

Living Beyond Health Anxiety

A 20-Minute Engaging Recovery Speech

“Anxiety may walk beside you, but it doesn’t have to lead your life.”

Opening Hook

How many of you have ever Googled a symptom and convinced yourself you had a life-threatening disease? *(Pause — look around, smile)* Yeah... I see those guilty smiles already. Now imagine doing that... **every single day**. That's what living with health anxiety feels like.

The First Breakdown — COVID & Panic

In 2021, during the COVID second wave, one night I suddenly felt breathless and had chest pain. I panicked and called everyone I knew, desperately trying to arrange a hospital bed. After hours of fear and waiting, my CT scan came back completely normal. That night, I experienced my first full-blown panic attack.

Understanding Health Anxiety

Health anxiety is when your brain’s alarm system gets stuck in **ON mode**. Normal sensations — like chest tightness, dizziness, or a flutter — are seen as signs of serious illness. You start assuming the worst every single time. Think of your brain like a smoke detector. For most people, it rings only when there’s a real fire. For people with health anxiety, it rings **every time you make toast**. ■■

Life Inside the Spiral

After my first panic attack, I made the biggest mistake — I started Googling every symptom. Headache? Brain tumor. Muscle twitch? Nerve disease. Chest flutter? Heart attack. I bought a pulse oximeter and blood pressure monitor and checked my vitals constantly. I visited ERs multiple times in a year, often walking out with perfect reports but no peace. This is called reassurance seeking. It feels calming in the moment but fuels anxiety long-term.

When Anxiety Shrinks Your World

Soon, I started avoiding life itself: - Skipped friends' meetups. - Missed family functions. - Avoided exercise, thinking it might trigger a heart attack. - Even stopped playing with my son outdoors. My world became smaller and smaller — safer, yes, but lonelier and scarier.

Surgery & Relapse

In June 2022, I had to undergo a major abdominal surgery: truncal vagotomy with gastrojejunostomy. While the surgery went fine, the post-surgical complications reignited my anxiety. This time, it hit harder — my fears felt justified, and I lost trust in my body completely.

Turning Point — My Son

By January 2023, my complications were resolved, but I still couldn't enjoy life. One evening, my 4-year-old son asked, *"Appa, can we go outside and play?"* That moment broke me. I realized anxiety wasn't just stealing my peace — it was stealing his childhood too. That became my why. My reason to fight back.

CBT & Rewiring My Mind

My psychiatrist introduced me to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which became a game-changer. I started using thought diaries to challenge catastrophic thinking. Example: - Situation: Chest tightness - Automatic thought: 'Heart attack!' - Rational thought: 'Happened before, always anxiety.' Over time, my thoughts became more balanced. Panic didn't disappear, but I stopped fearing it.

Interactive Grounding Exercise

Let's pause and try a quick exercise together — it's called the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique: • 5 things you can see • 4 things you can touch • 3 things you can hear • 2 things you can smell • 1 thing you're grateful for (*Pause for 20 seconds*) This simple tool brings you back to the present, calming your nervous system.

Lessons I've Learned

- Anxiety is a condition, not a disease.
- Googling symptoms fuels fear.
- Therapy only works when you commit fully.
- CBT rewires thought patterns.
- Consistency beats intensity — small steps matter most.

Gratitude

To my wife — for your patience, love, and silent strength. To my son — for giving me the courage to fight for a better life. To my friends — for understanding and supporting me. To my organization — for creating a safe space where I could heal.

Closing Message

If you're struggling with anxiety, remember: - You are not alone. - You are not broken. - Recovery is possible — one small step at a time. **“Anxiety may walk beside you, but it doesn't have to lead your life.”**