

PLAY IT AWAY



A WORKAHOLIC'S CURE FOR ANXIETY
CHARLIE HOEHN

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1

My Anxiety Story

For a long time, I thought I was going crazy. I'd convinced myself that something horribly wrong was about to happen. I thought I would be attacked or arrested every time I left my apartment.

I saw criminals and undercover cops everywhere I went. I was sure that there was an impending disaster that would melt the social contract and pit my neighbors against me. All that "world is coming to an end" talk? I believed it. And the only thing that made me feel safe was worrying.

Every moment was exhausting. I dreaded being around more than one person at a time. I eyed everyone like they were judging me, pitying me, or trying to manipulate me. My attention was constantly divided. One half of me pretended to be normal while the other half tried to keep it together. I could feel parts of my face twitching, like I was about to crack. My hands shook constantly. It got so bad that I couldn't drink a glass of water without spilling.

I tried to behave like nothing was wrong, when all I wanted was to lock myself in a room and curl up in a ball. I felt fragile, weak, and hollow. If someone had tapped me on the chest, my body would have shattered.

I didn't want to be around anyone – not because I stopped liking people; I just didn't want them to catch my weird energy. Everything felt forced and fake and exhausting. If someone experienced something great, I didn't

care. If someone went through something horrible, I didn't care. If a friend wanted to go to the movies, I'd say, "Yeah, let's do that," but felt like they were trying to drain the little bit of life I had left.

I didn't have thoughts of *I want to kill myself*, but I did think *I want this to be done*. There was no meaning, purpose, joy, excitement, stimulation, or sex drive. I wearily watched my girlfriend cry after I confided that I felt dead inside, all the time, and didn't know how to fix it.

I was ashamed, because I couldn't explain it without feeling like a failure. How could I possibly be so miserable and unhappy? What right did I have to feel this way? Couldn't I just tough it out?

I laid on the ground in the fetal position for 20 minutes one night, wondering whether I should call an ambulance. My heart was beating so hard and fast that I could actually hear it, and my left hand was going numb. It was my first panic attack. I closed my eyes and trembled as two deafening thoughts played on loop in my mind:

You are going crazy.

You are going to die.

There's no 'I' in anxiety. Wait. Yes there is.

Oh my god oh my god oh my god.

— ELIZA BAYNE

My anxiety lasted for more than a year. It affected how I breathed, how I thought, how I ate, how I slept, and how I talked. I was serious and tired and afraid, all the time. I wanted so badly to return to my normal, lively, carefree self. But I had no idea how to shake it.

I scheduled an appointment with my doctor. I told her about the panic attacks, and explained the inner turmoil I was battling. She suggested that I get an EKG at the hospital, just to make sure my heart was okay. Then she gave me a prescription for a pill she described as “a non-addictive version of Xanax.” She said it would help me sleep, and that I’d feel better in a few days.

I couldn’t believe it. I practically skipped home, clutching the little orange bottle to my chest. I finally had an escape hatch from my relentless tension and fear.

Just as I was about to take one of the pills, I decided to look up the brand on Wikipedia. My heart sunk as I read the warnings listed on the page:

High addictive potential...

Withdrawal symptoms can range from anxiety and insomnia to seizures and psychosis...

Great. Instead of suffering from anxiety, I can become a psychotic-epileptic-insomniac junkie...who *still* suffers from anxiety.

I read through dozens of blog posts and forum discussions about the drug. Nearly everyone said it stopped working after the first week. I couldn’t find a single testimonial of this pill curing anyone’s anxiety.

I took the little orange bottle to my bathroom and reluctantly flushed all 30 pills down the toilet.

I was extremely discouraged, but my desperation to cure myself was stronger than ever. I spent the next several months trying to conquer my inner demons. I researched and tried *everything*...

- Meditation
- Deep breathing exercises
- Yoga
- Journaling
- Therapy
- Therapy books
- Aromatherapy
- Acupuncture
- Massages
- Floatation tanks
- Chiropractors
- Naturopaths
- Spiritual healers
- Volunteering
- High-intensity workouts
- Long runs
- Super clean diets
- Supplements
- Psychedelics
- Extended fasting
- Prayer

I even took a six-week course made specifically for men who wanted to

overcome anxiety.

A few of these things helped, but most of them didn't. Some of them made things worse.

Then one day, it happened. I discovered the cure for my anxiety. It took me a moment to fully comprehend it, but when my mind processed that I'd found the solution, I started laughing. The answer had been so obvious all along.

