

*Hearts*  
  
*Journey*  
*a journey through sickness to health*

*Christo Jovner*

# Hearts Journey

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# *Our Story*





## Preface

At 38, my life was great! I was what one would call fighting-fit and my perfect-weight, non-smoking, non-alcoholic lifestyle helped maintain this illusion.

Life was running full-throttle and on all cylinders. I had just successfully completed a project as project manager, with the next one lurking around the bend, wanting to be labelled a success as well. Life was gracious and I had settled into a rhythm that gave the prescribed amount of attention to exercise, work, family and church. You guessed it; I was Mr Good Guy!

As you read this you may be thinking that you haven't played everything by the book, but keep in mind, no matter what your history, when you lie on the operating table the playing field is made equal. What matters then is not what you have done, but what you will do with your second chance.

## Preface

This book is dedicated to the story of our family; how I survived a heart attack, underwent a heart bypass and the dreadfully slow recovery process which ensued. It shares how we as a family processed everything, especially on the emotional side.

We are created as both physical and emotional beings. During a time of trauma, like the suddenness of heart surgery our emotional being is the one that is too often overlooked at work and home. The emotional effects, if not attended to in the right manner, can last much longer than the physical effects on one's body.

Together my wife and I have endeavoured to share our journey to help you, perhaps not fully but in part, cope with the aftermath of your surgery. Be comforted by the fact that you are not alone in your situation!

## Preface

I am forever grateful towards a few key players:

Through this whole process my wife has been strong, steadfast and courageous. Two is certainly better than one and she is a jewel placed beside me.

To all the cardiologists, the cardiac surgeons and the healthcare staff working so tirelessly: You are warriors few and far between. I want to salute you with a big THANK YOU! I know that life is in the hands of the Lord, but that He uses yours to extend life here on earth, is just as true.

I am thankful for a second chance given to me by my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. If you do not know Him our heart is that you will encounter Him through this book and through your circumstances.



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

### *Patient*

I can remember that day so clearly. We were at a children's party one sunny Saturday morning in February. Just a few people there knew that I had seen the doctor the previous week after having chest pains. I was referred to a cardiologist who did an ECG test; he scheduled me for an angiogram that coming Tuesday. We were light-heartedly chatting the morning away with friends when I suddenly felt a pain in my left arm that went straight into my chest. I turned to my wife to tell her I didn't feel well. We excused ourselves and when we got home I immediately got into bed; I was exhausted. I spent the rest of that afternoon and evening in bed.

The following day my sister, who worked as an ICU sister at the cardiothoracic high care unit, and her

## Introduction

husband came to visit. After hearing what happened she told me to pack my bags and go to the hospital immediately. What I didn't realise was that I actually already had a heart attack the previous day.

### *Family*

I remember my sister-in-law visiting us that Sunday. She was terribly upset, knowing what had really happened to Christo.

As we were on our way to the hospital it struck me how oblivious everybody was to our emergency. The cars in front of us were driving ever so slowly; people everywhere were just getting on with the daily busyness of life. It seemed as if people were trapped in their own reality and could not care any less whether I was in a hurry or not. Everybody was merely trying to cope with their own lives. If you didn't matter to them, then your emergency was not urgent.

## Introduction

I was very concerned about Christo being admitted to hospital. This wasn't exactly how I pictured our life together. In a few days the reality that life doesn't always work out as you plan, dawned on me.

### *Patient*

Upon arriving at the emergency unit of the hospital the Sunday afternoon an ECG and blood tests were done. The blood tests confirmed the heart attack. My sister called the cardiologist and I was immediately admitted to hospital and scheduled for an angiogram.

### *Family*

Christo and I were only expecting the insertion of a stent or two. *A stent is a small stainless steel mesh tube that acts as a scaffold to provide support inside the coronary artery. A balloon catheter, placed over a guide wire, is used to insert the stent into the narrowed coronary*

## Introduction

*artery*<sup>1</sup>. That would mean having him home in approximately two days' time. This also meant the minimal trauma. He would also be in time for our daughter's sixth birthday. And our lives would be back to normal.

The new year lay ahead of us; the main theme was our daughter starting school for the first time. Little did we know what awaited us that year and how our lives would change.

In the previous months, many people had been laid off at Christo's work place. Because of this and resignations in the section he worked, his workload doubled. There were late nights and immense stress as new system developments needed to be implemented.

I let my sister-in-law do most of the organising as far as the doctors and specialists were concerned. In the meantime I was trying to comfort and



## Introduction

support Christo. I remember staring down at him lying in that hospital bed, his skin was an odd greyish colour and the exhausted expression on his face left my stomach in a knot.

That evening the angiogram confirmed that a couple of arteries were blocked around his heart. I was very shocked when we were informed that it was inevitable; he would have to undergo heart bypass surgery.

We felt so isolated and confused, with truckloads of questions filling our minds. I wondered if he would survive. Would I be able to cope with everything? We voiced some of these questions, others we just hid away, too scared to even utter them.

***Accept all the help you can get; it makes the adjustment to your new circumstances much easier.***

## Introduction

I had to let the family know and ask for prayer. During these times, I valued family and true friends even more. Every kind gesture was appreciated.

**Thought:** *Accept all the help you can get; it makes the adjustment to your new circumstances much easier.*

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1. Novartis South Africa. 2010. Angioplasty & stents. Information for patients having an Angioplasty.

## Chapter 2

# Stress

### *Family*

Stress is a buzz word nowadays without any impact. I think we have become so used to the word that we do not give much thought to the damage it does to our bodies. In our own little rat race we try to survive the day by drinking our vitamins as suggested by magazine advertisements. We hope to get through the next week, not to mention the month. While ever so often we find ourselves dreaming of our next holiday, hoping that this one will be enough to counter our increasing stress levels. Maybe holidays don't do anything else than press the pause button on stress. Why else would you need another holiday to recover, once you're back from holiday?

## Stress

With Christo working hard at his job I did everything a good wife would to ease his load and look after him. I knew stress could have devastating consequences, but I wasn't at all prepared for what lay ahead of us. Medical research shows that stress may be related to heart attacks<sup>2</sup>. At the time we were controlling his high blood pressure and cholesterol with medication. Surely a balanced meal in the afternoons and all the exercise he was getting would do the trick regarding his health? When he came home in the afternoons, I would curb my eagerness to share my day. I was a stay at home mom at that time and would let him relax for a while before I clutter his thoughts with my day's nitty-gritty happenings.

We were very busy and there was little or no time for family get-togethers or relaxed family time. Somewhere in the back of our minds there was always the thought of work waiting to be done.

## Stress

With Christo in hospital, it was necessary for me to travel daily to visit him. Going to a hospital in the neighbouring town day after day was very exhausting to say the least. I always parked on the same spot, under a tree in the shade. It was near a back entrance leading to the ward where Christo was and by entering in the back I missed all the familiar hospital passages I disliked so much.

I was very tired during this time; the underlying stress was taking its toll on me as well. My emotional turmoil became evident in my body. I could not get enough sleep at night and woke up tired.

### *Patient*

We were very busy during the evenings and weekends, giving us little time for rest and relaxation. Whenever we had free time, guilt would make us get up and see to some unfinished chore in and around the house.

## Stress

Keeping everything on my plate meant burning the candle on both ends, all the while not realising the effects stress had on my life and body.

I carried two visions within me that I couldn't escape from. One was to provide for my family and the other to be part of a team that planted a church to impact the community around us. All my possible time and energy was being channelled to serve these visions.

At work, we were staffed to maintain and serve the status quo in the company with a good ERP system. But any vibrant company cannot distance itself from the continuous drive to consolidate, better and optimise processes with the direct impact on the systems that serve the core business. Soon, we were involved with projects in this regard, and the hallways were filled with consultants to do the extra work. The success of these projects stayed our responsibility as this was

## Stress

where the buck stopped. My colleagues and I ended up overseeing the projects as well as maintaining the daily system requests in the company. It was manageable, but we felt the extra load.

Our evenings were filled with meetings, gatherings and rehearsals that served the church we were part of. I loved it and the passion to be part of something bigger than oneself, drove me on.

I once visited my parents at a camping site where they were having one of their regular weekend

***Family must  
be a priority.***

***This means  
quality time  
spent  
together.***

getaways. It suddenly dawned on me that our lifestyle was very far removed from this kind of relaxation and recreation, mainly because of the time constraints of our double barrel vision. For a moment my heart yearned for this, but I told

## Stress

myself that it is part of the price we had to pay. Bottom line was that rest was a luxury item on our agenda.

