

# The Emergency Room

**A**re you still having chest pain?"

"Yes, but it's not as bad as it was."

Standing next to the gurney, the physician picked the EKG up off the machine. "Okay, Mike Forrester. Let's see here." The doctor mumbled the results of the heart exam as he read it. "Regular rate and rhythm, no Q waves or ST changes..."

Mike thought to himself, *I have no idea what he's talking about. I just need to know, am I having a heart attack or not?* He nodded as if he perfectly understood what the physician was saying.

"Looks pretty good," the physician said. "We drew some labs to make sure. They'll be back soon. Tell me about your chest pain."

Mike explained, "Well, I can't really say that it was chest pain for sure. It felt like my heart was pounding out of my chest, and I couldn't catch my breath. I was so uncomfortable I couldn't sit still. My vision went blurry, and it seemed like I was in the twilight zone. My body was acting as if I was running a marathon, even though I was just sitting on our couch. This sort of thing has happened before, but never as bad as this. That's why I came to the ER."

"Any tingling in your arms or numbness?"

"Yeah. I had some numbness in my fingertips of both hands for a few minutes."

"How about radiation of the pain or discomfort away from the chest?"

"No."

"How long have you been having these symptoms?"

"About thirty minutes."

"What seemed to cause your symptoms?"

“I have no idea.”

The physician inquired about his past medical problems and family history of illness. Mike had been healthy and didn't smoke or drink much alcohol. There seemed to be no apparent reason for his symptoms until he heard the doctor's next question.

“Any major stresses going on in your life?”

There was a short pause, and Mike deliberately avoided his wife Sara's piercing green eyes as she sat in the chair beside the gurney. “Not really. Well, I guess I have the usual stress with work, and you know, with life in general,” Mike lied. He had no intention of sharing with the physician his marital problems or his difficulties with Travis.

After a few more minutes of questions, the physician performed a brief physical exam and then was off to see his next patient, who happened to be in the same ER room. Mike could overhear the whole story about how the man had run out of money and stopped drinking his fifth of whiskey a couple days before. The man was now complaining about bugs crawling all over his skin. Anxiously, Mike looked around but couldn't see any bugs in the room. Still, he was afflicted with the compulsive urge to scratch all over.

## RUMINATIONS

Thinking about the insects brought to mind the topic of Travis again. Work was becoming rather unpleasant because of this co-worker. Mike used to love his job. For a while, work had been a refuge, a place of mutual respect with only a few exceptions. One of these exceptions was Travis. While Travis seemed to keep busy, his work needed constant revision to work out the kinks. As a result, the whole team was held back. Mike couldn't stand having a project delayed. Being somewhat of a perfectionist, his internal drive compelled him to produce the highest quality work. The problem began when Travis started seeking out Mike for help. The job needed to be done properly, and unless Mike intervened the project was not going to be done correctly.

Mike had considered his options. *I could let the design flaws be discovered by the testing team, but that would just create more work for others later. Or, I could help everybody out by catching the errors early.* He had the skills to rework the code, so Mike agreed to help. But it came with a price—his time.

After a while, Mike began to rationalize that helping Travis was a decision driven by compassion. His church upbringing taught him that he was supposed to help people in need. Travis sure seemed to be in need. As a result, Mike would put

in the extra time to compensate for Travis' inadequacies in performance. This extra work began to wear on Mike, and he could tell that there was something wrong. Bitterness had crept in.

*For all his busyness, he doesn't produce much. How can he make so many mistakes? I feel bad for him, because he can't think things through and he hasn't been improving. Why doesn't our boss tell him how to do a better job? There's no way that I'd tell him. It would be insulting to him if I showed him how to improve, since he has been here longer than I have. Mike's imagination had begun to consider amusing possibilities. Maybe he is preoccupied in some on-line candle-lit chat room on a hot, romantic cyber date. It would probably never last. It would be over once the girl met Travis and discovered his unkempt black hair, disheveled clothes and potent body odor.*

*I wonder if anyone else at work has a problem with Travis. Maybe I'm making a bigger deal of this than it really is.*

This pattern of donating more of his time to Travis at work became more onerous for Mike. He was enjoying work less and becoming more irritable. For most of his life, Mike had been quite patient with others, but he knew that he was becoming more cantankerous. He felt guilty for this change.

*This is not me, Mike thought, I'm usually an easy-going guy. Plus, as a good church-going person, I'm not supposed to be irritable all the time. What happened to me? I need to work harder at not being so annoyed. I'll just ignore it and hope it goes away on its own.*

Insidiously, Mike's work hours stretched longer and longer, to the point where Sara was questioning where he was going after work.

## THE TEST RESULTS

While Mike was wrapped up in his thoughts about work, Sara was becoming impatient with how long things were taking in the ER. She was also getting upset that Mike wasn't paying attention to her. Instead of bringing it up at that moment, she decided to wait until she knew that he didn't have a heart attack. Casually, she opened a magazine and tried to read.

Both were startled when the physician slipped through the curtain and loudly declared, "All the labs are fine. I'm not exactly sure what caused your chest pain, but it doesn't appear to be coronary artery disease. You have a very low probability of having had a heart attack, because you're so young and your story was atypical for angina. You could benefit by losing a few pounds, though. What happened could be related to stress in your life. Regardless, I recommend that you see your primary care physician within the next couple of days for follow-up. Any questions?"

Considering it was now one in the morning, Mike and Sara were both exhausted and their questions forgotten. Mike was still thinking about the doctor's comment for him to lose a few pounds.

"Okay, my nurse will be in to get you checked out soon. I'm glad that you're feeling better."

As they were leaving the emergency room, Sara murmured under her breath, "I'm going to be so tired at work tomorrow." Too drained to reply to the veiled snub, Mike said nothing.



- 4) What stresses are you currently facing in life? How is that stress affecting you? For instance, is it impacting your health, sleep, mood, relationships or work? You can expect each of the skills taught in this book to help you to deal with the various types of pressures and strains you experience.