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A Q&A with Dr. Cynthia Thaik, author of *Your Vibrant Heart*

1. Why is a healthy heart key to one's overall well-being?

The heart is the most vital organ in the body . . . its very function is to sustain life and yet a healthy heart is a gift that is often taken for granted. Heart disease remains the leading cause of death among men and women in the United States, despite the fact that it is both preventable and controllable. Beyond a healthy physical heart, having a balanced emotional and spiritual heart is the key to optimal health.



2. What first made you interested in studying medicine, and more specifically, cardiology?

I knew I would practice medicine from an early age, when I was exposed to my mother's medical clinic in my home country of Burma. There I was able to witness the pure, hands-on art of healing—free from the modern day challenges of drugs, bureaucracy or threat of malpractice. My interest in cardiology blossomed after I experienced the thrill of holding a beating heart during open-heart surgery of one of my patients.

3. How did your upbringing in Burma (now Myanmar) influence your medical practice?

Growing up in a country with limited resources and high death rates made me deeply appreciate the sanctity of life. My Buddhist faith taught me to be centered, mindful and present in the moment. These important skills, along with accepting personal responsibility, are the keys to living a healthy and balanced life.

4. How have you incorporated both Eastern and Western medicine into your cardiology practice and wellness clinic?

With the opening of my wellness center, Revitalize-U, three years ago, I was able to orchestrate more positive, life-changing results in my patients than I had in the preceding 20 years of prescribing drugs. It was then that I recognized that true change and the power to heal resides within the patients themselves. By introducing them to mindfulness, being centered, meditation and other Eastern practices, I have been able to help them sustain their success.

5. You talk about the importance of a mind-body connection; how do our thoughts and emotions influence our physical health?

Every thought and every emotion leads to an instantaneous cascade of hundreds, if not thousands, of neurotransmitters, neuropeptides, hormones, inflammatory markers and

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cytokines, that will either have a positive effect or a negative effect on the body. All too often, it is our negative thoughts and emotions that cellularize within the body, causing toxicity and damage to the internal organs, which leads to disease.

6. What are some mind-body methods that help people to achieve their goals—health and otherwise?

I like to think of the available methods in three broad categories:

- a) Physical – focusing on nutrition, fitness and detoxification
- b) Mental and emotional – mindfulness practices: focus on your thoughts, notice what you are noticing, pay attention to what you are feeling and doing
- c) Spiritual practices – leaning into gratitude, appreciation, and love. Tune into your internal guide via practices such as meditation, deep breathing exercises and yoga.

7. What are the risk factors for heart disease and what are the warning signs individuals should watch for?

Major risk factors are hypertension (high blood pressure), diabetes (high blood sugar), high cholesterol, a family history of heart disease and smoking. Closely tied to these risk factors are obesity, metabolic syndrome and sleep apnea. Warning signs include chest discomfort or pressure, shortness of breath, palpitations and dizziness. Other less common symptoms, particularly present in the female population, are vague symptoms of nausea, fatigue, depression, back and shoulder pain.

8. Are there preventative steps you should take when you have a family history of heart disease?

I always coach my patients to do the things that they can do and not worry about the circumstances over which they have no control. So if there is a family history of heart disease, rather than becoming paralyzed in fear, use this knowledge to get motivated and proactive in preventing or treating the other risk factors listed above.

9. How do diet and obesity affect our heart and overall health?

Obesity is responsible for or closely related to many of the chronic medical conditions, including heart disease, lung disease, cancer, arthritis and inflammatory diseases, to name a few. Obesity is rampant in our society and has been declared a disease by the American Medical Society, and yet this condition is 100% preventable and reversible. Our dietary choices dictate our future health.

10. How does smoking affect our heart health? Why do you call nicotine withdrawals “adult temper tantrums?”

Smoking and obesity rank as the two leading preventable causes of heart disease. Smoking is a choice, and I do not allow my patients an easy “out” by playing the addiction card. To me, addiction is defined by biochemical dependency, which means

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the absence of the substance leading to clear, reproducible withdrawal symptoms. No such claim can be made for nicotine withdrawal, and each individual has his or her own set of “withdrawal” symptoms, thereby defining his or her own temper tantrum.

