

A Note from the Author...

This book describes how accidentally at the age of 25, during a routine checkup I discover that I suffer from a near fatal disease without a cure. How it affects me mentally to know that I may not live long. How I choose to initially live in denial but then fight it out, making some avoidable mistakes on the way. Eventually in spite of a near death situation, I do conquer the disease to get back to a normal life with good health by the age of 39. The book traverses my journey in these fateful 14 years, where I did not let the disease affect my career or daily life. It talks about my trials and tribulations and the highs and the lows in my fight for life.

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Chapter 1: Discovering about my Genetic Disease

I was a normal healthy child all through my school life if you exclude shortsightedness that is. I wear high-powered glasses, probably a result of reading too much fiction. In the year 1990, when I was in college I became more health conscious. I joined my neighborhood friends for jogging and exercising on a daily basis. I did quite a few pushups including one-hand pushups apart from pull-ups. We also used to jog each evening from our houses in Vasant Kunj to the Vasant Vihar market around four kilometers away. The jogging greatly increased my appetite. From three chapattis for dinner, I straightaway jumped to seven chapattis on the very first day I jogged. Gradually I increased the time spent in doing bodybuilding exercises to an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening. The efforts showed and I became physically much stronger than ever within a year of this new regimen.

During my MBA years, as my workload of studies increased, I had to give up on jogging, but I still spent one hour on bodybuilding exercises everyday. Having built up a strong muscular frame, this one-hour of exercise helped me to maintain it. When I got placed from campus in my first job in a large MNC

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engineering firm, I went through my first health checkup and my blood tests and other parameters came out normal indicating as I believed that I was in good shape. The initial months immediately after joining the firm were both physically and mentally demanding as we travelled all over India for a detailed induction and on-the-job training. I was leading a group of thirty engineers in all these trips. All through, I was always commended for my high energy levels and stamina. In all I spent around five years with this firm. It was during my second posting in this firm, when I was working in the company's factory in Faridabad, that I first got to know that I did have some serious health issues.

It was a hot sunny summer afternoon, when a group of IIT Engineers in our factory were sitting in my office cabin and were discussing about our company's tie up with a large Private hospital chain for employee health checkups. Although not mandatory, the facility was available for all employees free of cost. A friend from IIT Kanpur joked that his body was a 1972 make and he felt that a routine checkup was overdue. Another guy did mention about an incident where a factory union leader who was absolutely hale and hearty had gone for a checkup, but when he found out that he had a heart problem, his health deteriorated and he died within six

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months. We then debated whether it was better to know in advance about any health issue and take precautions or wait till something actually happened. The consensus veered more towards the former.

So one fine morning in 1997, I drove in my second hand fiat car all the way from my Vasant Kunj residence to this Hospital situated on Mathura Road in Delhi. I was on an empty stomach all ready for a battery of tests to cover each part of the body. Most of the tests were routine and were going fine. However, it was during the ultrasound that the Doctor looking at the screen, looked worried and turned to me to ask the reason for undergoing that particular test. I told him that there was no particular reason and that I had come for a routine Executive Health Check up as a part of our company's policy and its tie-up with their hospital. It was then that he revealed that the ultrasound was showing numerous small cysts in my kidney. He said that as I grew older these cysts would grow larger and ultimately my kidneys could fail. This news came as a bolt from the blue to me and I was at a loss for words. Anyway at the end of the whole checkup, I was supposed to meet a Senior Doctor to discuss all my reports. This Doctor also looked quite grave and said that it seemed I suffered from a potentially fatal disease called the Adult Dominant Polycystic Kidney

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Disease (ADPKD). He also noted that my blood pressure was on the higher side at 130 / 90 and could be a direct consequence of this disease. He asked me if my parents had any kidney problems. I told him that I had lost my Dad due to kidney failure way back in 1983, but we did not know the reason and it was believed at that time that he died due a reaction from some wrong medication. He told me that my disease was genetic in nature and from what I had told him, it seemed to have come from my father's side since my mother was healthy. He said that I had a fifty percent chance of survival. He however qualified that he was not a Nephrologist and that I should take an appointment with a Nephrologist and discuss this in detail. I nodded a faint yes and left.

On the way back, while driving in my fiat back home, the conversation with the Doctor just kept playing in my mind and I was just thinking about how much more time I had, to live. Although I have a cheerful disposition and it takes a lot to get me down I must say at that time I did feel quite depressed. I was wondering how I would break the news at home. After a lot of thought I decided against telling anyone at home about this whole episode. In fact I thought that when the doctor said that I had a fifty percent chance of survival, he did not say anything new. After all

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everyone at any moment in time can die for any reason whatsoever, so everyone has a fifty percent chance of survival. I also thought that doctors tend to be alarmist at times. Let me not think too much about what he said and let me lead my life normally as before. Hence within a few days I had put all negative thoughts to the background and all but forgotten about the incident. I also never went to the Nephrologist as advised. One thing I must mention here is that during those days, we did not have the Internet, so I was not in a position to do any independent research of my own and hence ignorance was bliss at least for the moment.