In less than one month, I was back to my old self. I woke up one day and nearly overlooked how great I felt. My anxiety subsided so steadily that I no longer noticed it. Just like that, it was gone. I was free.

The process for healing myself was fun, painless, and immediately effective. I have no fear that those awful feelings will ever return. If they do, I'll be able to wipe them out right away.¹

¹ If you'd like to watch a quick video summary of my cure and the contents of this book, visit playitaway.me/video.

2

Why I Wrote This Book

In May of 2013, I wrote a lengthy essay called *How I Cured My Anxiety* and published it on my blog, CharlieHoehn.com. I didn't have a huge audience, but I suspected the message would strike a chord with my readers. It did.

Within two weeks, the post was read and shared by tens of thousands of people. I received hundreds of messages from anxiety sufferers all over the world. The post was so popular that it shot up to the #1 position on Google for the search phrase "cure anxiety" – right above Oprah.com.

My post was honest, but it was incomplete. It didn't contain everything that helped me; only my first major breakthrough. I wanted to share all of the techniques that put my life back on track and healed my pain. That's the book you're reading right now.

I wrote *Play It Away* because I couldn't find anything like it when I was searching for my cure. That's the point of this book: to create for other people what I wished had existed. I was so jaded after trying all these different things that never seemed to help. Then a few key pieces clicked into place, and I was back to normal. And at the risk of sounding like a late-night infomercial, the cure for my anxiety was so much easier than I imagined.

It's my sincerest hope that, by sharing my entire story, you too will find

your way back to health and happiness. But before we continue, I need to lay down a quick disclaimer. Just so there's no confusion, please understand:

I am not a health care professional, and while a lot of these chapters contain actionable advice that you can use in your life, **this book is about MY experiences curing MY anxiety**. What I did might work for you, or it might not. You need to figure that out for yourself by using your own judgment, not just by blindly following my advice (or anyone's advice, really).²

In order to properly treat anxiety, one must identify and fix what is causing it. The primary source of my anxiety was me. I was the creator of my own suffering. I just couldn't see it.

² The methods I used to heal my anxiety are backed up by a lot of data and scientific research. I won't weigh you down with those details in the text because that's not what this book is about. However, if you want to double-check the validity of any of my techniques, just visit playitaway.me/endnotes.

3

My Workaholic Story

If you work for a living, why do you kill yourself working?

— THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

My brain felt swollen, like it was pushing against my skull. I looked down at my iPhone. Good lord. 60 hours straight. Wide awake, no sleep, for 60 hours straight. Yet I was still lively and sharp, thanks to the magic pill.

For four days, I'd supercharged my energy with a powerful nootropic; a brain drug typically reserved for fighter pilots and narcoleptics. If you've seen the movie *Limitless*, well, that pill actually exists. The drug's primary function is to silence the body's pleas for sleep. Lucky for me. Rest was a luxury I couldn't afford.

I'd secretly taken this brain drug, without my boss knowing, so I could be great at my job. I was in charge of coordinating the *Opening the Kimono* event — a private conference on next-generation content marketing, hosted by Tim Ferriss.

Most people knew Tim as the author of two mega-bestselling books: *The 4-Hour Workweek* and *The 4-Hour Body*. The driving themes of Tim's work were effectiveness and efficiency — getting better results, in less time, with less effort. In *The 4HWW*, Tim gave readers step-by-step blueprints for creating online businesses, generating passive income,

outsourcing work, and taking mini-retirements. In *The 4HB*, Tim revealed how to lose 20 pounds of fat in one month (without exercise), how to triple fat loss with cold exposure, and how to produce 15-minute female orgasms. Both books sold more than a million copies each, and Tim was a star in the publishing world.

In addition to being a bestselling author, Tim was also a successful angel investor and advisor (his portfolio included Facebook, Twitter, Uber, Evernote, and many others). He was also — and I'm not exaggerating — a Chinese kickboxing champion, a horseback archer, a world record holder in tango, and a polyglot (fluent in five languages). The man was the embodiment of achievement, and I was lucky enough to have him as my mentor.

I'd been working with Tim for nearly three years as his Director of Special Projects. It was a dream job I'd worked hard to land, and I'd reaped countless benefits. In the time we'd known each other, he'd personally introduced me to his entire network of successful friends, given me a world-class education in entrepreneurship, and helped build my portfolio into an expansive showcase of incredible work.

