

Surgical lifestyles

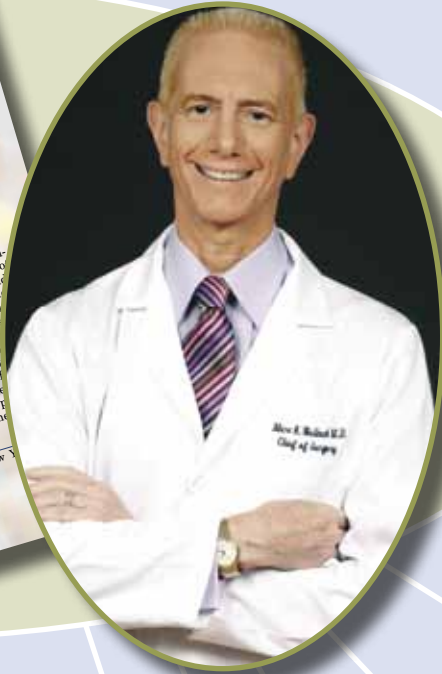
## Discovering life's "chapter two" after surgery

by Marc K. Wallack, MD, FACS, New York, NY



Over the past 12 months, I have received two calls from surgical colleagues who had suffered major myocardial events that altered both their professional and private lives. One had to retire from practice and the other worries and then, to his demise. With these two phone calls, I thought back to my own experiences. I had open-heart surgery on July 17, 2002, after developing severe angina when running toward Central Park while training for a New York City marathon. An angiogram showed that I needed a quadruple bypass and the hardest decision for a surgeon to make is whether to have major surgery, especially knowing how complicated it can be, as surgical complications are always reviewed weekly for medical students, residents, and faculty alike. At my hospital, the morbidity and mortality conference is held on Wednesday mornings. As chief of surgery, one of my most cherished duties is to preside over the conference, which dissects the complications and operations always been billed as mistakes that gives surgeons hope so they can learn from the mistakes of their peers; but this conference also has an awareness of imperfections that come with it. Sobering experience when otherwise healthy physicians because of chance, have had a bad outcome weekly reality check.

Left: Dr. Wallack running the 2004 New York City Marathon.



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# Heart and soul: A surgeon rebuilds his life after a cardiac crisis

by Stephen J. Regnier, Editor

On July 14, 2002, Marc K. Wallack, MD, FACS, a surgical oncologist and chief of surgery at Metropolitan Hospital in New York, NY, developed severe angina when running toward Central Park while training for the New York City marathon. After an angiogram revealed that his arteries were 95 percent blocked, he underwent quadruple bypass surgery, and later found himself unprepared for the physical and emotional fallout of his recovery.

Dr. Wallack recounted his experience of "discovering life's chapter two" following a major surgical procedure in an article that appeared in the *Bulletin* in June 2006.\* "In the same way that a near-miss car accident might cause a person to drive more slowly, the memory of a near-death experience forces a reinvention of one's life, a close examination of life passed and missed opportunities," he noted.

Dr. Wallack indicated that one of the most important aspects of his recovery took place just two weeks following his open-heart procedure. While at home he read Lance Armstrong's book, *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* (Berkley Trade, 2001). He says he knew then that he had to prove to himself that he was ready to engage in life again, that he would not be a victim, and that he would return to work, perform his job, and be involved with his family and friends.

Dr. Wallack ran the New York marathon in 2004. "Two years following my surgery, running the marathon marked my return from the dead and showed me that I had reclaimed my life. It was a return from the darkness to the light," he remembers.

Dr. Wallack's hard-fought lessons surrounding physical and emotional recovery prompted him to write the article in the *Bulletin*. "I thought maybe the article would cause others to move to a chapter two in their life with assuredness, so that involvement in their careers and their lives can be sustained and maintained," he explains.

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### **Back to life**

The feedback from the *Bulletin* article surprised Dr. Wallack. “I must have received 60 to 70 e-mails at home following publication of that article, most from Fellows of the College and other individuals who had undergone similar experiences,” he said. The response was such that Dr. Wallack was moved and encouraged to expand his thoughts and practical experiences. A book seemed the next logical step.

The result was *Back to Life After A Heart Crisis: A Doctor and His Wife Share Their Eight-Step Cardiac Comeback Plan*, published last month by Avery. His coauthor and wife of 19 years is Jamie Colby, a longtime network news anchor and reporter who now hosts the Fox News Channel program *America’s News HQ* and *Sunday Housecall with Dr. Isadore Rosenfeld*. Ms. Colby offers the unique and special perspective of the caregiver, and tells how attending to someone in recovery from an operation can place considerable strain on the caregiver and their relationship.

In the book, Dr. Wallack and his wife address the physical, emotional, and career-affecting issues surrounding a cardiac recovery. From the most ordinary suggestions, ranging from how to use a shopping cart in the grocery store to protecting your midline incision, from relearning how to drive a car, to dealing with symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder—including re-experiencing the initial trauma through flashbacks or nightmares—Dr. Wallack discusses major aspects of the recuperation process through the eyes of the surgeon/patient. “I wanted the book to serve as a prescriptive guide for reclaiming your life after confronting the issues of mortality and vulnerability raised by a traumatic heart event—whether it be a heart attack or a surgical procedure,” he explains.

### **Back to work**

Dr. Wallack returned to work two months after his heart procedure. His mind was filled with questions: “Who am I going to be?” “What am I going to be able to do?” “Do I have the stamina to stand in the OR for as many hours as it took to finish a complicated operation?” He weighed 138 pounds (down from his “norm” of 147–150 pounds). “I was physically not the same person and I knew that people would be watching me



Dr. Wallack and Ms. Colby during Dr. Wallack’s comeback period.

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closely in the operating room,” he reveals. He was careful to have trusted, experienced colleagues consult on difficult cases. He built up his stamina for standing and took frequent breaks as needed.

Dr. Wallack found that he had to continually remind himself that your job is what you do—it’s not who you are. He avoided negative coworkers and congratulated himself for small accomplishments, even when no one else did. Other insights from Dr. Wallack: delegate tasks to others—you are only human; hit the “forget it” button as needed; create a comfortable “oasis” in your office; fill out the “I accomplished list” daily; and take breathing and walking breaks as needed.

### **The finish line**

Dr. Wallack has completed nine marathons, one triathlon (after the quadruple bypass operation), and hundreds of shorter running races. “I thought I was too important, too invincible, and too necessary to have heart disease. Being a heart patient taught me about vulnerability. Completing a marathon taught me what it took to not give up. My life is better, I’m stronger, happier, and healthier than ever,” he observes.

Had he not finished the marathon in 2004, Dr. Wallack believes he might not have had the will or the faith to deal with the adversity that was to come. He continues to run an average of three times a week. Each footstep reminds him that life is fragile, to live it to the fullest. □