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After Recovering from Severe Brain Bleed During a Workout, L.A. Man Celebrates Becoming New Dad (Exclusive)

"It takes my breath away thinking about raising them," Chinna Balachandran says of his twin girls

By Susan Young | Published on June 17, 2024 12:00PM EDT



Chinna Balachandran (left) holding daughter Maya with wife Erica Wendel holding daughter Anjali. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHINNA BALACHANDRAN AND ERICA WENDEL

- Chinna Balachandran, 35, is looking back at a harrowing injury during a boxing workout in 2019
He tells PEOPLE that he once thought he wouldn't recover enough to build the life he now has, with a wife and kids
"I have this newfound appreciation for life that makes fatherhood feel so much more special," he says

Chinna Balachandran says the life he had five years ago ceased to exist after he almost died from a head blow during a boxing workout — leaving him with a severe brain bleed and major physical and psychological complications.

"For a while I thought this is what my [new] life is going to be: in pain, on a bed, taking pills while waiting to die," Balachandran, 35, tells PEOPLE in an exclusive interview. "All I knew was that I was blessed to be surrounded by my parents and [my partner] Erica. But having kids, going back to work, none of that seemed possible."

Until it did: Balachandran spent years regaining his physical and emotional health, relearning crucial skills like how to walk and how to even move his eyes without issue.

It was hard on him and his new family. But not impossible.

"Just because I'm not the person I was before, it doesn't mean that I'm necessarily worse off. It's just different," Balachandran says. "And that's the same message I hope to convey to other survivors."

He is now the proud father of twin girls, Maya and Anjali, born in December. He married Erica Wendel, 36, in September 2021 and was able to return to work as a psychologist at a Los Angeles psychiatric hospital for teens.



Chinna Balachandran in the hospital after his surgery. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHINNA BALACHANDRAN AND ERICA WENDEL

"The version of me before the injury is just dead. But who I am now is still living shades of that old me's life," Balachandran, who chronicled his journey on his Instagram account, admits. "I'm going to be figuring out my new normal for the rest of my life."

Wife Wendel, a University of Southern California psychiatry professor, says "recovery was really hard on our relationship"; "In addition to the physical aspects of recovery there were things around emotional regulation. He was really quick to get sad or angry and it took a while to figure that out."

But now Balachandran, whom his wife affectionately calls "Chin," has a "new lease on life and an appreciation for life the other one didn't," Wendel says. "He's overwhelmed with gratitude to be alive."



Twins Anjali, left in pink, and Maya in yellow on right. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHINNA BALACHANDRAN AND ERICA WENDEL

Becoming parents was healing in its own way, despite the struggles.

The couple, who first met while students at the University of Texas at Austin, tried repeatedly to have children after they were married, with Wendel having several miscarriages before getting pregnant last year with their twins.

"I think the amount of time that passed between the injury and us actually having the babies allowed Chin to heal in some really important ways," she says.

A '30-40% chance of dying'

When Balachandran was first injured during his workout in 2019, he didn't have an immediate reaction to the punch. He knew he took a good hit — but he was still able to walk out of the gym on his own.

It was only about 90 minutes later after he drove home that he began to have symptoms, he says.

"I'm seeing dark circles out of both my eyes, I'm losing the ability to move the left side of my body, losing the ability to speak," Balachandran recalls. "I collapsed, but was able to signal Erica who was home and she called 911."

Balachandran was rushed to the hospital at UCLA, where doctors removed the entire right side of his skull to relieve the pressure on his swelling brain.

"If you come in with a brain bleed like this, you have a 30-40% chance of either dying or ending up in a persistent vegetative state," his neurosurgeon Dr. Isaac Yang tells PEOPLE.

Balachandran not only survived, he pushed himself to recover as much of his previous capacity as he could, learning again how to sit up, how to walk and how to move his eyes without experiencing violent seizures.

During his dogged training program and physical therapy, Balachandran decided to compete on American Ninja Warrior, where athletes test themselves to complete an obstacle course.

Balachandran was featured in his qualifying runs in seasons 12-14 of the series airing in 2020-2022.

"I was able to do something that was honoring the broken version of me in a hospital bed wondering if I would even be able to bathe myself any more," he says.



Chinna Balachandran, center, on the set of American Ninja Warrior. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHINNA BALACHANDRAN AND ERICA WENDEL

Yang says that about a third to a half of his patients don't survive, and those who survive don't come back 100%.

"I never say anyone gets to go back to being completely normal," he says, citing motor and sensory issues, including balance. "But I think [Balachandran] is one of the most remarkable recoveries I've seen in 20 years."

The ultimate high point for Balachandran was when he and his wife finally had their twins and the joy he finds every day in caring for them.

"I'm remembering how close we were to having missed all of this, and I have this newfound appreciation for life that makes fatherhood feel so much more special," he says. "It takes my breath away thinking about raising them. It's the ultimate blessing."

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