



Making time for yourself is a must”

Emmy-winning actress, mom, and crusader for survivors of rape and domestic violence Mariska Hargitay believes good health—and real joy—start with self-nurturing. Here, her advice for all women.

BY JANCEE DUNN

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ARISKA HARGITAY is a sharer. When the warm and outgoing *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* actress talks to *Health*, she's so eager to pass on tips for a health-

ier, more balanced life that she opens up her cabinets to recite what's inside, then later sends a follow-up e-mail (signed 'xo, Mariska'). This is someone whose advice you can trust: Hargitay makes it look easy as she deftly juggles 15-hour days on the set, marriage (to actor Peter Hermann), motherhood (to 2½-year-old son, August), and her non-profit organization, Joyful Heart Foundation, which helps empower survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse. Since its inception in 2004, more than 1,400 survivors have participated in their retreat and well-

ness programs; they plan to serve 2,200 this year.

Hargitay is the daughter of late actor and bodybuilder Mickey Hargitay and sex symbol Jayne Mansfield, who died when Mariska was 3 years old. Her first film was 1985's *Ghoulies*, but she only worked sporadically after that. ("I had an eight-year dry spell," she laughs.) She became a household name in 1999 when she landed a plum role as tough-but-tender Detective Olivia Benson on *Law & Order: SVU*, and in her decade on the show has collected both an Emmy and a Golden Globe.

Now 45, the lifelong athlete is still brimful of energy. She suffered a brief setback in January when she was hospitalized with a partially collapsed lung. Two months later, she was back in the hospital to address further complications. She spoke with us right after she was released, and was her usual vibrant self as she talked about what inspires her, how she balances her crazy-busy life, and why the days of doing her own stunts are behind her.



Best-life lesson:
"My dad taught me: 'Find out what you want to do, and give it everything.'"

Before we begin, we just want to ask how you're feeling.

I'm doing better and better every day. I feel stronger. And, most of all, I'm so grateful, because, the truth is, it was a really scary thing. But this has been a great lesson for me to get back in touch with that inner voice that teaches us how to take care of ourselves.

We really do ignore that inner voice at our peril.

Our health is the most important thing, truly, that we have. If we don't have that, we don't have anything. This time has made me learn how to take care of myself, listen to my body, and know when I have to rest. Women are such amazing multitaskers; it's a blessing and a curse. We want to do it all and, the fact is, we can't! So it's been a lesson for me to stop. [Laughs] I'm feeling better, and, hopefully, smart enough to get the lessons I need to learn and to appreciate how fragile and beautiful life is. And I want to get [back] to work as soon as possible! That's happening very soon—I think I'm only missing one episode. It's been a journey, a scary one, but, I guess, a necessary one. In the big picture, I'm feeling really lucky.

You started Joyful Heart in 2004 to empower survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse.

I've always had an affinity for children, and when I started preparing for the role of Detective Benson on *Law & Order*, the sta-

tistics just floored me. Every two minutes in the United States a woman is sexually assaulted. Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women. And nearly four children die in this country every day as a result of abuse and neglect.

Apparently, when you started playing Detective Benson, you got letters from viewers sharing their own stories of abuse.

That's what really did it. When you do a show, the normal fan letter is, "Hey, I really like you on the show," or "I like your hair, you're pretty." [Laughs] But the kind of mail I was getting was women saying, "I was raped when I was 15—I'm 45 and never told anyone." I didn't know what to do. I was like, *Wait a minute, everyone, I'm an actor on TV!* And Joyful Heart was my answer and my way of giving back. I wanted to shine light on this darkness because sexual assault, in particular, is something people don't talk about. I'll tell you, I have three passions in life: work, motherhood—I've wanted to be a mother since I was 2 feet tall—and Joyful Heart. People say, "Oh, it's so great, you're helping all these people." And I say, "You know what? I'm starting to think Joyful Heart is the most self-serving thing I've ever done."

You juggle your job, family, and charity work. How do you keep your energy up?

I drink a lot of water. I try to breathe—I hold my breath when I'm stressed. And I do everything in moderation. I know I'm somebody who needs dark chocolate in my life, as much as I try to give up sugar.

What's your sleep regimen?

Mine's terrible. I don't get enough sleep, but I'm changing that. I'm someone who goes to bed between midnight and 1 a.m. and gets up at 6, and then I'm miserable. So, now my rule is I have to be in bed by 11, period.

Are you able to adhere to it?

I'm starting to. I've been off work for a week now. And, obviously, you can't sleep in the hospital because it's a nightmare there. But since I've been home, I'm trying



Mariska, with Peter and August: "My happiest moments are when I'm reading my son a bedtime story."



Getting hands on with Joyful Heart: "It's the most gratifying, life-affirming thing I can do."

WIN! A Joyful Heart Nuddle

What's your best tip for taking care of yourself? Go to Health.com/cover-contest and in 50 words or less tell us your secret. Three winners will win a *May Health* magazine cover signed by Mariska, plus a Joyful Nuddle—a plush blanket with arm slots created for the Joyful Heart Foundation. (The Joyful Nuddle is also being sold for \$88 at JoyfulHeartFoundation.org; 50 percent of net proceeds support Joyful Heart programs.)

