

Exercising your heart

Just call Steve Bugelli and Brad Zorns two peas in a pod.

The men walk in to OSF HealthCare [Sacred Heart Medical Center](#) in Danville, Illinois, together and make a beeline for the [cardiac rehabilitation](#) gym.

After a vitals check, Zorns, of Oakwood, Illinois, hops on a treadmill. Bugelli, of nearby Westville, steps onto an elliptical.

“You good, Brad?” Bugelli asks.

“I’m ready,” Zorns replies.

Ninety minutes and a good sweat later, the strangers-turned-friends walk back out to their cars side-by-side.

Repeat the routine for the other four weekdays, and it’s easy to see why the men have made tremendous strides in recovering from serious cardiac events.

“It’s made a difference,” Bugelli says, the conviction in his voice strong. “Right now, I can get up. Before, I was in the scooter. I couldn’t get my groceries. I couldn’t do anything. Now, I can. I can go in. I can walk.”

“Rehabilitation is great,” Bugelli continues. “The girls work with you. They work with you at your own pace. You’re well-monitored. And it’s really helped. It changes your lifestyle.”

Cardiac rehab is a typical, but important part of recovering from something like a heart attack, congestive heart failure, open heart surgery or other cardiac event, says Caitlin Cole, an exercise physiologist at OSF Sacred Heart who helped start the hospital’s cardiac rehab program in 2020. Cole and her colleagues Brittney Cromwell and Tricia Herman run the program today.

“My angels,” as Zorns refers to the women.

While we think about building up arm and leg muscles at the gym, your heart is a muscle too, and a pretty important one, Cole says. She explains that cardiac rehab starts as inpatient phase one, when a patient is still in the hospital. It then progresses to outpatient phase two, where patients exercise two to three times per week over a couple months at the rehab gym. Then, patients “graduate” to phase three (also called maintenance program or community fitness). That’s where Bugelli and Zorns find themselves. There, patients chart their own course and come as they see fit.

“What we do is watch their heart rate and make sure it doesn’t get up to a certain level for their age,” Cole says. “And then as they progress, we just make it a little tougher for them. Increase their speed or increase their [workout] level.”

Herman, a registered nurse, says OSF HealthCare Mission Partners (employees) also educate cardiac rehab patients on things that go along with working out, like nutrition and managing medication.

Herman adds that the mental health benefits mirror the physical ones. Look no further than the friendship of Bugelli and Zorns, who swapped phone numbers early on in their recovery journey.

"I tried to go to gyms before. You just go in there, and all they want is your money," Zorns says. "They don't care what you do. I had trouble with my heart rate. They didn't monitor any of that stuff. I go and I'd feel worse after I'd come out."

Not so at cardiac rehab through OSF HealthCare.

"Some people may not be able to fully walk on a treadmill for 20 minutes where other people do," Cole says. "And then they say 'well, they're doing that so I can do that too.' They push each other to be better. They know 'OK, well you're coming tomorrow. OK, I'll come too.'"

"They've already developed, sometimes, friendships in these classes. Or bonds. Because, 'hey, I have this and you have this.' They know about each other's families," Herman says. "It feels so much easier to come into a community to do your fitness program and keep it up."