

# Living at 38 with congestive heart failure

**Tahira Farooq has had to learn to take care of her heart health while letting go of some of her inhibitions**

By Shruti Ganapathy

Tahira Farooq is a young South Asian mother. Her primary role is to care for her family. She is actively involved in her kids' lives, championing their interests and spends some time volunteering in the local community. Farooq is also extremely religious. She prays regularly and when in public sports a headscarf and burqa. Farooq is just 38.

It therefore came as quite a surprise to her when two years ago, at the age of 36, she was diagnosed with congestive heart failure.

"For quite a while I was struggling a lot to get past my daily chores", recalls Farooq. "My feet would get shallow, I got tired very easily and I often found myself pushing to complete my daily tasks. I also got very sick very often. During one instance, when I developed strep throat, I had to be taken to emergency and given intra-venous fluid. I even faced a recurring case of pneumonia."

Farooq's heart had a faint murmur that went unnoticed because she was uncomfortable with her male General Practitioner (GP). "It wasn't the doctor's fault. I was uncomfortable being clinically assessed by a male doctor," she says. After her trip to the Emergency, she switched her GP to a female, who detected the murmur in her heart and referred Farooq for further tests to a cardiologist.

"When I first met Farooq, she was a very sick woman", said Dr. Shekhar Pandey, Adult Cardiologist at the Cambridge Cardiac Care Centre. "During her initial consultations with me, she had her entire garb on. It was difficult for me to even conduct a full clinical assessment. Her heart was functioning at a capacity of below 20 percent. One of the reasons her condition had deteriorated to such a great extent was because her family physician was not able to handle her cultural needs effectively."

Farooq's situation is not an isolated one. She is, in fact, part of a larger South Asian population that, studies indicate, are at double the risk of having a heart-attack than their Caucasian counterparts. And contrary to popular belief, the disease is as rampant in women as in men.

"If (heart diseases) has an incredibly high rate in South Asian women", says Dr Pandey. "Gender doesn't seem to provide the same kind of protection to South Asian women, that it does to Anglo-Saxon women."

"Apart from the usual high cholesterol and blood pressure, diabetes too plays a major role as a risk factor for heart disease. And the South Asian population is at very high risk for Diabetes. Unfortunately, once a woman develops diabetes, she is at equal

risk (as her male counterpart) of developing a heart condition," said Dr Pandey.

Farooq says she became depressed and pessimistic on learning about the diagnosis. "I had no stamina and I felt there was nothing left in my life anymore. However my husband and kids really supported me at that time. My husband often said that I was very young and that I would get better very soon."

After her initial diagnosis of a Congestive heart failure, Farooq was recommended to participate in a cardiac rehab three times a week. The program, conducted in mixed gender groups, consisted of exercise training, education on healthy living, and counselling to reduce stress and help you return to an active life. Farooq was uncomfortable with the nature of the program.

"Initially I was uncomfortable with the thought of having to exercise in a mixed group", says Farooq. "I wondered how others in the group would view me and how I would protect my modesty." That prompted Dr. Pandey to contact her local Imam.

"When we contacted her Imam, we found out that a lot of her concerns were not things that were supported by her religion. They were very supportive of doing everything to make this woman healthier and the Imam even sat her down and explained that her body was a gift from God and that she should do everything that was required to take care of it," said Dr. Pandey.

The Imam's words encouraged Farooq to start rehab. Her husband's unwavering support gave her confidence. "I now attend rehab three times a week and do the exercises wearing my burqa and headscarf, and am extremely comfortable doing that." She has also made some crucial changes to her lifestyle. "I use less salt in my food. I also avoid red meat, processed food and eating outside."

Farooq has now turned champion for the disease. "When I first met Tahira, it was difficult to get her to agree to the rehab sessions. Now, she is actually a champion who helps others get over their concerns about cardiac rehab. She attends the sessions three times a week and helps us with translating information into the languages she speaks for patients who are not fluent in English.

"Even on a personal level, she diligently follows the routine and her heart strength has doubled over the last year. To see her blossom like this has been incredible," says Dr. Pandey.

For Farooq, the entire experience has taught her to look at the bright and positive side of life. "Stress does more harm than good. Whenever I feel stressed, I get busy doing the things I love, listening to music, sewing or reading the Quran. I have learnt how to handle stress. I try to look at things positively and always think of the good things and good people who surround me. That makes me comfortable."



Dr. Shekhar Pandey, is an adult cardiologist at the Cambridge Cardiac Care Centre.

## YOUR WEEKLY HOROSCOPE

IF YOU ARE BORN TODAY You are self-contained and able to work well on your own. You have excellent powers of concentration and like to be productive. Great news! This is perhaps one of the most powerful years of your life — a time of accumulation. The seeds you have planted in the past will now ripen because it's a time of fruition. This is also a good year to buy and sell.



**ARIES**  
March 21 to April 19

**ARIES** (March 21 to April 19)  
Avoid squabbles about shared property today. In fact, this is a poor day to engage in quarrels with parents, teachers and bosses because things could get nasty very quickly. Chill out.



**TAURUS**  
April 20 to May 20

**TAURUS** (April 20 to May 20)  
Steer clear of controversial subjects like politics, religion and racial issues, because people just want to argue today. Keep your head down and your powder dry.



**GEMINI**  
May 21 to June 20

**GEMINI** (May 21 to June 20)  
This is a very poor day to engage in arguments with authority figures. Even though something unexpected might affect shared property and such, wait until tomorrow to deal with this.



**CANCER**  
June 21 to July 22

**CANCER** (June 21 to July 22)  
Difficulties might arise today with legal matters or anything having to do with medicine, higher education and travel plans. Someone could throw you a curveball. Be patient.



**LEO**  
July 23 to August 22

**LEO** (July 23 to Aug. 22)  
Disputes about inheritances and shared property, and possibly taxes and debt, will likely arise today. This could catch you off guard at work. Tread care- fully.



**VIRGO**  
August 23 to Sept. 22

**VIRGO** (Aug. 23 to Sept. 22)  
Romantic arguments about shared property or how to share expenses right arise today. A close friend or partner might be angry about something. Yikes!



**LIBRA**  
Sept. 23 to Oct. 22

**LIBRA** (Sept. 23 to Oct. 22)  
Be patient with coworkers today, because arguments will arise. (You need this like a fish needs a bicycle.) Domestic squabbles are likely because of something unexpected on the home front.



**SCORPIO**  
Oct. 23 to Nov. 21

**SCORPIO** (Oct. 23 to Nov. 21)  
Parents need to be patient with their kids today. Because something unexpected will affect your daily routine, tempers will fray. Patience is your best ally.



**SAGITTARIUS**  
Nov. 22 to Dec. 21

**SAGITTARIUS** (Nov. 22 to Dec. 21)  
Keep an eye on your money and cash flow, because you might find money or you might lose money. Meanwhile, avoid domestic arguments, because who needs this? Not you.



**CAPRICORN**  
Dec. 22 to Jan. 19

**CAPRICORN** (Dec. 22 to Jan. 19)  
Today the Moon is in your sign at odds with Uranus. This might make you obsessed with something. You might feel restless and irritable. Guard against accidents!



**AQUARIUS**  
Jan. 20 to Feb. 18

**AQUARIUS** (Jan. 20 to Feb. 18)  
A female acquaintance might upset you today. This could mushroom into an argument that involves parents or bosses. You don't need this. Keep a low profile.



**PISCES**  
Feb. 19 to March 20

**PISCES** (Feb. 19 to March 20)  
A female acquaintance might upset you today. This could mushroom into an argument that involves parents or bosses. You don't need this. Keep a low profile.

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