**Thought:** *Family must be a priority. This means quality time spent together like camping, fishing or whatever you as a family enjoy. The only two things in life that's more important than family is God and your spouse.*

One thing that I lacked was mentors in my life that could coach me and hold me accountable in the area of managing my time and a balanced lifestyle. In your

***Find a mentor  
that can hold you  
accountable.***

twenties and thirties it is quite doable and almost expected to just push on and drive yourself towards achieving those goals and dreams you have set out for yourself. This is usually accompanied with a “Can



# Stress

Do” attitude, but all the while our lives get thrown off balance.

We all know the importance of rest and regular time-outs, but we just don’t pay attention to it, or at least, I did not.

In small doses, stress is good; it can even help

***Stress should be managed. Take regular time-outs!***

with increased energy levels and alertness. It becomes, however, detrimental to us

when the stress surpasses our ability to cope with it in a positive way<sup>3</sup>.

Typical of my personality type, I would mostly internalise work pressure, relationship issues, financial worries, etc. Usually stress first affects our psychological well-being and then pans out to affect one’s physical body.

# Stress

My family history of high blood pressure and cholesterol, me being on medication for these, combined with my personality, in time proved to be a less favourable combination.

**Thought:** *Be cautious - watch out for stress in your life. Stress should be managed. Take regular time-outs! It will differ from person to person, but you will figure out what works for you. Lastly, find a mentor that can hold you accountable in this area of your life!*

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2. The heart and stroke foundation of South Africa. Media Data document. July 2007
  3. Rhodes, D.R. 2012. Stress. Online article. Accessed from [emedicinehealth.com/stress](http://emedicinehealth.com/stress)

## Chapter 3

# Isolation

### *Family*

Due to my Type A personality, I felt the necessity to take control of the situation, comforting all the other people around me as well as encouraging Christo. I did not want to unsettle Christo in any way, causing more stress and tension for him in this difficult time. This left me feeling isolated as I did not allow myself to acknowledge what I felt and experienced in the situation. I also sensed that family and friends around me were so busy coping with their own shock that we ended up emotionally paralysed, trying to make awkward small talk to comfort ourselves.

As a wife I also felt emotionally detached from my partner, as I didn't feel the freedom to share my deepest emotions and fears with him. I deliberately withheld these anxieties from him.

## Isolation

I was afraid that any negative or remotely negative talk from me would upset him and be detrimental to his recovery. This caused a gap between us that would later take much time and effort to bridge.

***Confide in someone not directly part of your circumstances, e.g. a counsellor, social worker or psychologist. This will help to diminish any feelings of isolation.***

### *Patient*

We received news that weekend that I was scheduled for a heart bypass the following Monday. Family, friends and work colleagues visited me during this week. I found it comforting that so many people took an interest in what was happening in my life, something that is not always that visible when everything is in the green.

## Isolation

Two ministers from churches that my parents and family respectively attend, came to pray with me during this week. The morning before the operation, a friend and leader of the organisation I was part of at the time, came to pray for me and anoint me with oil. This is a practice found in the New Testament of the Bible, "If you are sick, ask the church leaders to come and pray for you. Ask them to put olive oil on you in the name of the Lord." (James 5:14). Being a child of God, I felt prepared for the heart bypass to an extent, although in hindsight I realise that nothing could actually prepare me for what lay ahead.

## *Family*

The week we waited for the surgeon to return from leave gave us unnecessary time to contemplate everything that could go wrong during the operation. I realise now that a long waiting period before the operation is not ideal. It is a very emotional time for the patient and family

## Isolation

and too much time on hand only promote dooming conversations and thoughts.

### *Patient*

It was D-day! On the Monday morning the cardiothoracic surgeon came to my bed to discuss the operation. He showed me the photos that were taken during the angiogram, which arteries were blocked and told me about the procedure. The discussion was short, factual and to the point like only men can be.

The operation was scheduled for 17:00 that Monday, one week after I was initially admitted to hospital. Later that afternoon a male nurse came to shave off all my chest, arm and leg hair using a lot of baby powder to ease the shaving process.

My emotions started to fluctuate between excitement and anxiety as I looked at my scarless, upper body in the mirror for the last time. Despite

## Isolation

having a heart attack, I actually felt very healthy at the time, with no shortness of breath or any other indication that I was suffering from coronary artery disease. I felt like a walking paradox. I also didn't know in the least what was waiting for me.

I saw my wife earlier that day and my mom and dad were with me before I went into theatre.

### *Family*

My heart broke when I could not be with Christo before he went into theatre. Driving back home thoughts of fear mingled with prayers were my companions. *What if something went wrong? What if I never see him again?* I asked his parents to be with him before he went in and I can only imagine how scared they must have been, after all he is their son.

# Isolation

## *Patient*

In the theatre everybody was focused and programmed to do their job. The theatre was cold and emotionless. On the operating table the sister asked me to lie still as my trembling was so excessive that it was difficult to insert the anaesthetic needles. The calming medicine that I was given earlier had no effect on me, I was gripped by fear. I felt like a lamb being led to slaughter. I was eventually rigged up with anaesthetic needles; everything became dark.

Despite all the visits, phone calls and interest shown by people, I felt extremely isolated in this situation. I had no idea where and how to place my experience and forthcoming operation in my paradigm and belief system of God. Being a leader in the community that I served, the questions I had could not be discussed with just everybody. I had no choice but to get through this. I held on to what David wrote in Psalm 23 where he says, "I



## Isolation

may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won't be afraid". Valleys are there to walk through and not remain and get comfortable in! All that I knew was that God is faithful.

**Thought:** *Confide in someone not directly part of your circumstances, e.g. a counsellor, social worker or psychologist. This will help to diminish any feelings of isolation.*



## Chapter 4

# Fear of dying

### *Patient*

I woke up breathing with the help of a ventilator. I could hear the sound of monitoring machines behind my head that measured almost everything imaginable. From the corner of my eye I could see tubes protruding from my neck and right arm to administer medicine.

To my left I heard the welcoming and calming voice of the sister assigned to me. She was quick to put me at ease; assuring me that everything was fine and that I did well up to now. She guided me through those first frail hours until I went off the ventilator that same morning. Reality had kicked in; and excruciating pain was part of my reality.

Confined to a bed, I carefully observed everything

## Fear of dying

that moved and no sound escaped my ears; from the monitors which beeped to the conversations between the sisters. I couldn't help but notice their skill and friendliness.

My wife was the first to visit. We didn't talk much; I just appreciated her being there and I enjoyed the moment we had together. I asked her to pray for me, as I didn't have the strength to pray for myself. I was very emotional. I was stripped of the one thing one takes for granted in life - one's health. I was also stripped of being the provider in my home, the contributions I made to society and of being an influence bearer. I was helpless. This was not what I imagined it would be like; it was much worse. I felt useless and ashamed and I had nothing to throw back at life.

*Why did I have to go through this? Haven't I done all the "right" things up to now? Then again when one is stripped from all these things which add*

## Fear of dying

value to your identity and you lie there "naked", you realise that no accomplishments, no money, no prestige and no material things matter anymore. One is just thankful to live. It was also in these moments that I felt so close to my Saviour. My desire to live was overwhelming; I wanted to be with my wife and see my six-year-old daughter grow up. I realised that relationships matter more and that life was too short to entertain unfinished business.

Later that first day I was summoned to sit in a La-Z-Boy recliner and a bit later to walk. I was escorted by the physiotherapist, lots of tubes dangling out of me and an oxygen bottle. And so, followed by this entourage I walked again for the first time after my operation. The physiotherapist tried to distract me with small talk; making this moment seem almost normal and insignificant, yet behind me I could feel the silent cheers of the entire ICU nursing staff.

## Fear of dying

When the first night fell, I found myself wide-awake; the sleeping medication did not work.

I watched as a bypass patient came back from theatre. I saw his family standing beside his bed trying to talk to him and I heard them crying. I watched the assigned sister tirelessly monitoring his levels and then making adjustments accordingly. Before dosages were given, it was first cross-checked with a co-worker. I heard the monitors of my neighbour, sound asleep. His heart beat was slowing down and his monitors were crying for attention. I thought to myself, *I don't know if this man is going to make it*. It took my attention to my own monitors and the thought crossed my mind, *Am I going to make it alive out of this place?* I was petrified to say the least. Every time I heard one of my monitors shouting that something was out of range, I would pray and ask to live and not to die.

