

# How a stroke led radio icon Tom Joyner to push Black heart health

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**Sara Berg, MS**

Senior News Writer

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About five months ago, Black radio icon Tom Joyner was doing some boxing training with his physical therapist, who was counting the punches thrown. Joyner reached 140 punches and suddenly lost his balance. Thinking he had just become exhausted from so many punches, he wanted to continue.

But his therapist said, “You’re having a stroke,” and called 911. Joyner—who retired from his illustrious radio career in 2019—was not slurring his speech, but his left arm was just hanging there. At the hospital, he learned that he had indeed experienced a stroke.

“I had lost mobility and range of motion in my arms and legs. I stayed in the hospital maybe a week before I was released and since then, I’ve been working really hard,” Joyner said during a two-part interview about why he came out of retirement to support the national Release the Pressure (RTP) campaign. “I do physical therapy twice a day and recovery is slow, very slow. The reward does not match the workload because I work hard every day.”

What is important to note is that Joyner “didn’t even realize it. It took someone else to realize” he was having a stroke, said Patrice Harris, MD, MA, the AMA’s immediate past president. “And the other important point is someone else recognized those symptoms and you got immediate attention.”

While Joyner has dedicated his life to recovering, he also wants to help others in the Black community improve their cardiovascular health. Here are ways Black men and women can take charge of their heart health.

## 1 Self-measure at home

Since his stroke, Joyner has been taking his BP every day at home twice a day. “We really do think that is very important,” said Dr. Harris. “Not just it is important to go to the doctor, but you need your blood pressure checked more frequently.”

## 2 Improve medication adherence

Joyner’s high BP was likely one of the reasons why he had a stroke. Joyner noted his high BP had been an issue for quite a while. “I didn’t want to take medication because I just don’t like taking medicine,” he said, adding that “both my mother and father had high blood pressure.”

In fact, the hospital staff said that “when they rolled me in, my blood pressure was like 220 over something,” he said. “It was high. They said it spiked and I bled.”

## 3 Release the pressure

While Joyner is retired, he is “willing to speak with us about the state of heart health in Black America today because this Release the Pressure campaign is so important on so many levels,” said Dr. Harris. “It is clear that no one is immune. In this campaign, we want to be laser-focused on Black women because we know we need to do something different to stem the tide of heart disease in Black women.”

“Black women care more, and they care more about the people in their family or the people that they work with than they do themselves,” said Joyner. “Somebody has got to do it. It just happens to be Black women.”

“There’s a whole lot of pressure on us. When they say Black lives matter, I think now the world understands the pressure that’s on Black men and Black boys,” he added. “But Black women have to take some time for themselves.”

## 4 Make appropriate lifestyle changes

“Some people talk about lifestyle change and the need for lifestyle change in the context of blaming and shaming,” said Dr. Harris. “We are coming from a place where yes, the structural issues contribute to where we are today, but it is important to do what we can on an individual basis.”

“We think that just because our parents, aunts and uncles have had diseases—heart disease, diabetes, whatever—that it is in our DNA and that we probably will have it too, but I don't think that's right,” Joyner explained. “If you change your lifestyle, which has nothing to do with DNA, that's an individual choice. Put some things down that are not good for you, you'll feel better. You'll live longer and you'll have a more fulfilling life.”

Learn more by watching part one and part two of this interview with Dr. Harris and Tom Joyner. And tune in to [ReleaseThePressure.org](https://www.releasethepressure.org) Jan. 27 and Feb. 3 at 7 p.m. CST. for the second Wellness Wednesday series, where Joyner sits down with an all-Black male panel to discuss racism in health care.

Release the Pressure brings together a diverse coalition of health professional organization—the RTP heart health squad—who are dedicated to partnering with the Black community to improve heart health. The coalition includes the AMA, AMA Foundation, Association of Black Cardiologists, American Heart Association, Minority Health Institute and National Medical Association. Learn how your care team can be involved.