We are approaching Valentine’s Day, but did you know that February it is also American Heart Month? We know that emotions and feelings come from our brain and affect our heart, so the topic of today’s column is treating the heart, not just physically, but also emotionally and spiritually.

One of Naturopathic Medicine’s core principles is to Treat the Whole Person. This means addressing and treating the mind, body and spirit together and understanding how they affect each other.

An example: the research that supports broken heart syndrome or "stress cardiomyopathy", reveals it to be a condition in which intense emotional or physical stress can cause rapid and severe heart muscle weakness. We experience this as an emotional affect when we feel a quickening of our heartbeat as we see a loved one we haven't seen in a while or the heaviness we feel when we hear devastating news.

Researchers at HeartMath have studied the constant signals that flow between the brain and the heart. Noting that anger, frustration and insecurity cause the heartbeat to be more erratic, whereas emotions like love, care and compassion produce a different, smooth pattern. Interestingly, the harmful emotions have a longer lasting effect than the beneficial. Just another reason to be expressing love and kindness as much as we can.

This research reinforces the 2000 year old practices of Chinese medicine, in which practitioners feel pulses - the blood pumping from the heart - to diagnose disease. While I am not as experienced as the Dali Lama’s physician whose ability to diagnose "congenital heart disease, an interventricular septal defect with resultant heart failure" through a pulse diagnosis was described in The Sun last month, I can definitely feel if someone is stressed or not, buy testing their pulses. Your emotions and thoughts, which are controllable, are extremely important to your health.

Some of the basics for heart health from the physical and biochemical realm are exercise and diet. Here in Jackson, lack of exercise is not an issue for 90% of my patients – quite the opposite of the rest of the country. However, this leads to a unique problem – Those who exercise hard often feel they have more leeway to eat poorly because they just "burn it off ". Your cellular body is not fooled. If you are eating a burger with fries for dinner, your body incorporates those bad fats into your cells resulting in inflammation, one of the primary causes of heart disease.

Other very important aspects to heart health are controlling blood pressure, homocysteine, cholesterol, stress, diabetes, weight gain, alcohol consumption and other markers. If you are unable to get these under control by yourself, your physician can help you either naturally or with medications.

Some of the most effective supplements for heart disease are:

**Fish Oil** containing omega-3 fatty acids increase vessel flexibility (decreasing vessel stiffness) associated with arrhythmias and high blood pressure. It also decreases triglycerides and slows atherosclerotic plaques.

**Coenzyme Q10** helpsproduces energy in the mitochondria of the cell. The heart muscle has more mitochondria than any other muscle so CoQ10 make the heart muscle contract more efficiently thus lowering blood pressure and increasing energy.

**Magnesium** is one of the least appreciated supplements. It is inexpensive and about 50% of people are deficient in it. It is a natural smooth muscle relaxant. Relaxing and dilating the vessels and bringing down blood pressure.

**Vitamin D** is one of the most studied vitamins and recent research revealed that people with low levels are twice as likely to have a heart attack, congestive heart failure or stroke.

These are just a few of the many supplements that are beneficial.

Working on spiritual health through a contemplative practice like prayer and meditation is thought to be optimal treatment. Neuroscience has recently become very interested in analyzing the physical attributes and brain activity of both short and long-term meditation practitioners. Not surprisingly, the positive health effects of a regular practice are dramatic. Western science is confirming that the spirit has the power to heal the mind, which in turn we know has a profound affect on the body.

Valentine's Day is a day when people are encouraged to express their love for one another. Imagine if we all did so 365 days a year.

Wishing you love today and every day!

*A 15-year Jackson resident, Monique Lai, ND is an alternative health expert with a family practice where she works with patients to restore their health. She obtained her doctorate in naturopathic medicine from Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine in 1996. Monique enjoys working with a variety of health challenges, particularly autoimmune disease, thyroid disease, digestive disorders, menopause and diabetes. For more info visit* [*drmoniquelai.com*](http://drmoniquelai.com/)