## Fear of dying

### *Family*

I remember very vividly our trip to the hospital in our neighbouring town the Sunday Christo was admitted into hospital. I was driving as fast and as carefully as I could. I glanced over to the passenger seat and I could see Christo was in a lot of pain. There were so many things racing through my mind and I knew now was a time for faith and not fear. I felt in my heart the following words and said it to Christo: "*You will live and not die*". These words were not spoken as if in a conversation, but hung in the air and found its way into our hearts. In that instant we both knew that these were words from the Lord. Although these words brought comfort, it did not completely dispel all our fears and doubts that he might not survive this ordeal.

### *Patient*

These words were an anchor and gave sustenance during this time in our lives, but the one thing

## Fear of dying

that I realised was that I actually was afraid to die. I believe in life after death and I believe that the only way to God the Father is through Jesus Christ, who died in our place for our sins. So, I knew the Lord Jesus Christ and I was sure that I would spend eternity in heaven. But I realised I had unfinished business regarding my life's purpose. Although we were leading and pastoring a church part-time, I felt that I had not completely surrendered to the purpose God had for my life. It felt like I was just half-way there and this made me afraid of death. So my prayer was that the Lord would keep me alive in order to make things right.

I was continually comforted by Psalm 23 and the fact that the Lord was going through this with me. He was and still is my Shepherd; to feed, to guide and to shield me. This roller coaster ride between anxiety and comfort carried on through the night.



## Fear of dying

I watched the clock on the ICU wall, waiting for it to change to 4:00 a.m. It was time for my first bed wash. After the night's mental aerobics, I welcomed the movements in the ICU.

The fear of dying plagued me right through my recovery process in hospital and at home.

One of the first things I did when I got home was to buy my own blood pressure measuring device. I was obsessed and measured my blood pressure morning, noon and night.

One night I woke up with severe heart palpitations. I went into a complete panic. *God don't let me die!* was the only prayer that kept racing through my mind as I measured my blood pressure. It predictably spiked because I was so upset. I struggled to calm myself down, and I eventually fell asleep that night with music in my ears.

## Fear of dying

During my recovery at home I had heart palpitations several times before my first visit to the heart surgeon. Sometimes my whole body would go into a shiver as would my prayer life!

True to my engineering background, I had my blood pressure graph indicating the trends ready with my first visit to the surgeon. I also had a bunch of questions to ask him. He assured me that the heart palpitations were quite normal after a heart bypass. I thought to myself, *this was crucial information that could have taken some emotional bumps out of the road to recovery.* But thanks to this nugget of truth, my obsession about my blood pressure subdued as time went by.

My first visit to our church after the bypass was quite significant. Everybody was happy to see me and very appreciative that I came. During the singing, I was overwhelmed by my emotions and I couldn't sing much. I made a promise to the Lord

## Fear of dying

to fully obey His purpose for my life. I also realised that this would have a lot of consequences for our family life, but I was ready for the challenge. Once this decision was made in my heart, I was comforted with peace from within. With God nothing is impossible.

Dr Robert Lewis says in his DVD series, *The quest*

***It is important to deal with unresolved issues; it is a freeing experience.***

*for authentic manhood* that “an emotional wound is any unresolved issue where the lack of closure adversely impacts and shapes the direction and dynamics of a person’s life now.”

I think it is safe to say that unresolved issues impede one's progress in life and it can take on many forms. Perhaps you have unresolved relationships issues, perhaps you find yourself in

## Fear of dying

the wrong vocation or perhaps you have not invited Christ into your life to be your Lord and Saviour.

Unresolved matters just take up unnecessary time and energy. It takes a whole lot of our energy to sustain; energy that could have been used to live life to the fullest. We might even be the one that the harm was done to. Even in this we have the choice to forgive.

When I look back, I know my unresolved issues were directly related to my fear of death.

I would also strongly suggest you read *The First 5 Minutes After Death* by Dr Isak Burger wherein he illuminates and elaborates on what awaits us after death.

**Thought:** *It is important to deal with unresolved issues; it is a freeing experience.*

## Chapter 5

# Coping mechanisms

### *Patient*

Day two in the ICU remains a blank. I can only recall asking my wife to bring my earphones and music as the sounds of the monitors were overwhelmingly intimidating. Being a musician, my ears were sensitive to all the sounds and noises in the ICU.

I recovered quite quickly and on day two the drainage pipes were removed. I could sense the sister was a bit nervous as my anticipation of what was about to happen reflected in my blood pressure. But once the pipes were taken out, I felt a lot more comfortable.

The second night sleep still evaded me. Music was the only companion through that long night and it helped me a great deal. My thoughts were

## Coping mechanisms

calmed and channelled in silent contemplation of my Saviour. I couldn't wait for day break.

Most of my medication was stopped at the beginning of day three. At this stage I was very tired.

The surgeon's daily visit was brief; he would scan all the recorded results and then make some suggestions as to my treatment. On my last day in the ICU he walked past all his patients and threw a red heart-shaped cushion to each one of us. I could see that he felt quite pleased with himself looking at his survivors. Who wouldn't be? For one's life to be extended through the hands of a surgeon is a pretty prestigious and grand affair. Yet there was no standing ovation, no encore. He was just a man doing his job to the best of his ability. Deep down in my heart I knew that the Lord used this man to extend my life.

## Coping mechanisms

After three days I was discharged from the ICU. Upon arriving at the High Care Ward, I fell asleep for what felt like the first time in weeks. I was alone in the room and the silence was a welcome companion. Somehow the silence helped to speed my recovery along and my extreme fatigue started to lift.

During my stay in the high care ward I read *The Shack* (William P. Young); a gift from my wife.

The author uses a lot of analogies in the book to demystify God in a way. The one thing that struck me was how God the Father wants to provide for us. It was comforting to know that God not only heals, but that He wants to provide for us, sometimes in unexpected ways.

One of the things that helped me cope during the recovery was to listen to music as this was a language that I understood. I would critically listen to a piece of music to unravel the

## Coping mechanisms

arrangement of the instruments and vocal parts thereof. I intentionally listened to gospel music as I realised the effect that music has on one's emotions. The words of these songs would calm my emotions and made it easier to connect with God. It would take me to a place of familiarity and peace.

What actually happened was that my thoughts were taken off my current reality, whether it was heart palpitations, a disturbing conversation, my slow physical progress or just to drown the influx of negative thoughts. The music helped me, not to escape, but to cope.

***Find what coping mechanisms work for you on the positive side and implement it.***

"You cannot escape life!" are words that still today resound in me. It was the words of one of my



## Coping mechanisms

seminary lecturers during my theological studies. He explained that life does not always consist of good things happening to you, but that we need to walk through life, enduring the good and the bad times. This road that I was travelling on now proved this to be true!

There is a certain song, named “I belong” from Kathryn Scott that meant a lot to me during this time and it has the following words:

*Not angels, nor demons*  
*No power on earth or heaven*  
*Not distance, nor danger*  
*No trouble now or ever*

*Nothing can take me from Your great love*  
*Forever this truth remains*

*I belong, I belong to You*  
*I belong, I belong to You*

## Coping mechanisms

*Not hardship, nor hunger  
No pain or depth of sorrow  
Not weakness, nor failure  
No broken dream or promise*

*Nothing can take me from Your great love  
Forever this truth remains*

*I belong, I belong to You  
I belong, I belong to You*

*Forever and forever I belong*

*Nothing can take me from Your great love  
Forever this truth remains*

*I belong, I belong to You  
I belong, I belong to You*

Later on, back at home some of the most relaxing moments that I had during my recovery were the mornings in our back yard. I would sit under the shade of a majestic Siring tree and read anything from the Bible, *Popular Mechanics* to *Home*

## Coping mechanisms

magazines. Sometimes when a friend would come visit me, we would sit in the tree's shade and talk. Looking back, I could see how reading, listening to music and the positive conversations I had with people helped me cope during the recovery.

### *Family*

Our thoughts are very powerful. It determines our whole lives - for as you think so you are. If we can realise that we are in control of our thoughts and our thoughts are not in control of us, we have mastered a great deal. To let our thoughts just wander off, could lead you unto dangerous paths; such as depression and anxiety. This in turn can have a profound effect on your body. As it is not easy to direct your thoughts when you are in a difficult situation - it is good to have something positive to focus on. For some it may be music, for others it can be a positive conversation with a friend.

## Coping mechanisms

Encourage your spouse to do something to take their mind off their situation. Making conversation about anything but work and responsibilities is essential as there will always be responsibilities and work to be done.