No purchase necessary. Visit Health.com/cover-contest for official rules, how to enter, and more. Each entrant will receive a code for 10 percent off a Joyful Nuddle. Contest begins 4/28/09 at 12:01 a.m. (CT), and ends at 11:59 p.m. (CT) on 5/31/09. Open to legal residents of the 50 United States and District of Columbia age 21 or older at the time of entry. Void where prohibited by law.



to sleep when August sleeps, and that's helped a lot. On days when I do that, I notice that I'm a different person. I have a different kind of day.

Do you have any healthy snacks that have been life-savers?

I have these chips that are so great. [Yells to assistant] Jacob, what's the name of those awesome chips you got me? They're called FoodShouldTasteGood multigrain tortilla chips. Another snack that's supersimple is apples with almond butter; it's sweet, but there is protein. And my decadent snack is really good pears with truffle cheese. Oh, and edamame.

Tell us about what you typically eat to stay at a healthy weight.

Obviously, as you get older—I don't care what anyone says—your metabolism *does* slow down. So I watch what I eat a little more, but I'm just one of those everything-in-moderation types because I, personally, just can't cut out stuff.

What's the best thing about being in your 40s?

I love it. You have clarity, you know who you are—decisions are easier.

And what's not so great?

Like I said, your metabolism starts to slow down. Everything starts to sag. [Laughs] In my head, I still think I'm a 20-year-old athlete. I have always been so athletic and have always been a runner, and what I don't like about the 40s is you just can't do as much—and my brain can't seem to get it. Like, [*Law & Order: SVU* co-star] Chris Meloni is a super-stud and works out every day, but we were talking about how we used to do our own stunts. *Always*. For 10 years, we said, "We have to do our own stunts." We'd have to be badass. I don't know what we were trying to prove. And now we're both like, "No way! Let the stunt double do it!" The fact is, we can get hurt, and we do get hurt.

What about parenthood has been a surprise to you?

My perfect analogy for being a parent is before you have kids, and you're on a

plane, and there's a screaming kid, you're like, *shut that kid up, give me earplugs, get me a blanket to put over my head!* And, as soon as I became a mom, if there's a crying kid on an airplane, there's this compassion because you get it. You're like, "What can I do? Do you want me to hold him?" Because you think about the time your kid was screaming, and you know everyone hates you, and there was the one parent who looks at you and smiles, and that compassion is everything.

You've mentioned that you want more kids. Is this still something you think about?

You know, I have no idea. Do I want more? Sometimes. Am I scared of it? Yeah! I have a lot on my plate, so I can't say I want more of anything right now.

What's the best life lesson that you learned from your own parents?

I had the best parents, and my stepmom has been incredibly supportive, too. From my dad, it was to find your dream and eat it, sleep it, and drink it, and never quit. I wouldn't be where I am today without my dad, because I would have quit so many times. He said, "We're not quitters in this family. You find out what you're made of in the face of adversity." When I was a kid, I was so intimidated by these big, iconic parents of mine and thought I'd never live up to them. But you find your own path in life, and you realize that it does sink in, that you get a lot of it from osmosis.

How do you find time to nurture yourself?

I always try to laugh. Between August—and the things that come out of that kid's mouth—my friends, my husband ... even my co-star Chris, who's hilarious, I laugh a lot. That, to me, is one of the most life-sustaining things you can do. I don't take it lightly. The other night I had a friend sleep over, and we had a laugh on the couch until we couldn't breathe, where you could literally feel the endorphins in your body. I really think something healing happens when you have a gut-busting laugh. ●

ON MY NIGHTSTAND: "I have this beautiful garden, and I just got this book called *Happiness is a Garden*. Is that not the metaphor for everything? It's the most gorgeous book I've ever seen."

MARISKA'S SELF-CARE TIPS

No matter how busy you get, making time to care for yourself—mind, body, and spirit—is a must. Here, a few of my secrets.

TAKE TIME FOR TLC. Set aside an hour a week for a mini "spa day." (And don't spend the time beating yourself up about how you don't make time for yourself. TLC, remember?) Take a warm bath, light a beautiful candle. A little indulgence will go a long way.

EAT WELL. It's about a balanced diet. And for me, it's also about a little extra dark chocolate. They call it "the healthy chocolate." No, seriously. A girl's gotta leave room for chocolate, right?

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY. Make sure you're finding the right balance of work, exercise, rest, and play.

DISCOVER YOUR CREATIVE SELF. Start a journal, paint a picture, grab your camera. And the best part is, you don't even have to show any of it to anybody. Creative expression feeds *your* spirit, not some person looking over your shoulder telling you to paint faster.

FIND YOUR PASSION. I'm passionate about the Joyful Heart Foundation. The hearts we open, and the incredible people we encounter—these are the roots of inspiration for me.

CLOSE YOUR EYES AND BREATHE. In the midst of the chaos, there's a calm, healthy, and joyful self in there that may just need a little air.

LAUGH. There's just nothing better for the soul. —xo, Mariska

FAVORITE TIME OF DAY:

When I'm not working, definitely sunrise, and having that quiet time—and then August gets up, and it's like Christmas morning because he wakes up so happy."

Top photo: AP Photo/Disneyland; Paul Hiffmeyer; Middle and bottom photos: Peter Hermann

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