I was 25 years old at the time, living in Russian Hill in San Francisco. Each morning, I'd walk over to my neighborhood café, sit down with my laptop, and work until nightfall on my weekly tasks. Whenever I finished a given job, I'd ask Tim for more work. Things multiplied quickly, and I soon had a plethora of responsibilities: assistant, researcher, editor, marketer, videographer, photographer, customer service, project manager... And now, I was his conference coordinator. *Opening The Kimono* was my biggest challenge to date.

More than 130 authors and entrepreneurs, from all over the world, paid \$10,000 apiece for admission to Tim's conference. And while I was confident we would successfully make it through this four-day event, I was also completely overwhelmed by the complexity of the task. There were so many moving parts.

I was terrified of screwing up. If something went wrong, I would need to fix it with superhuman speed. Somehow, I had to stay awake for the entire event...

And so, in my desperation, I visited an overseas pharmaceutical website, where I ordered the most powerful brain drug on the market.

The pills arrived just before the event. I took one every morning. Each day, I expected to pass out randomly from exhaustion. But it never happened; I stayed alert and wide-awake the whole time. The pills really, really worked. During the course of the four-day seminar, I slept a grand total of *six hours*. And just as I'd hoped, I was great at my job.

The event was a whirlwind, but we managed to pull it off. On the final day, everyone gave us a standing ovation. Attendees ran up to hug us and said it was the best conference they'd ever been to. Our inboxes were filled with dozens of glowing reviews and thank you notes.



WITH TIM FERRISS

I was in shock. After months of working around the clock, we'd exceeded all expectations, including our own. Tim gave me a hearty congratulations, and said he was amazed how well we'd done.

I was proud, happy, and very tired when I arrived back home. But later that night, my body started sending out emergency signals, warning me that something horribly wrong was happening.

My heart was racing. My vision was blurred. I had a pounding headache that wouldn't stop. Sounds drifted sluggishly into my ears, and I could barely stand upright.

For the first time in my life, I felt completely and utterly burned out.

A few days later, I went back to work. We were just getting started on our next big project: *The 4-Hour Chef*.

Two years prior, I helped Tim edit and launch his second book, *The 4-Hour Body*. I was immensely proud to have played a part in the book's success; it was the pinnacle of my career. On the other hand, *The 4-Hour Body* had been the most stressful undertaking of my life. Tim and I half-joked that the book nearly killed us. I was very hesitant to jump in for round two.

Tim offered to double my salary if I helped him complete *The 4-Hour Chef*. It was a generous offer, and I was immediately interested in taking it. I'd be making more money than I'd know what to do with, and I'd have another cool achievement under my belt. What did I have to lose? After a

moment's pause, we shook on it.

I felt incredibly fortunate to be in that position, especially since so many people I knew were either unemployed or working in jobs they hated. My family and friends all congratulated me. From a distance, things looked great.

But on the inside, I was flailing. I'd completely lost balance, and I couldn't even recognize that I was destroying myself.

You see, I liked to think of myself as busy and important, so I was tethered to the internet seven days a week. I communicated with people primarily through screens. I spent all day long sitting indoors. I drank coffee all week, and drank alcohol all weekend. I only stopped working when I was sleeping. And then I stopped sleeping.

I just couldn't stop myself from working all the time. It didn't matter what else was going on in my life; work was everything. No one seemed to mind, because practically everyone around me behaved the same way. All of my friends and colleagues were workaholics. Several buddies of mine were pulling 16-hour workdays. My friend in medical school was popping Adderall like it was candy. All of us were destroying ourselves during the week, and punishing our livers on the weekend. We didn't take vacations. We didn't take breaks. Work was life.

Here's the thing: I was a workaholic long before I met Tim. I'd always stayed up late. I'd always spent hours at a time staring at screens. The difference now was that my state of mind had changed. I took my work very seriously. And because my entire life revolved around work, life stopped being fun.

Each week, I felt increasingly sick, exhausted, and apathetic. My eyes sunk back and grew dark circles beneath them. My forehead developed thick stress lines. My hands started shaking. I felt like I was always on the verge of crying. I didn't understand what was wrong with me, so I just tried to work my way through it.

Then the deadline for *The 4-Hour Chef* got pushed back three months.

Then a family member died.

Then my close friend attempted suicide.

When Tim and I met up for dinner the following week, I told him very meekly:

"I can't do this anymore. I have to quit."

Tim didn't argue with me. He understood where I was coming from, and offered his support in whatever I was going to do next. It was a relief to part on amicable terms, but I felt weaker than ever. I was already feeling the pressure to get back to work, but what would I do? My identity was gone. I decided to take a couple weeks off. Then another week... And another...