Don't lose heart if the response you get is not always what you hoped for. Sometimes recovering emotionally takes longer than the physical recovery. Humans are complex beings. Do what you can to give support and trust that in good time everything will return to normal. If after a year there are still serious issues consider a few sessions with a counsellor.

**Thought:** *As our lives and backgrounds differ, so will our coping mechanisms. I urge you to find what works for you on the positive side and implement it. It eases the road, and absorbs the recovery time.*

## Chapter 6

# Rush into slow motion

### *Patient*

The rest of my stay in hospital was without event. I only found the bathing sessions to be challenging as it was difficult to get in and out of the bath. The chest bone needs a lot of time to heal and I felt very weak and out of breath afterwards.

On the day that I was to be discharged from hospital, the surgeon came to the ward to give me "the talk". You know the one that everybody gets before they go home - about the family history that you can do nothing about and the do's and don'ts of diet and exercise. It basically spelled out a change of lifestyle!

The doctor's instructions were clear: walk as much as possible once your back home and I was determined to do exactly that.

## Rush into slow motion

The memory of my exercise routine in the gym before this whole ordeal, motivated me to start as soon as possible.

On day one I decided to walk just up the road; 250 meters to the stop sign and then 250 meters back home. Courageously, my wife and I walked this distance in the heat of the day, aiming for the shade of the trees to escape most of the late summer sun.

When we arrived back home I headed straight for the bedroom. I was so out of breath and I felt like I was going to die. On our bed with a damp cloth on my forehead, I was gasping for air, waiting for the strain in my chest to ease. When I opened my eyes I saw our first guest, hopefully looking at me to make conversation. It was in this moment that it dawned on me that this was going to take longer, much longer, than I expected.

## Rush into slow motion

Needless to say, my next walk was just around the house and early in the morning when my energy levels were high and the sun's rays soft. It took quite a while before we attempted to venture out in the street again. In those first couple of months after my surgery, the days seemed to last longer than the energy in my bones. By the late afternoon I was often completely exhausted, and wishing the day would end. I just wanted to go to bed and start over, hoping the next day would end better. It took a couple of months before I could see the days through.

As if I didn't learn my lesson with that first walk, after some time had passed, I decided to go back to the Biokinetic Clinic to start with my gym program. After a short discussion with the trainer, explaining my situation, he assured me that he had many similar clients and promised to keep a watchful eye on me with regular check-ups during my first session. I went in the afternoon to miss

## Rush into slow motion

the morning rush as I was not yet ready to explain what happened to me to any chatty fellow gym-goers.

I started with the bicycle, as the normal routine prescribes. I was fine for the most part of the 20 minute session, but towards the end I felt a pain in my left arm and asked the trainer to come and check my blood pressure. It had suddenly dropped and he told me to get off the bike and rest a bit. After I rested, we decided it was enough for one day. The concerned trainer walked me to my car, never to see me at the Biokinetic Clinic again. As I drove back home I realised once again that I was too eager to get back on track.

Apart from one's loss of appetite and skin tone, I also lost my zeal for DIY after the bypass. My enthusiasm for most other things disappeared as it had to make room for the emotional survival mode that overshadowed my life like a cloud.



## Rush into slow motion

Every time my wife took care of my wounds and clothed me, every time I got out of the bath exhausted, every time I could not open or close the curtains, every time I got tired before the day ended - the realisation of the lengthy process I was in came and stuck itself to me. There were no shortcuts out of this, no secret recipes, no instant results, only a man looking in a mirror, his body sawed in half by an operation that had eroded his upper body and left it with just a soft whitish tissue valley that inaugurated him to the most acclaimed "zip club", as fellow colleagues at work would jokingly call it. A very expensive emotional zip if you ask me!

Back at work, my boss ordered me to work only half day in order to pace myself back into the work environment. I welcomed her courtesy. Although this lighter load was well intentioned, I wanted to prove that everything was okay and

## Rush into slow motion

that I could still do the job like everyone else. I did not want to send out any signals of weakness.

Although I wanted to prove myself one's psychological and physical worlds are so intertwined that a serious conflict was about to ensue.

And so it happened that in one of our meetings I suddenly didn't feel well. A sharp pain surged through my upper body. I got up and briefly excused myself. Out in the hallway one of my colleagues was suddenly behind me, escorting me into one of the offices while someone phoned the paramedics. Upon their arrival they measured my blood pressure, it had soared and I was immediately put on a drip. I was carried down two flights of stairs on a stretcher to an ambulance, much to my annoyance. Upon arrival at the hospital's casualty unit, an ECG and blood test showed that I was okay. I was admitted to hospital

## Rush into slow motion

to be stabilised. The following day I was in the cardiologist's room for a stress ECG and heart sonar. All the results showed I was fine. I seemingly had a panic attack and needless to say I felt really "strong" and stupid!

My advice is to take it easy on yourself. Your body will quickly tell you if you are going too fast. I know that the demand on your life does not wait, that time is money, that some opportunities come by only once, but your life is more precious than money, than that once-in-a-lifetime-opportunity, and yes, the demands that is placed on your life can wait a bit. Recover slowly, but recover well!

It took me roughly a year to regain my physical strength and passion for things like DIY and other hobbies. Today, I am so thankful for a second chance to take on life!

## Rush into slow motion

### *Family*

Companies are established by and consist out of people; people are our greatest asset in the world. We sometimes think that the world revolves around money, but actually it revolves around people. You are more important than any job. I always believed that no company would build you a monument if you became sick or died on the job. You are your own biggest asset - it is worth the effort to look after yourself.

As your spouse's partner it is also important to look after yourself during this time. You need to

***Your body will quickly tell you if you are going too fast. Recover slowly, but recover well!***

be in good physical condition to have energy to sustain everybody and everything around you. See that you get enough rest, eat healthy and drink water. You will sometimes need to pull your partner through when

## Rush into slow motion

they go through a rough patch. Spend time with people outside your household that can build you up with positive conversations or lend an ear when you need it. And be patient with your partner's recovery - it takes time.

**Thought:** *My advice is to take it easy on yourself. Your body will quickly tell you if you are going too fast. Recover slowly, but recover well!*



## Chapter 7

# Fighting to be independent

### *Patient*

As my daughter grows up, it is interesting to note that she always wants to do things by herself. She wants to eat by herself, to dress by herself, to comb her hair by herself, to open the car door by herself, to bath by herself, to read by herself, to operate the TV and DVD machine by herself, to swim by herself to name just a few things. As she develops physically and mentally her quests also adapt accordingly.

From the time we are born, there is a strong desire to be independent and to do things for ourselves. This is part of us until the day we die. It is a healthy sense of independence that helps us to survive and to go forward in life.

## Fighting to be independent

Part of what sickness does is to seriously attack and steal this independence and in the case of a heart bypass, this is no less the case.

So each time I could not do something that I previously could, like closing the glass sliding door, or driving my car, or picking up something heavy that would have come naturally before, I longed for independence. The independence to just live life by yourself.

***The secret lies  
in choosing  
your fights to  
independence.  
In doing so,  
you will not be  
worn out.***

The slow recovery process of my body continually sent these messages to my brain of not being independent. In some cases you just have to let go; in other cases you need to adapt and accept it as the new normal; in some cases you need to put on the gloves and fight!



## Fighting to be independent

During your recovery:

- **Let go** of your work responsibility *for a while*.
- **Let go** of those unreasonable demands life places on you *for a while*.
- **Accept** that you will not be able to drive *for a while*.
- **Accept** that you need help to clean the wounds, to get dressed *for a while*.
- **Accept** that you need to take care of your physical actions in order for your chest bone to grow back correctly.
- **Fight** your eating habits *continually*.
- **Fight** your exercise habits *continually*.
- **Fight** your emotional well-being *continually*.
- **Fight** and resolve the unfinished business in your life - *continually!*

## Fighting to be independent

As time allowed me to walk further away from the operation, I could greet independence progressively. But it takes time and most of all patience - not with the people around you, but with yourself!

### *Family*

As the partner in the recovery process you will need a lot of discernment. You need to discern when to let your partner battle with something on their own for a while and when it's time for you to step in and help or maybe take over. In the beginning there is still a lot of healing that needs to take place. Later on in the journey there comes a shift from the physical to the emotional. Although the emotional aspect is always there it becomes stronger. Fear becomes a crucial battle. Fear in life is sometimes a crippling foe.

