

'Which activities this summer will I cancel?'

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She did it right then and there. And then they sent me back to Belleville to heal and to mend.

Exercising as tolerated

When I was released from Belleville General Hospital to recover from my heart attack, I was given a one-page piece of paper on which was written a list of my medications and a three-word directive: "Exercise as tolerated."

Huh? That was ambiguous enough. How much was "as tolerated?" Who could tell me? Was it an individual decision? Would my body let me know, with insistent flashes of pain, or would it just say, too bad buddy, and shut down my heart for good? How much of my life should I put on hold while I recovered?

I had faced this question during my first few hours in emergency. I remember thinking, "Okay, I've had a heart attack. Which activities this summer will I cancel?" The family reunion at the cottage? The literary festival at Jones Falls? The Scene of the Crime festival on Wolfe Island? And then I immediately realized the truth. "You silly fool, you're going to cancel them all!"

Initially, I had no trouble staying in bed. An old problem with gout had returned to terrorize my feet and I couldn't go anywhere.

Gout is sometimes caused by stress, and I had indeed been through a stressful experience. I had medication for it, but I didn't dare take it because I didn't know how it might interact with my new heart medicine. It was a holiday weekend, my doctor was unavailable, and the pharmacist wasn't sure. Since this was all-new territory for me, I opted for caution and kept off my feet until the gout disappeared. It was an enforced rest.

Over the summer, I instituted my own exercise program "as tolerated." I began walking my dog routinely every evening, which he now assumes is his right and insists upon every night no matter how cold and snowy. It's good for us both. Everywhere I go, I carry my nitro spray and a cell phone.

I began cycling again, sticking primarily to flat stretches. I became a food label reader, checking the fat content and the sodium ratings and the cholesterol count. My favourite foods stayed on the rack. It was also a burger-less summer. Just once I savoured every bite of a delicious hamburger, only to discover that my body no longer tolerated burgers and it sat like a lump in my stomach for hours.

One of the "perks" of a heart attack is that you gain a chauffeur. The cardiologist prohibited me from driving for six weeks (he can do that), so I became pleasantly appreciative of being driven everywhere.

We didn't holiday at the cottage again until Labour Day, in part because reaching the cottage means transporting everything across the lake in a boat and lugging stuff up a hill. I didn't know if this fit into the "as tolerated" category.

On Labour Day, with the help of some young relatives, I felt fit enough to tackle cottaging. I had not counted on meeting the bear. We - four adults, two kids and a dog - went for a hike on a trail to a high hill called Rock Dunder. The trail was more precipitous than I had imagined, and so there was much resting and checking of pulse rates. But since there was no huffing or puffing or stabbing pains, I felt quite all right although a little tired.

On the return loop we stopped to take pictures. I glanced back up the trail, then said quietly to my wife, "Turn around slowly and see what's behind us." Expecting to see a deer, Sylvia turned and saw a young black bear not 30 feet away.

Now, this was a test of toleration. We backed away slowly, talking loudly, then skeddaddled along the trail. Bruno gave us some space, then began following us like a stray dog looking for a home, or a people sandwich.

We all reached the parking lot safely, scrambled into the van, and watched the bear amble off into the bush. I think my heart may have been racing a bit, but what would I expect?

French, O'Rand

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