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Chapter 2: Living in Denial

Within a couple of months of the Executive Health checkup episode at the hospital, I had a high in my career and received some fabulous news. I was chosen by my company to head my function, Human Resources, in a new joint venture company of theirs in Satna in Madhya Pradesh. I was extremely excited about this and made all preparations for my transfer to this small city, which was located just around a hundred kilometers from the famous city of Khajuraho. Once I moved there I found the job extremely challenging and exciting. Also the company CEO to whom I had to report was one of the best bosses that I had in my entire career. Needless to say the next two years there were a dream and I went from one high to another doing extremely well for myself and winning many accolades from my company. I felt that I was mentally and physically in great form and the whole two years that I spent there flew by in no time.

It was the year 2000, when I decided to move on from my cushy job and take on some new challenges in a new company, that a seemingly exciting offer came my way from a leading chain of 5 star hotels in India. The role was to head the HR for their property in Agra. The job

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seemed exciting since the place had a huge Industrial Relations challenge and I had made that my area of expertise in the last 5 years of my career. So I readily accepted the offer. The job was challenging, though there were huge mental and physical pressures. Apart from my HR role, I was also expected to be the Duty Manager of the hotel at least thrice a month, a role shared by all heads of departments. This role required one to stay in the hotel after the normal day shift and be responsible as a supervisor for all activities of the hotel till the next morning when one did the normal day shift again. The role was extremely challenging but also a lot of fun as one got to interact with guests who came from all over the globe. It also meant handling all kinds of emergencies from fire alarms, angry guests, to medical emergencies. Hence there was an on call Doctor on our panel. He was a very friendly and nice chap with whom I used to frequently chat and have the evening tea. A couple of times that I decided to visit him in the Doctors room in our hotel, he insisted on checking my blood pressure. He was alarmed to see that it was always very high. Remembering, my tryst with the Doctors during my health check up in my last company, this was the last thing I wanted to discuss, and I quickly changed the topic and gave some excuse for the high BP. During the rest of my stint in this hotel, I made sure that he never

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checked my BP. My philosophy at that time was that the more I dwell on things like these, the more I would spoil my health.

However it was not long before I was forced to dwell on my health issue once again. My next job offer in the year 2001 was from a startup BPO in Delhi that was expected to grow on a very large scale and I was hired as one of the founding members of their HR team. After receiving the offer, I was expected to go for a pre-employment health check up. Though not as comprehensive as the previous one that I had undertaken when I had been diagnosed with my kidney disease, it still required both blood and urine tests apart from a BP checkup. Thankfully everything came normal, but when the doctor checked my BP, he again nodded his head gravely and rechecked. Then he looked at me and said that he was surprised that with such a high BP I was walking about. He said my BP was 160 / 110 and he could not give me the employment clearance unless I immediately started some BP medication that he prescribed and got my BP under control. So I decided to do the needful and for the first time in my life I started taking daily medication for BP. Thankfully it did come under control and I joined the company.

The job in this company was very different from what I had done till now and so was the

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profile of people that I dealt with. Till now in HR, I had mostly been in organizations with a large category of workmen, mostly male dominated and I had to face industrial relations issues, but this company and sector was different. 2001 was the year when BPOs were just about starting out in the country. The workforce was young and educated and had an equal gender ratio. Our firm was one of the initial starters and it was interesting to be part of a company that worked all through the day and night in three shifts. When I joined the company there were less than 200 employees but very soon we got a large contract and were required to hire around 1500 people in less than six months. I was given the task of leading this project and the job entailed my team meeting 100s of candidates each day, putting them through multiple tests and interviews. I not only designed and monitored the entire operations but also took all the final interviews. After the interviews finished for the day, my team made calls to candidates till 10 pm to line them up for the next day. Once the calls got over my team made the appointment letters for all hires that I was required to sign. By the time we wound up for the day, it would be between 12 midnight to 1 am. I used to go home, have a late dinner and then a short sleep before I was back in office by 9 am the next day. There were times when because of the deadlines, we continued with

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the interviews even on Sunday and so worked non-stop. Since all of us were young and the job was loads of fun, we did not even think twice before volunteering to do all this stretch. Off course it required tremendous energy and stamina and I must say, that irrespective of whatever underlying health issue I might have had, I never even once got the time to dwell on it, nor did I ever feel that anything was wrong with me health wise.