As the body heals and recovery is taking place, the brain needs to let the body regain its independence. Your partner may be afraid and

## Fighting to be independent

reluctant to resume certain responsibilities - it may be simple things such as opening the curtains! There may be times when you will have to be stern in order to help your partner in their recovery process. As time progresses they need to start doing things for themselves again as this helps rebuild self-esteem. In not trying, they will only prolong their physical and emotional recovery.

**Thought:** *The secret lies in choosing your fights. In doing so, you will not be worn out.*



## Chapter 8

# Why me?

### *Patient*

My time at home was filled with visits from family, friends and work colleagues each one demanding, not in words, but in their intention of visiting a detailed description as to what happened. It took everything in me to retell the story as it was drawn out of me: from the heart attack, the operation, my hospitalisation, up to that moment in time. Some people would respond in sympathy, others didn't know what to say, while others just could not relate. Then there were those people that are so positively wired, and I considered myself one of them, that they simply didn't want to talk about the reality of what I was going through and were there purely out of courtesy and office.

## Why me?

Through these conversations people were asking what caused this to happen. I soon found out that I also didn't have all the answers. This was clear from the emotional effect retelling the events had on me. I was devastated each time. Sometimes I would burst out in tears or my body would shiver all over after recounting the events. My emotions and the way my body reacted shouted that I was not nearly done dealing with the emotional side of the bypass. This wasn't simply a big operation; it soon became clear that the emotional effects on one's life were even bigger than the physical effects on one's body.

In a situation like this I wanted to be the strong one; the untouchable one. I wished I could simply shove it all under the carpet and pretend as if nothing had happened. I was struggling to see the fairness in all of this, and I hated the feelings of shame that I suddenly felt.

## Why me?

Although these conversations were always well-intended, the ignorance thereof often caught me off-guard. Dealing with these emotions was a fight for survival and I felt trapped inside my own body. The last thing I needed was these unspoken attitudes and suggestive comments from loved ones that lodged themselves firmly in my heart and mind. When our guests left, my loving wife would comfort me with her words or sometimes by just being there.

I was caught in an emotional storm and this cloud nearly overshadowed my life and it almost destroyed me and my family. With a thought-life focused only on myself and my situation, I found myself isolated. Work, ministry, adventure and progress seemed out of my reach and not part of my reality anymore. I couldn't see any light at the end of this tunnel. Maslow's theory of survival became more than a page in a textbook; I saw it playing out in my life.

## Why me?

I realised that what I was going through, seriously challenged me. I realised that I had to find out *why me?*

I felt as though I had only lived half of my life and I was not in the least prepared for the impact this sudden stop had on me.

It felt like someone had tackled me from behind; I didn't see it coming and it certainly was not part of my game plan. An emotional meltdown was inevitable. I felt pitifully sorry for myself! And when you travel down the path of self-pity it is a mudslide that takes you with it.

My self-centeredness caused a lot of frustration between my wife and me. What should have been a glorious time at home, turned out to be one filled with frustration for my wife. My wife kept on reminding me that I was not the only one going through a tough time. But the fact she was also



## Why me?

having a rough time didn't seem to register with me.

This was the case until one sunny morning when my wife and I were sitting in our backyard and we had a serious talk about our situation. It was one of those defining, God ordained moments etched into my emotional DNA. The discussion's crux was simple: I had to get my act together. I finally realised that I received the extravagant gift of life for the second time. Although the discussion was harsh it caused an emotional turning point for me!

We might not get all our questions answered here on earth, and the *why me?* or the “how could this ever have happened?” all tend to linger and overstay their welcome in us. Acceptance of the unanswered, blended with time, heals. I rest in the thought that nothing happens to us as Christians that is not for the glory of God.

Why me?

***The battle scars remind us of a lengthy courageous battle that is won!***

A good friend of mine once said that war veterans usually have battle scars to prove it. The brave ones have theirs in front. My battle scars remind me of a lengthy courageous battle that is won! How about you?

### *Family*

Because of our self-centred nature as humans, when something bad strikes, we tend to withdraw into our own thought world. And as I have said in Chapter 5, negative thoughts can be devastating, especially if you don't talk about it and break the negative thought patterns. It only repeats itself over and over in your mind. When you voice it to someone else, it can help you gain perspective and see the truth about the situation.

## Why me?

It is important to help your partner realise that the family also have emotional issues to work through. Although they did not go through the actual operation, it was a very traumatic experience for everyone.

Adopt an attitude of working together. Resolve that you will make it through by helping one another. Neither of you are islands. You need each other to understand the situation in its totality. Each one only has a part in the recovery process, but together you can heal and grow into wellness.

**Thought:** *The battle scars remind us of a lengthy courageous battle that is won!*



## Chapter 9

# A life beyond statistics

### *Patient*

It is 8 April, 13h50 and I'm running 5 minutes late for my 6 week post-bypass appointment with the cardio thoracic surgeon. He is a no-nonsense type of man and I am hoping that he isn't waiting for me.

Upon entering his rooms, two other patients are already waiting. I am relieved. I report at the receptionist and she puts a number four against my name. Patient number three is not in the waiting room, perhaps he went to the restroom. "The doctor is still in theatre", she says. The thought that the surgeon is operating on someone in order to prolong a life, gives rise to a newfound patience and understanding. The only person slightly uneasy about a room filled with waiting patients, is the receptionist.

## A life beyond statistics

After a while Peter\* comes in. We recognise each other; he had a heart bypass just a couple of days after mine and we were together in the high care ward. A few minutes later another man whom Peter recognises enters the room. He had a bypass just after Peter. I engage in a short discussion with a man that looks about my age. I notice he is wearing a medical sock and I ask him if he also had a heart bypass. His surgery was done on the 11th of March, mine on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, and he is there for the surgeon to have a look at his leg. The man is 40 years old, two years older than me, and he had five veins bypassed. Both of us agree that we didn't expect this to happen to us at this age.

In the course of our discussion Peter asks if anybody could cough without bracing themselves

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\* Fictitious name

## A life beyond statistics

and like a typical man he tries to establish a pecking order even in the recovery process. From the talks that we had in the high care ward, I know that Peter is a tough guy and that he had to fight his whole life to establish himself in his community. But this round is different, because nobody responds; nobody wants to open up to the conversation. Suddenly everybody is very busy reading a magazine and for a moment I also seek shelter between the pages.

In myself I sensed how this heart operation affected all of us sitting there. We were like eagles whose wings were damaged in life's storm at the prime of our lives. We looked dejected trying to rationalise and process what had happened to us. Being taken out of the workforce is disheartening, especially if you are the sole breadwinner as it was in our case. But being men and strangers to each other, we chose not to talk about these issues.

## A life beyond statistics

And so we gentlemen sat there, all middle aged, all had a heart bypass, all part of the South African statistics of heart diseases.

When the cardio thoracic surgeon arrived back, I waited for my turn. The consultation was quick and he assured me that everything was fine.

According to my cardiologist, statistics show that the life expectancy after a heart bypass deteriorates to 66% after 15 years.

In my case having had a heart attack and bypass at the age of 38 thus left me to live to 53 “in general”. So, what do I do with this information? Do I believe it as the truth over my life? It felt like my life was doomed with these statistics hanging over my head like a sword!

I wrestled with this thought and statistic quite a while. In this time we visited some elderly friends



## A life beyond statistics

of ours and talked about this matter. The following scripture from the Bible was given to me:

“The LORD said: Ezekiel, I hear the people of Israel using the old saying, “Sour grapes eaten by parents leave a sour taste in the mouths of their children.” Now tell them that I am the LORD God, and as surely as I live, that saying will no longer be used in Israel. The lives of all people belong to me - parents as well as children.” Ezekiel 18:1-4

***Life and the span thereof on earth, is in the hand of the Lord.***

The discussion and scripture brought a realisation to me, as a child of God, my life and the span thereof on earth, is in the hand of the Lord. That settles it.

In my mind I take notice of the statistics, but in my heart I live by a greater truth and find comfort

## A life beyond statistics

in it. In terms of being active and doing exercise, eating healthy and managing my stress, I do my best. That is all I can do!

### *Family*

Statistics can be daunting. With statistics usually come fear. And fear, when pondered upon, attracts the negative situation to you. It is like the truth that says: “life and death is in the power of the tongue”.

In reality statistics merely make you a part of the crowd. The truth is that you and your partner are both unique. Don't give in to statistics, don't speak negativity over your life or situation. You don't have to be part of statistics - God has a plan and a purpose for your life. Trust Him not statistics.