11. What are some heart-healthy foods you recommend?

The basics would be fresh, organic whole foods. Topping the list are greens, followed by dark-colored vegetables and fruits, which are loaded with phytochemicals. Berries provide amazing antioxidants, then there are the more exotic foods, such as raw cacao, Goji berries, Acai berries, and Spirulina, to name a few.

12. What are the foods to avoid?

There is a broad category of acidic foods to avoid. Included among the acidic foods are animal protein/fat, dairy, sugars and processed foods.

13. How can parents help their children to make healthy food choices?

Education is the key. Provide the information in a fun and interactive manner. Teach children to read labels. Play the “stop and go” or the “red, yellow, and green light” game with them to teach them the right and wrong type of foods to choose.

14. What are some roadblocks on the path to health and well-being? How can people overcome these obstacles?

The biggest roadblock that I see that prevents people from achieving their goals is the lack of belief, confidence and trust in their own ability to manifest health. Instead there is too much focus on self-doubt, self-judgment, and fear-based or anxiety-driven thinking patterns that limit their success.

15. Can you recommend specific types of exercise for maintaining a healthy heart? Can too much exercise be damaging to your heart?

I believe in being centered and balanced in all approaches to life and health. So yes, too much of a good thing can be bad. Perform a healthy blend of aerobic and anaerobic activity and exercise. Running, biking, swimming, weight or endurance training are a few examples of recommended activities.

16. How does meditation help our health? Any advice on beginning a meditation practice?

Meditation allows us to slow down our bodily processes, including our mentation. This practice allows for connection to the divine or spiritual side of our nature and allows us to connect to our inner guide. There are many different types of meditative practices, but the easiest one that I advocate is to sit in gratitude, approaching the practice with a calm peace of mind. Too many people stress themselves out with the fear of quieting the mind. Instead try meditating on this simple statement: “I am grateful for this moment, I am grateful for this breath.”

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17. What are some other modalities you recommend for treating the mind, body and soul?

My two favorites are emotional freedom therapy or tapping and visualization or mind movies. Tapping involves making statements that validate some pain or unrest while tapping on distinct meridian points and expressing positive affirmative statements. Visualization is about creating a movie in your mind's screen that rewrites your script into a more favorable storyline.

18. Tell us more about Revitalize-U, your wellness clinic. What transformations have you seen in your patients?

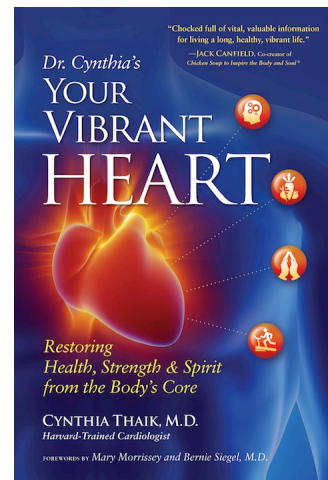
Revitalize-U is a wellness center I started three years ago. We focus on nutrition, fitness and detoxification with a particular emphasis on helping clients lose weight and develop a positive self image. There are many different programs that a client can choose, but our flagship is the Ideal Protein protocol, which is designed to address metabolic syndrome. Collectively our clients have lost over 10,000 pounds of weight in just the few short years of the program.

19. Any tips on building a support system of people around you who will help you make healthy choices?

You need to surround yourself with like-minded people who are either on the same journey or are sympathetic to your struggles. It is important to be selective in who you choose to share your story, as even our closest family and friends might unintentionally sabotage your efforts, due to their own fears and ignorance.

20. Tell us where we can find your book and more information about you.

Your Vibrant Heart: Restoring Health, Strength & Spirit from the Body's Core can be found in all major bookstores, on Amazon, and Barnes & Noble. The book can also be found on yourvibrantheart.com and drcynthia.com sites.



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