



the beat **GOES ON**

Seemingly a picture of health, fitness trainer Nadia Bender suffered a heart attack in her 40s. Survival has only strengthened her mission to help others achieve optimal well-being.

AS TOLD TO LISA EVANS

I COULDN'T HAVE SEEMED a less likely candidate to have heart issues. I'm a personal trainer and the owner of a fitness studio. I eat a balanced diet and, in 2012, I ran a marathon. And yet, on June 4, 2013, at 46 years of age, I found myself lying on a hospital gurney, struggling to process a cardiologist's news that I'd had a heart attack.

My first indication that something was wrong happened while I was vacationing in Cuba. I'd been using some exercise machines in a hotel gym and awoke the next day with severe pain in the centre of my chest that was so debilitating I couldn't get up. Thinking I must have pulled a muscle while working out, I proceeded to do all the pectoral

stretches I knew. After an hour, the intense pain subsided, but I moved slowly through the rest of the day, stopping several times while walking down the beach due to discomfort and laboured breathing. I assumed I was simply overheated and tired from my workout the day before.

Home from Cuba, I went back to teaching my fitness classes. I was getting winded faster than usual, but figured I was just deconditioned after a week of fun in the sun and too many margaritas. But instead of the classes getting easier as time went on, they were getting harder. Still, I resisted going to the doctor.

Then came the wake-up call. On a Tuesday morning, I taught my regular cardio

and strength-training class. When I picked up the weights I had always used, I felt the same severity of pain in the centre of my chest as in Cuba. My breathing was laboured and it was difficult to scream instructions to the students. I got through the hour but left the room with tears streaming down my face. I still didn't think it could be anything serious, but I didn't believe it was from overworking my chest muscles two weeks prior.

The pain subsided enough to allow me to continue with my day: training clients, attending a meeting and then picking up my kids from school. I drove my daughter to soccer practice, where I ran into another mother who happens to be a nurse. I told her about my chest pains and said that while

I'd self-diagnosed it as an overworked muscle, I wanted a second opinion.

"You need to get yourself to the hospital," she said.

"Yeah, I was planning to go to the doctor at some point," I replied.

She looked at me blankly and stated, "No, you need to go right now."

Despite her strict instruction, I arrived at the hospital still believing there was no great cause for concern. I was admitted right away and had blood work done. Within an hour, a doctor came into the room and said, "You've had a heart attack." Still in my workout gear—because I'd refused to change into a gown like a sick person—I said, "You must have the wrong blood work." The doctor then ran through standard background questions: "Do you have heart disease in your family?" No. "Do you have high blood pressure in your family?" No. "Does anyone in your family have diabetes?" No. "Are you a smoker?" No.

Even the medical professionals looking after me found it hard to believe that a 46-year-old fitness instructor could have had a heart attack, so I convinced myself it simply wasn't true. As I lay on an operating table prior to having an angiogram, I thought they wouldn't find anything serious. But the test revealed two blocked arteries: one was 95 per cent blocked and the other 80 per cent. An angioplasty put two stents in my heart to repair the clogs. The procedure was painful, but it was the six hours following it, during which I had to stay completely still, that nearly killed

me. The doctors had operated through an artery in my groin, and in order for it to close properly, I couldn't move my leg or my head.

Those six hours felt like six years. Thoughts of what might have caused my condition raced through my head. Could it have been brought on by stress? I'd left a 16-year career in management to open my fitness studio, thinking the move would alleviate all the stress I *used* to have, not thinking that perhaps I was simply trading

at the hospital because my circumstances were so unique.

Since my attack, I've undergone a host of lifestyle changes. My lattes are now decaf because caffeine stimulates the heart rate, and my previously empty medicine cabinet contains eight medications, which I take daily. I've also had to adjust my fitness expectations: While I used to raise my heart rate to 180 beats per minute in my classes, if I get anywhere close to 145 I feel awful because the beta blockers

I'm taking don't allow my heart to pump that hard. I still want to be a picture of health for my clients, but I have two stents in my heart that are keeping me alive.

Despite these setbacks, I know I'm lucky to be here, and I want others to survive as well. I'm now

a national spokesperson for the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, through which I've shared my experience on TV and radio. My studio, Fitness that Fits, is approved by the Cardiac Health Foundation of Canada in partnership with the University of Ottawa Heart Institute as a Heart Wise facility that provides exercise programs to those who have been discharged from hospital with heart disease, mild stroke, or a chronic health condition such as diabetes. I want to show people that if this could happen to me, it could happen to anyone, and so I encourage everyone not to ignore their body's warning signs. I'm grateful for the chance I've been given to serve as an example that living a healthy lifestyle really can add years to your life. ☺

I felt stupid for ignoring the signs and always having something more pressing to do.

in one kind of stress for another. Three kids, a husband and a business are a lot for anyone to handle. I felt stupid for ignoring the signs and always having something more pressing to do: teach a class, attend a meeting, drive my kids around, make dinner—everything except go to the doctor. The chest pains I had experienced in Cuba could have been a first heart attack, but there's no way of knowing because I didn't get medical attention while I was there.

In the end, the doctors who tended to me could only conclude that my heart attack was due to my genetic makeup—there was no other detectable cause. My cardiologist told me that if I hadn't already been in such great shape, it could have killed me. He also said I'd be used as a case study in future teachings

SURVIVAL SKILLS

Heart disease and stroke are often perceived to only afflict men. But the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada points out that women carry a greater risk than men of dying from either event: an estimated 16 per cent more from a heart attack and 32 per cent more from stroke. The reasons are many, including not recognizing the symptoms; not being treated promptly enough by medical professionals; and specific risk factors that are exclusive to women, such as pregnancy and menopause. Your best strategies for minimizing the likelihood of a heart attack or stroke are making healthy lifestyle changes, learning to recognize various warning signs, and responding to them promptly and correctly. Visit thehearttruth.ca for more information and check your heart health using the Heart Age Calculator at shoppersdrugmart.ca.

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