**Thought:** *Life and the span thereof on earth, is in the hand of the Lord.*

## Chapter 10

# Get grafted

Our hope is that this book has provided you with the emotional comfort to know that you are not alone in your situation. Many people have gone through heart surgery and there will be others after you that will undergo the same surgery. The uniqueness of your situation lies not so much in the heart surgery itself, but rather in how you are going to react to this reality.

Today I want to offer you hope; a hope that is only found in God, in nothing else. Not in our possessions, not in our prestige, not in our relationships, not in our intellect and not even in our lack. When you taste death, these things are but a vapour before your eyes. When you are confronted with death, the fact that we were created to worship Jesus Christ becomes a larger than life reality.

## Get grafted

There is a God-shaped vacuum in each one of our hearts that longs to be filled with our worship of someone or something divine. This vacuum will only be truly filled if we receive Jesus Christ into our hearts by simply believing in Him. There is no one else fit to bring restoration and regeneration into our lives.

You can come just as you are, God does not have prerequisites. He only asks that you believe that Jesus, who became a man just like you and me, died on a cross, was raised from the dead and through that overcame death so that we can have life and be with Him for eternity.

John 3:16 says “God loved the people of the world so much, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who has faith in Him will have eternal life and never really die.”

## Get grafted

The Bible says that we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), but Jesus came so that we might have eternal life.

Heaven, that is eternal life, is a free gift. It cannot be earned, but can only be received by faith in Jesus Christ. If you are reading this and thinking *I need this, I am in need of a Saviour*, I want to tell you that it is the Holy Spirit working in your heart right now. I want to lead you in a short prayer to accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour and invite Him into your heart.

Pray this with me:

***Dear Lord Jesus, I need you! Please forgive my sins. I invite you to come into my heart and fill me with Your Holy Spirit. Amen.***

Friend, if you have prayed this prayer, I want to welcome you as a child of God! John 1:12 says “Yet some people accepted him and put their

## Get grafted

faith in him. So he gave them the right to be the children of God.”

Tell someone today that you have accepted Jesus as your Lord and Saviour. Get involved in a good Bible-based church and enjoy life as an adventure with God.

If you have prayed this prayer, we would like to send you something that will help you through the first couple of steps in your walk with God. Send us an e-mail at [info@intune.org.za](mailto:info@intune.org.za), visit our website, [www.intune.org.za](http://www.intune.org.za) or call us on **+27 84 976 5593**.

## *Other Stories*

This is a retelling of other people's stories. The names are fictitious, but the stories are true. The writers have endeavoured to give a true reflexion of every story, and as such cannot be held responsible of any misinterpretation or omitting of facts.





## Chapter 11

# Sam's story

One week before my 66th birthday. A week after which nothing would ever be the same again, but a week for which I am eternally grateful and without which I possibly wouldn't have seen my 66th year.

In 2003 I was referred to a cardiologist by my reflexologist. An angiogram was done and it was discovered that I had what was called 'a narrowing of the hearts micro system'. I was told it was not serious and nothing to worry about as long as I took my prescribed medication. Every year I went for a check-up and had no problems.

In June 2010 my wife and I went on a two month holiday touring England, Spain and Portugal. We were on and off airplanes; in and out of hire cars and lugging suitcases around with no problem. We returned tanned, relaxed and full of life.

## Sam's story

Four months later I had my annual cardiologist check-up. This consisted of getting a fairly heavy work out on a treadmill coupled to an ECG machine, BP monitors, etc. This process usually consisted of doing three minutes slow walking, three minutes brisk walking, three minutes fast walking, three minutes trotting and three minutes running. This time I was stopped after eight minutes. After a scan check I was told that there was a problem and I was to be admitted to hospital for another angiogram.

It was found that I had already had a heart attack and that the right hand side of my heart was almost totally occluded. We were completely stunned. There were three options available, one was medication which I had been on for a few years and which obviously hadn't worked completely. The second option was angioplasty which entails putting small bladders into the veins, inflating them to open up the vein and

## Sam's story

fitting a stent into that area to keep the vein open. The lesions in my veins were too big for that and so it was going to be option three, coronary artery bypasses graft operation.

I immediately realised the daunting recovery process that lay ahead, but what scared me more was the thought of leaving my wife behind, alone. We moved here from England, and being just the two of us, our lives naturally revolved around each other. I even wrote her an instruction booklet in the few days prior to the bypass to help her through life without me if I didn't make it.

Looking back on that now it seems beyond ridiculous, but the fear that gripped me was so real, I had to have an intervention plan in place. Luckily the booklet idea never had to kick in and I made it through. I remember waking up with a tube down my throat, and to be honest, the thought of how and when they were going to

## Sam's story

remove this was the most frightening thought I've had in a long time.

The emotional roller coaster that followed really caught me by surprise. I was overwhelmed by my feelings of self-pity and I am forever thankful for the hospital trauma counsellor who helped me through this.

I have never cried since I was a small child and I have been a very hard and callous man all my life. The turning point came on the second day I was in high care; I was sitting on the edge of the bed. I remember the counsellor came in and asked how I was. I started to talk to her and then broke down. I started to cry and she sat beside me and put her arms round me. I sobbed and sobbed for a while and the counsellor said it was the best thing I could have done. I was getting something out of my system and the breakdown was the way to do it. The counsellor said I was one of very few

## Sam's story

people who have ever let their emotions flow as men find it hard to do that.

I learned that the heart is the centre of the emotional side of the body and one should expect mood swings, anger, depression, good days, bad days and all sorts of things. On top of this was the pain and soreness from the physical operation itself. I was basically sawed open from the neck to waistline; I had pipes and tubes going into my stomach, my arms, leg and neck. My leg was opened up from my ankle to my thigh to remove veins to use in the bypass. I was in a lot of discomfort and a real pain to my poor wife to say the least. Without her I don't know how I would have survived this. We have known each other for 47 years and we really are co-dependant.

I learned a lot from the counsellor, especially about the effect the operation and the deep anaesthesia has on the emotional side of the

## Sam's story

brain. I immediately noticed a change in myself, subtle but definite. I had seemingly more patience, was quieter and felt more relaxed. However there were other effects that hit me, I had lost 12 kilograms in the time in hospital and my taste buds had altered, I lived on jelly and custard in the hospital. When I came home the food tasted awful and I craved a lot of sugary stuff. Red wine, which I was told I had to drink lots of, was like vinegar.

I slept a lot during the day in my recliner, but I couldn't get comfortable in bed at night. I walked as instructed, miles and miles round the streets near my home. Even my preferences in television changed, I found I didn't like crime or violence of any sorts anymore. Instead I enjoyed romantic comedies. After six weeks I started driving again, but had become a dodderer. After Christmas we went away for a short holiday and during this period my taste returned.

## Sam's story

A major thing that I did to get closure after the operation and its effects was to write down everything that happened. Every little detail as I recalled it. All the good and the bad, my worries, my feelings and then to take the paper on which it was written and burn it. This was probably the best advice I got in dealing with the trauma of what happened to me. It was a catharsis, a healing and a way to find understanding.

When I was younger I abused my body through alcohol and smoking. And at times during my recovery it crossed my mind that all of this might have caught up with me, but I decided to just put these morbid thoughts out of my mind. To be honest my lifestyle didn't really change as much after the bypass as my attitude towards life did.

Today I'm firm in the believe that today is the first day of the rest of my life. I'm resolved on not giving up, no matter what. There are so many

## Sam's story

others who have not been so lucky. It's said life is not a dress rehearsal and I was given another chance. Life is the biggest roller coaster in the world and now I have a ticket. So I'm strapped in, taking a huge breath and getting ready for the ride of my life.



## Chapter 12

### Susan's story

I remember in 2002 before I had the heart bypass I woke up one night with the most indescribable nausea. I was up that whole night being sick. It was only a year later when I went to the doctor, because I was often extremely out of breath, that I discovered I had had a light heart attack.

I was 49 when I had a triple bypass. The surgery was a success and the cardiologist was astounded at my quick recovery.

The fact that I stopped smoking a year before was to my advantage, but in the years and months leading up to the operation we had escalating tension within our family home. My husband's drinking problem left him emotionally detached from our family with little support, even more so

## Susan's story

after my heart bypass. This might have been the hardest obstacle I overcame during my recovery.

Back at home my daughter took care of me and I would spend most of my days reading to pass the time. I had a strong support base in my mother and sister who often came for visits. After the bypass I could take long walks for the first time in years and my breathing was steady. For someone who would normally be red-faced, huffing and puffing after a brisk walk, this was a miracle.

