**My Founder Story: Aneela Kumar, HabitAware**

“Where are your eyebrows?” Aneela Kumar froze. Since her early teens, she had soothed her anxiety and OCD-like tendencies through hair pulling—a condition called trichotillomania. For Aneela, it manifested in picking at her eyebrows and eyelashes. For years, she’d been good at hiding her condition from family and friends—balancing out where she picked to make it less noticeable. But hormonal changes after the birth of her first child had exacerbated her pulling behaviors, and for the first time, she had someone it was harder to hide it from—her husband, Sameer.

When Aneela’s husband asked her that question, she felt a wave of fear *and* relief. She was tired of hiding—of not feeling truly known by anyone in her life because of the secret she kept. Aneela told Sameer about her trichotillomania, and they started doing more research together about the condition.

One night while watching TV together on the couch, Aneela unconsciously put her hand to her face to begin picking. Sameer gently grabbed Aneela’s hand, and a light bulb went off. When Sameer brought awareness to Aneela’s behavior, it was much easier not to pick. What if she could have that awareness all the time, and help others with similar conditions have that awareness, too?

Up until that time, Aneela had pursued several disparate career paths, staring with accounting. She studied it during high school when her father was battling cancer, ultimately passing away her senior year. Unlike life, accounting was black and white. Right or wrong. The balancing of numbers was calming to Aneela, helping to soothe the stress of her father’s illness and the anxiety she felt.

Aneela pursued accounting as a career, working in audit for a major international accounting firm. She enjoyed the work but never felt truly happy or fulfilled. When the parent of a close friend died at the same time Aneela was going through a difficult ending to a romantic relationship, it triggered something inside of her. The raw pain of losing her dad came rushing back, and she knew she needed to step away from her job and take some time off to heal.

After some soul searching during that time, Aneela decided to go back to school for advertising. While very different from accounting, when she reflected on her childhood and early adult life, Aneela realized the things that made her happy were always related to the arts: scrapbooking, creating the program for the Indian talent show at her school, serving as the editor and graphic designer for her college’s literary magazine.

Aneela spend nearly a decade in her new career, working in account management, design and production for several large marketing and advertising agencies. During that time, she moved to Minnesota with Sameer, started a family, and started dreaming of creating her own companies. The day Sameer grabbed Aneela’s arm and she had the idea to bring more awareness to herself and others, it all came together: the idea that Aneela could help herself and others, finding more meaning than she had in either her accounting or advertising careers. The idea that she could use her varied background in accounting and advertising to help her run a business of her own.

Aneela and Sameer started researching the potential for a bracelet that people with body-focused repetitive behaviors (which also include skin picking, nail biting and more) could wear. They connected with people in the Twin Cities technical community who could help them bring their idea to life. They traveled to Shenzhen, China, for three months to learn about manufacturing. They attended health care industry conferences and talked to psychologists and end users about what they needed. While it wasn’t always easy, Aneela could see the excitement from others in her idea. Health care professionals told her this was sorely needed by their patients. So, Aneela kept going.

In 2017, Aneela launched HabitAware and its Keen smart bracelet, which senses its owner’s behavior and sends a gentle vibration to bring awareness to their actions. Just a few short years later, Aneela’s product is helping tens of thousands of people—herself included. Today, she no longer needs to rely on the bracelet to avoid hair pulling. Aneela used the product, combined with a great therapist and some new coping techniques, to help retrain her brain. Today, Aneela is 90% free of pulling.

Aneela is on a mission to help even more people through HabitAware—not just with her product, but by increasing awareness about body-focused repetitive behaviors, helping people build a new relationship with those behaviors, and advocating for others to respond with compassion. Her efforts have been recognized by the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, both of which have given HabitAware research grants to develop further solutions to help others increase their awareness of behaviors that don’t serve their physical or mental health.

While it took several chapters in her career to reach this place, Aneela feels like she’s finally arrived. She speaks publicly about the freedom she’s gained by releasing a secret she carried for decades—a secret that she now realizes was weighing her down, preventing her from getting fulfillment from her work and from helping others.