I spent the next two months being unemployed and feeling awful. Every day, I'd go through the motions of my old work routine without actually doing anything. I compulsively checked email all day long, stayed up until 4:00 AM, and slept a few hours each night. I received a handful of job

offers and turned them all down, recoiling at the thought of having to go back to work.

The worst part was the guilt. I felt enormously guilty every second I wasn't doing something that could advance my career or earn money. I would pace around like a neurotic rat, coming up with random chores to distract myself. When the chores were finished, I'd think, "Okay... Now what?" Any activity that didn't feel productive – sleeping in, watching TV, taking a trip – filled me with regret. There was this gnawing sense that I was wasting time. I was losing money. And yet, I had no desire to work.

I started wondering if I'd screwed up my life very badly. *Hadn't I been living The Dream? Did I just throw away everything I'd worked for?* I started feeling very anxious. I wanted to do something big, to reinvent my career, to make a name for myself so I could be successful. What that something would be, I didn't know.

Then one day, two of my friends, Chad Mureta (whom I'd met at the *Kimono* event) and Jason Adams, suggested that we start a mobile app company together. They were both sharp entrepreneurs and savvy marketers, and Chad was already making millions from the apps he'd developed.

Finally, I thought, *here's a job that makes sense*. I could be one of the founders of a cool tech startup, working on fun projects with my smart friends, in one of the most exciting industries on the planet. The Draw Something app had recently been acquired for \$250 million, then Facebook acquired Instagram for \$1 billion. I thought, *This gig might make me a millionaire by the end of the year! This is it...*



INTERVIEWING CHAD MURETA

I was so relieved to feel productive again. I strolled into the office each day to work on my laptop until late in the evening. I sat down, stared at my computer screen for several hours, and drank coffee. When I got home, I worked on my laptop until 4:00 AM, slept for a few hours, then started all over again.

We spent the first month putting together an online course called *App Empire*, which walked people through the entire process of starting their own app business. It required many sleepless nights to get it finished on time, but we managed to pull it off.



The launch of the course was a success, raking in \$2 million dollars in revenue over the course of 10 days.³ We spent the next two months doing weekly webinars, walking customers through each lesson and answering

their questions. In our spare time, we worked on our app ideas.

At some point in the third month, I realized: *I didn't care about apps*. I knew how to make them, and I knew how to succeed in the app market, but I just didn't care. I didn't really use apps and I never got excited about them. I asked myself, *Why am I really doing this work?* Well, the job gave me an excuse to hang out with my friends during the day, rather than being holed up alone in my apartment. But that was only a small part of it. The honest answer was:

Status. Money. Guilt.

I wanted to impress other people with my “success” of founding a company. I wanted to be rich. And I wanted to avoid feeling bad for not working.

The problem was... I didn't really care about what I was doing. There was this weird disconnect, like apps should have been the natural progression in my career. But it just never felt right. It felt forced.

I quit my job that week.

Once again, I experienced “success” and walked away from it. Only this time, I was riddled with anxiety.

I started to think I was going to be punished for not being productive, for not making money, for not having my life figured out. I didn't know how or when, but I was certain it was going to happen. Everything was coming to a head. It was only a matter of time before something really bad happened...

I was in a bad place for a long time after I quit those jobs. I didn't have a life or identity outside of my career, so I had nothing to fall back on. I was too scared and proud to reach out to anyone for help, so I bottled my feelings up and stumbled around for the next year. It was the worst I've ever felt in my life.

It'd be very easy for me to manufacture a villain in this story. I could tell you that I was pushed too hard, or that no one cared about how I felt. But that's not the truth. I was the one who chose to stay up until 4:00AM. I was the one pouring caffeine down my throat every hour. I was the one who secretly ordered brain pills. I was the one who isolated myself from friends and kept my feelings hidden. Everything I did that fueled my anxiety was my choice.

The truth is that all of my emotional issues would have unfolded for me at some point in my life, regardless of whom I was working with. I was the creator of my own anxiety, and I was the one who broke myself with my workaholic habits. I just didn't recognize how destructive my behavior was because I thought it was normal.

I wish someone had held up a mirror to show me I was the problem, but that never happened. No one knew the full extent of my situation but me, and I was in denial. It's worth taking a moment to ask yourself:

- Do I feel guilty or anxious when I'm not working?
- Have I stopped playing with my friends?