People should know that there are definite consequences to our unhealthy habits and stressful lives. Since my operation I try to live a healthy life, but more importantly I have changed as a person. Things that use to motivate me don't anymore. A good example is our desire for material possessions, now I know that there are things in life that are far more important.

## Chapter 13

# Simon's story

I was an eighteen year old teenager when I joined the army for what was then my mandatory military service. Part of being enlisted involved all sorts of medical check-ups during which doctors discovered I had heart problems. I was born with this defect and my parents knew about it, but chose not to tell me up until that stage. I guess my parents were trying to protect me in a way, and truth be told it might have been a good thing. My inability to excel in sports caused me to divert my focus to academics.

I was born with a Bicuspid aortic valve<sup>4</sup> which means my aortic valve has two cusps instead of three. This is the most common cause of aortic stenosis (narrowing of the valve opening) in all people. Because of the stenosis, the valve doesn't seal properly, causing the heart to work harder to

## Simon's story

pump the blood through one's body. Knowing I had the problem, I had to see the cardiologist from time to time, but in truth I really wanted to postpone the effect it had on my life, although my body told another story. I had 70% heart failure that caused kidney failure and inevitably led to my heart valve replacement. What counted in my favour was that I did not have cholesterol or hypertension problems.

The two years leading up to my operation I became very tired, with chest uneasiness. I also fainted once and often felt dizzy. In the last month before my operation I started to show flu symptoms, and was referred to a specialist by my GP. Before I knew it I was with a cardiologist being scheduled for an angiogram.

On Monday I was admitted to the hospital with my angiogram scheduled for the following day. On the

## Simon's story

Thursday of that same week I had the heart valve replacement procedure. I was 49.

Although I was not afraid of the operation, I had to talk my wife through our budget and our testament so that she could go on if something happened to me. Emotionally, this was very difficult for me.

I spent six days in the ICU after the operation. On the second day I felt very nauseous. I also started walking. From the third day on I felt much better. While I was in the ICU there were people that died, but strangely enough I never felt afraid of dying. My kids brought me stuff to do like Crossword Puzzles and Sudoku, this kept me busy and my thoughts channelled.

My family was very worried prior to the operation, which is kind of normal in a situation like this. I also received a lot of support from my minister

## Simon's story

and my father-in-law. My father-in-law also made a lot of effort to connect with and support my daughters during this time.

My task-driven nature was what frustrated me most and during my recovery at home I felt useless not being able to do the things I normally would. I carried out the doctor's instructions to the tee. And I felt much better! To step up from a 30% to a 100% heart function made my world liveable again! The quality of my life has drastically improved.

I even worked out a walking program on Excel. I started off just walking around the house. From there on I used Google Maps to work out a route with the exact distance as prescribed by the doctor.

I was very cautious regarding the recovery of my chest bone. At one stage my wife and I had to buy dog food. With her carrying the heavy bags and

## Simon's story

me just walking beside her, I got a couple of nasty looks from people that walked pass us. During my recovery process, we had other similar incidents that tested my "worth". One was with a flat tyre of which I could not loosen the nuts. The other was our petrol lawn mower that starts with the pull of a rather tight string. After my wife and three daughters were unsuccessful in starting the lawn mower, later on my father-in-law came over and could start it without much effort. It is funny now, but it wasn't then!

So what started off as frustration, changed into accepting that I simply had to persevere through this, and a believe that I would one day function normally again. I also had to make peace with the amount of pills that I needed to take on a daily basis.

Due to the nature of my work, I could remotely log onto my work. One of my work colleagues and

## Simon's story

I would often go for coffee and discuss difficulties he was facing at the office. Somehow this gave me a sense of worth during my recuperation. I also got an ingenious gift in the form of an iPad which went a long way in helping me starve my boredom.

I sometimes wonder why this happened to me, but I do not have an answer and I am at peace with it. I never discussed this matter with people, and especially not with the people at work. This would have reflected badly on me and didn't want to be seen as funerable. I have always dealt with stress by internalising it. Having said all this, I never felt ashamed or degraded because of what happened to me.

I walked a lot after the operation and I tried to be more active in doing things that require physical activity. My eating habits stayed the same, but I



## Simon's story

stopped taking vitamins. In all of this I believe moderation is key.

I got a second chance at life and I am so thankful to be with my family. The opportunity to recover and the quality of life that I have been given causes me to live a life of thankfulness.

It is not for me and you to decide what are going to happen to us regarding our health. It is part of God's bigger plan for your life. It does not help to worry about it.

The life span of a valve is about 20 years. At this stage I am focussed on retirement planning and my aim is to get my kids through school and tertiary education. I also give more attention to immediate requests from my kids. My relationships with my wife and daughters are much better now!

## Simon's story

I have lots of energy and for the first time in my life I can mow the grass and wash my cars in one day!

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4. <http://your-doctor.com/healthinfocenter/medical-conditions/cardiovascular/cardiac-conditions/valvular-dz/valvedz.html#bav>

## Chapter 14

# Sarah's story

*Who would take care of them while I am in hospital?* Thoughts like these plagued me in the days leading up to my heart valve replacement. No one could blame a wife, mother and grandmother about to undergo major surgery for having such thoughts. And what made my situation even more significant was that the age of 68, I was the mother of disabled twins in my full-time care.

Over a period of eight years the condition of my heart valve was monitored through undergoing regular angiograms. Three years prior to my eventual surgery I was constantly tired. My cardiologist finally decided that it could no longer be put off and I was scheduled for surgery.

## Sarah's story

I remember waking up after surgery very confused and distraught, I found it hard to distinguish between reality and hallucinations. To make matters worse I fell in the shower the evening before the operation; this was very traumatic for me. Furthermore I was being treated for depression at the time; all of which contributed to my emotional condition. It felt like a movie was being made and reality was the screen on which everything was played.

Strangely I didn't have a lot of pain after the operation, the only real pain I felt was in my left arm on which they did the angiogram two days before the operation. But emotionally the hallucinations really got to me; I even dreamt that they cut the pipes off too short when removing them. This left me feeling numb to any emotions and I could only pray again a week after the operation. I still don't sleep well and have nightmares, funnily enough about school as I'm a

## Sarah's story

retired teacher. The fact that I struggle to show emotion made it really hard to off-load on these intense feelings that I was experiencing.

The quality of my health has definitely improved after the operation, but in those first few weeks after my operation I used to be very tired. I can now walk far distances, even though I have had balance problems for years. I also lost 15 kilograms after the operation.

The worst thing about the whole process was probably the pipe in my throat as I became extremely nauseous. Also one or two weeks after my operation I had heart failure and moisture on my lungs. I had to have drainage pipes inserted to drain some of the moist.

I never asked why this happened to me; my dad also passed away after a heart attack. I quickly had to get going again. Although I wasn't working

## Sarah's story

at the time I had the twins to look after. Without the help of my daughter I don't think I would have recovered this well. I also felt a lot closer to my husband and I formed closer bonds with my brother, sister and friends after my operation.

Because of the twins our situation was never easy, but I have always just accepted it as part our lives.

Now I live every day, every minute believing that God is good and that eventually the storm in our lives will pass. We should never be so gripped with fear and uncertainty as to what the future holds that we can't see God's goodness and provision anymore.

For the first time in a very long time I feel good again and my depression has lifted. I am thinking about tomorrow and making plans for the future. My grandchildren are my life and I have a new vitality to do things.

## Chapter 15

# Steven's story

At 48 I lived a rather active life; I frequently went for a jog and was an avid squash player, although I smoked. I was aware that something was not right with me for almost 10 years. It was during one of my jogging sessions that I suddenly felt very tired and short of breath. I realised that something was terribly wrong and that I needed to see the doctor. I went to a cardiologist and a stress ECG test and an angiogram was clear in one thing, I needed a heart bypass operation as soon as possible. I asked to have the bypass postponed by two weeks in order to attend my oldest daughter's matric farewell. I took everything a bit slower and tried to minimize my exposure to stress situations during the two weeks.

Then, in October of 2000, the most beautiful month of the year at 48, I had my heart bypass.

## Steven's story

Thoughts of death crossed my mind numerous times and wondering what happens after death was another big question mark. There is no denying it, I was afraid of death or of the unknown to say the least. I didn't know if I would fully recuperate after the heart bypass and whether my life would be different. With all these uncertainties filling my mind it was time for the surgery.