The hard work paid off rich dividends in terms of my career. I was given the Company's leadership Award and I rose to head the HR for a prestigious business unit in this rapidly growing company and shortly got an attractive offer from another competitor as a Vice President HR with a 100% hike in salary. Thankfully the next company did not have the pre employment health check up. Actually, the numbers hired in the BPO sector were so large and the shortfall of suitable candidates so high, that we very soon realized that not only was there not enough bandwidth to check on all medical reports but also that we were not competent enough to decide if a health issue that might crop up should be reason enough to drop an otherwise perfectly suitable candidate. We were just not competent to decide if it would affect the work that required to be done. Hence even the management of my previous company with a strong vote of support from

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me had decided to drop these tests after a while. It saved them a lot of money, since they realized that in this sector a large number of candidates after undergoing all tests and after collecting the offer, failed to join and hence the expenditure on their tests was anyway going waste.

The next two years, as a Vice President in this new startup BPO, I did quite well for myself managing to get a special increment from the company's president within six months of joining. I also managed to beat my previous records of stretch at work by working sometimes from 10 am in the morning till 3 am the next morning. While working here, someone in my family recommended that I should not neglect my health and that I should regularly show a doctor at least a local physician near our house just to keep a check on my BP.

The local physician that I had been recommended was a very nice South Indian lady in her fifties. Her clinic was in a ground floor flat near our locality where she saw patients every evening from 5 pm onwards. She did a good job and also charged quite less, hence there was always a huge crowd waiting at her house just before the clinic doors

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opened. When I met her for the first time I was wearing a T-shirt and Jeans and she thought that I was a college student. This has happened often with me and I was not surprised. I look much younger than my age and in my profession of HR it's a big disadvantage, as you need to put in much more effort to be taken seriously by employees especially when they happen to be workers in a factory.

She was very sympathetic when she heard that I suffered from ADPKD. However she told me not to think too much about it since she said that she had herself seen a patient who was in his late sixties who had come to her with some minor problems and had been diagnosed with ADPKD for the first time. Till then that person had not even known that he suffered from any health problems whatsoever. That was quite reassuring. She took my BP and it was 150 / 110. She started by prescribing me a small dose of Amcard 5 mg and over the next six months had to try out different medications in different doses before she hit on the combination that had any effect on controlling my BP. It was a combination of Eslo 2.5 mg and Losar H. I used to meet the Doctor every fortnight and got my BP checked. Not only was the fee nominal, she would even refuse to take money most of the time. Apparently, she did this with most patients and I often wondered

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that where in today's day and age could you find such a Doctor.

My job as a VP - HR was interesting, however when I got the next attractive offer for a Head - HR role by yet another foreign startup, I decided to skip it and instead put in all the hard work that I had been putting in other peoples organization's into creating a venture of my own where I would be my own boss. By now, I was also realizing that I needed to get a life of my own and stop being a complete workaholic. Probably the health issues also awakened me to the fact that I should not take good health for granted.

I started my own recruitment firm. I had the option of catering to all levels for hiring, but that would have meant more staff and a more exhausting role for me. Instead I decided to focus on the higher end of the spectrum, where with a few good employees I could work for some high-end companies catering to their middle and senior management recruitment needs. I could then have few closures but still make decent revenue with a lot less of physical labour and stress. Off course it needed more mental acumen and finesse.

I set up my first office from a bungalow in Saket and did quite well to start with. Within

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six months of starting my business I broke even and also developed an impressive client portfolio of large multinationals. In fact my huge network as a VP – HR came in quite handy. Although not all folks whom I knew earlier were helpful, only some were. In fact that was another insight into human personality. How people treat and behave differently when you hold an exalted corporate position and how they treat you when that chair is no longer there and they cannot expect to get much from you in return. I was glad I got to see this earlier in life. At a later stage, say post retirement if someone loses a senior position, it must be difficult to adjust when people who till the other day fawn all over you, suddenly turn indifferent.

During my setting up of the business phase, I continued to regularly visit the local Doctor for my BP checkups. She was quite impressed by my discipline. I maintained a detailed excel sheet of all my BP readings and medications prescribed during each visit. She told me that if I maintained this discipline I should have nothing to worry. She also asked me to get annual blood tests done especially to check on my kidney function. I used to go to a local lab near my house in Vasant Kunj. At this time I was quite anxious about these tests, not so much for the outcome but because of the fear of the needle and the sight of blood being

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taken out that made me all nervous and dizzy. In fact I used to carry a bottle of juice with me whenever I went for this test, as I felt quite weak after blood was drawn. Off course all this was all in the mind than anything else.

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