

UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, November 2013

Careless Chris Gets Some Class

By: Kitty

"Got that report done yet? I haven't seen the email with it." Although he wasn't actually tapping his foot while he stood in front of her desk, the boss's tense posture and tightly controlled expression sent the clear message that if he stopped concentrating for just a moment, the tapping would happen on its own.

Careless Chris shook her head, still typing frantically. "No," she managed to mumble, "soon." The unfinished, congealing remains of her lunch next to the mousepad, the deepening lines of pain in her forehead, and the way her shoulders were hunched over the keyboard said the rest for her as well but he was impervious to the postural cues of distress.

"Soon as in now, or in an hour, or what?" he prodded, leaning a little closer over her monitor. The odor of her leftovers reached him and he wrinkled his nose in distaste, then focused on her again even more intently as if staring harder would elicit the answer he wanted to hear. He'd read that successful management was all about establishing clear expectations and he was determined to be good at it. Later on he planned to speak to her about housekeeping in the office and the poor impression messy desks could make on the other campus department directors who might wander through. "The meeting with the AVC is tomorrow morning and I need to review it and get comments before the end of the day."

"Soon," Chris gritted out between clenched teeth. When she lifted her hands from the keyboard for a moment her fingers were curled like a bird's claws, the joints white with strain, tendons standing up in sharp relief. She took a second to roll her head around in an attempt to loosen up her neck muscles but it didn't appear to do much good. Her shoulders remained high and closed in, elbows clenched against her ribs. "An hour. I'll have it in an hour."

"I'll be expecting it then," he pronounced solemnly and retreated to his office.

By the time the hour was up, Chris had managed to complete a passable draft and she sent it on the last minute of her allotted time. After a couple hurried bites of the now completely unappetizing meal, she checked her email, answered the most critical ones that had come in while she was occupied by the last-minute report project, and then pulled up the continuity plan she had been asked to review and update. Her concentration on UC Ready was unbroken until the end of the day, by which time she was in so much pain that even if she had wanted to stay later to finish the last section, she wasn't sure she could have done so. Popping a couple more of the generic ibuprofens from the dwindling supply in her top drawer, she smothered a sigh and headed out into the rapidly cooling late afternoon air, half-hoping to do some housework when she got home but already knowing that wasn't going to happen. Soon twilight would be over before quitting time and she dreaded the deep winter months of coming to work in the dark and missing all the daylight before leaving to go home in the dark. At least the cats got more snuggly when the weather turned chilly. She spent the ride home pondering how sad it was that she considered that the best thing she had to look forward to.

Next morning, the pain in her hands hadn't really abated very much and she started the day off chugging more ibuprofen with her coffee. It was getting bad enough that even opening the cat-food cans was more difficult than it should have been so she used her first break to shop for an electric can opener. She was still trying to massage away the sharp pain in her thumb joints and wondering what to do about the fact that lifting her coffee cup made it worse when Brianna walked by.

"How's life treating you these days?" Brianna asked, pausing for a moment when she saw that the boss' office was dark.

"With the usual respect and gratitude," Chris deadpanned, rolling her eyes in the direction of the empty office, and they shared a knowing smirk. She went back to prodding at her sore hand. "Hey, do you know a good masseuse?"

Brianna took a longer look and noticed all the indications everyone else had walked right past. "Chica, you need more than a massage. You have got to get some professional help on this computer set-up or you're going to end up on workers' comp before long. Call the ergonomics guys at EHS."

"They'll just tell me to sit up straight, and it's not like a new chair is going to fix my workload," Chris argued back. "As if they'd buy me one anyway, or pay for a massage. I have to bring in my own aspirin, for crying out loud."

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"That was your first clue," Brianna replied mercilessly. "Look, you're in pain, that won't get better if you don't fix the underlying problem. There's an online assessment thingie that will figure out what's wrong, tell you how to start fixing it yourself, and they can send out somebody who'll help even more."

"Uh huh. And then they'll make the boss stop asking me for 20 page reports at the last minute?"

"Not far from it; there's a rest-break tool you can put on your computer that makes sure you take micro-breaks when you've been working too long. It beats going to the clinic when your wrists seize up completely, trust me." She moved around to the other side, closer to Chris. "Here, try this stretch, it really helps with forearm tension." Demonstrating the move, she ended up leading Chris through several basic arm and hand stretches and each one seemed to help just a little bit, partly by making clearer the relationship of her work to the resulting problem.

"Where'd you learn all this?" Chris asked, repeating one of the stretches that had felt particularly good.

"At my desk, it's not hard. Took that online course and downloaded one of the workload monitoring programs." She explained over the incipient protest, "It doesn't check what you're writing, just how long you've been keeping your muscles busy. Honestly, you'd be surprised how much good a little knowledge and timing your breaks can make in how your body feels."

Chris flexed her hand and winced, but admitted it wasn't quite as sharp a pain as it had been while she was typing earlier, at least not until she closed her fingers around the mouse. "Geez, maybe it isn't just from getting older," she murmured to herself.

Brianna grinned. "That doesn't help any either! But you're a little beyond the natural curve here. Get some help before it's too late. They are not paying you enough to cripple yourself."

Before her boss got back from his meeting, Chris had found the online course and was working her way through it. Within days of reporting the level of discomfort she was experiencing, she had been seen for an evaluation, changed several elements of her workstation, and was already feeling the difference it made to not be getting actively worse every day. Months later Chris got permission to take the departmental ergonomic assessor training and started helping others find and make use of the systemwide training and other resources available to prevent injuries, and that turned out to be more rewarding than writing any number of reports on time.