The heart bypass went well with no complications. I had what one would call a "normal recovery period" after the operation. What got to me though were the drainage pipes and the monitors that didn't go to sleep when you wanted to! In those first couple of days me simply moving from my bed to the chair was with great effort and shortness of breath.

I read a lot during my recovery in order to get my loose thoughts channelled away from death. One



## Steven's story

way to destroy your life is to think of death all the time. I tried to get away from that as far as possible.

During this time our family grew closer and I received a lot of support from my wife and daughters. This surely eased the road to recovery. I didn't feel isolated at all. My wife's commitment to the recovery process was summed up in her loving words: "I will hit you until you are okay again!" So for me there was no turning back, just looking ahead!

I recovered within six weeks. During this time I was dependent on my family for a lot of things. For any man, losing your independence touches your ego. I also felt ashamed for not being capable and healthy anymore. I saw myself with a disability that others didn't have. I only started jogging again after a year.

## Steven's story

Oddly enough, during that first year my whole body would shake if I lay on my side. I had to change sides or lay on my back to continue sleeping. Needless to say I found this interrupted sleep very challenging especially because prior to the heart bypass I could sleep for twelve hours non-stop. I realised that my overall health was the same before and after the heart bypass. My alcohol consumption has been less after the heart bypass, and at this stage I am only walking for exercise.

Going through the heart bypass and recovery, I sometimes felt I was the only one going through this situation. I have come to realise that it could have happened to anybody. The more positive I was and the more easily I accepted what happened to me, the quicker my recovery felt.

Before the heart bypass I felt invincible, but this mindset changed dramatically after the operation.

## Steven's story

I realised that I had to look after myself to get more out of life. And in retrospect, life is still great for me!



## Chapter 16

# Sally's story

I am a mother of four, happily married to my second husband. My first husband passed away in a work accident after only about five years of marriage leaving me with two boy toddlers. My own dad died of his heart in his early fifties. I have experienced a lot of setbacks regarding my health. I was diagnosed being allergic to penicillin from an early stage in life. I also have porphyria, one of my kidneys was removed when I was 45 and I suffer from hypertension. Diabetes was added to my list after my heart attack at 52. This makes the possibilities of prescribed medicine for all my conditions a challenge to many a doctor.

One Spring Saturday morning in October I woke up not feeling well. The pain I felt in my chest did not indicate good news. My husband took me to the emergency care unit of the hospital.

## Sally's story

Our family GP were on duty that morning; thus he knew my medical history. What played off in the emergency unit that morning, was not a pretty sight.

I was sitting on the hospital bed waiting for the doctor when I suddenly had a massive heart attack. I fell backwards on the bed and died. Witnessing everything, my husband started to pray out loud.

The doctor induced the first electrical shock on me, but nothing happened. A second time and still nothing happened. After the third time my heart started to beat again. Unaware of what has happened, I was rushed to the ICU.

With all this happening to me, I had an experience of moving through a tunnel.

## Sally's story

My husband saw and experienced this dramatic event, and it forever made an emotional and spiritual imprint on his life. The fact that we went to the hospital, the fact that we were the only ones at that stage in the emergency unit and also the fact that our family doctor were on duty tells us a story of how God worked out everything for the good, and it gave me a second chance to live.

That same evening I was transferred to another hospital with a specialised heart ICU. An angiogram was done, and a heart bypass procedure needed to be done, but my heart was too weak at that stage. The following Wednesday I was still in the ICU and experienced chest pains again. A balloon pump was inserted. The Friday morning I went in for the heart bypass operation.

Back in the ICU after the operation, things did not go well at all as I started to bleed where the arteries were joined. I went into theatre again the

## Sally's story

Friday evening. I came out of theatre on Saturday morning three o'clock. I received ten points of blood to counter the blood loss. Through this whole event, I lost track of three days in my life. I was not awake or aware of anything around me.

I spend three weeks in the ICU. My experience of the operation was found worst by the fact that I could not walk afterwards. At first I did not understand it, and the thought of not being able to walk was petrifying, to say the least.

Depending on people for the rest of my life was neither what I anticipated, nor an easy thought to get accustomed to. *Not this on top of everything that happened to me! Not now!*

Later on, the doctor told me that, in an effort to save my life, they inserted a balloon pump through my leg, and it was the balloon pump that did the damage to my leg.



## Sally's story

I also had some experiences in the ICU that could be coupled to the effect of the medication on me. I saw a beautiful garden that looked like a painting through a window. I also saw how the hospital roof above me would open and close. A lot of people prayed for me during this time.

After the three weeks, I was transferred from the ICU to the heart high care ward. There, I found myself too weak to bath for the first time after the operation. My first attempt to bath was accompanied by my youngest daughter who helped me. After bathing, she helped me get back into bed and gave me oxygen. It is then that the nurses and I realised how weak I was, and they helped me to shower by sitting on a chair for the rest of my time in hospital.

At home, the chair-shower sessions continued as I could not walk. For four weeks, I was bound to a wheel chair recovering from the operation. After

## Sally's story

this time, I was operated on again, this time to put in a plastic artery in my right leg. This would hopefully channel the necessary blood flow in my leg to let me walk again. Waking up after the operation was one joyous event as I could immediately walk again. I lost some feeling in my right foot, but in comparison to walk again, it is a small price to pay!

My youngest daughter encouraged me to get active as quickly as possible. At that stage, she was an ICU sister in the same unit that I was cared for after my heart bypass. She had all the knowledge and inside information regarding my health and kept a watchful eye on me.

After the heart bypass, I felt a lot better. I was always short of breath when I was walking. I was smoking from the age of sixteen, but immediately stopped after the heart attack. As mentioned earlier, I developed diabetes from the shock of

## Sally's story

the heart attack and operation on my body. My addiction to Coka-Cola also had to die in the process.

The heart attack did not mean the end of my life. I still want to do a lot of things, and I want to see my grand children. I believe that the Lord has brought me through this experience to bring my life to a still stand. I realised what the true meaning of life is!

I still have a lot of will power to go on with life after all that has happened to me. I realised that life is not in my own hands, but if it is given, let me live it!

Apart from my husband, children and their spouses, I share my life with five grand children!



# Solomon's story

I had a lot of stress at work from which I resigned prior my heart bypass.

It all started with my legs that swollen up. I was admitted twice in hospital with irregular heart rhythm. Fortunately this was rectified with medicine. I was always short of breath and would just sit and fall asleep. My body would sometimes shake.

One Sunday night I could not sleep as I was struggling to breath. My wife took me to the hospital. The cardiologist did an angiogram on me. The inevitable were to happen, five arteries around the heart needed to be bypassed. I was at that stage on hypertension medication, but not cholesterol. The angiogram also showed that I had heart failure in one of my heart chambers.

## Solomon's story

The Tuesday morning I went in for the bypass operation.

At fifty, I was afraid of the operation. *Am I going to make it or not? What is going to happen to me if I die?* The doctor said I was a time bomb waiting to explode. These words were most certainly true, but empty of emotional support.

When I woke up after the operation, I realised that I made it! All the necessary pipes and wires that supplied the vital medicine and information towards my recovery, was not pleasant at all. I spent eleven days in the ICU during which my heart rhythm had to be stabilised as well.

Emotionally, to have seen my wife and children after the operation just broke my heart. My family's biggest concern was that I would not fully recover and worse, that I could be gone in a

## Solomon's story

twinkling of an eye. This brought us closer to each other and our family relationships blossomed.

In those frail moments and days after the operation in the ICU, the woman that lay beside me died after her bypass surgery. I was terrified, being afraid to die myself.

I watched a lot of TV and conversed with the ICU staff during this time. This helped me to cope.

At home, I could do almost nothing for myself. My wife had to clean my wounds. I just lied there, I could not provide for my family. I felt ashamed that I was not healthy. I saw myself with a condition that other people did not have. All this caused a lot of anger within me.

Physically, I felt a lot better after the operation, as I am not so constantly tired and my body also stopped shaking.

## Solomon's story

At one point I drank 13 pills a day, of which 5 were water pills. The medication has a direct impact on our marriage intimacy. I stopped smoking. I started to eat healthier and I am at a point where I eat much less red meat. Exercise is still a problem.

I also had a foot operation since the heart bypass.

I have come to accept what has happened to me, but with guilt regarding my past lifestyle. But I have realized I was given a second chance. I have to grab hold of it!

We go to church more regularly now as this whole experience brought me nearer to God.

It also gives me great joy to think that I will be able to see my grand children grow up. The thought tastes as good as that first glass of ice water after the heart bypass!



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