a visit to your primary care physician will be all you need to learn that a bad diet, lack of exercise, or unhealthy habits can contribute to the narrowing of your arteries, higher blood pressure, stroke, heart attack, or cardiac arrest. What's hard to find is a simple, practical guide that sets aside

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the biology lectures, forgoes unfeasible dietary restrictions, and doesn't insist that you blast every muscle of your body until you are sore, head-to-toe. This is where *Optimize Your Heart* fills the void.

As you read through *Optimize Your Heart*, you will see a book that is laid out in three separate parts, each designed to guide you through your journey to better heart health.

Part One: Cardiac Prehabilitation – Five chapters that are designed to help identify your risk factors, understand why your medical care provider is an important ally, techniques for building healthy habits, and advice for growing your support network.

Part Two: Your Wellness Comes First – If you made just one improvement to your heart health, then focusing on your wellness is a good place to start. You'll learn the foundation of heart-healthy nutrition, why sleep is so important, techniques for reducing stress, and ideas for kicking the bad habits that are sabotaging your cardiovascular system.

Part Three: Exercise Your Cardiac Muscle – Your heart is a muscle that needs exercise. Just about any kind of exercise can be beneficial, but in these chapters, you will be guided to the best physical activity for you, how to set up a training plan you look forward to consistently

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following, and workout tips that I wish someone had shared with me when I first started.

You are unique. So is your heart. And so, too, is your blueprint for improving your heart health. *Optimize Your Heart* is not a replacement for the advice you receive from your doctor, it's a starting point. Whether you're 34, 44, 54, or 64 years of age, *Optimize Your Heart* is a practical guide to help you reduce your cardiovascular disease risks, eliminate unhealthy habits, improve your nutrition, become more physically active, and optimize your heart health before a stroke or heart attack can strike.

I'm still 100 percent committed to improving my heart health. I am in the best physical shape of my life, sleep well, have more energy, and continually receive glowing reports from my cardiologist and neurologist. Having an optimized heart feels wonderful.

It's a journey without end, but that's a good thing. When you start your journey to optimize your heart, you push life's finish line further and further away. My hope is that *Optimize Your Heart* is exactly what you need to improve your heart health, reduce your risk for cardiovascular disease, prevent a stroke or heart attack, and feel wonderful for the rest of your life.

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HEART HEALTH?***

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