



Excerpt from *Mind Your Life: How Mindfulness Can Build Resilience
and Reveal Your Extraordinary* by Meg Salter

Stories of Ordinary Heroes

MINDFULNESS MEANS learning to pay attention to what’s happening in the present moment in the mind, body and external environment, with an attitude of curiosity and kindness. It sounds simple, doesn’t it? At later stages, it is. But at first, it may not be easy. In my experience, and that of many mindfulness teachers, about one in ten people who takes a mindfulness course continues practising on a regular basis. A recent study confirmed this. One year after taking a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course, ten percent of participants were regularly doing formal practices like breath meditation or body scans, although a larger proportion were practising informally during the day. Why is there so little take-up?

Developing mindful awareness means going against our built-in mental attentional patterns and what’s known as our brain’s “default attentional network.” Mindful awareness can

feel counterintuitive, like trying to float a boat upstream. My coaching training and experience tells me that, like any new habit, developing a sustainable mindfulness practice involves a small but significant behaviour change. Engineering this change involves several factors. These include the degree of stress or challenge we are coping with, the vision we have of what is possible (is our vision inspiring yet realistic?), the range of practical techniques we understand and can implement and the experience of positive rewards for our efforts.

Despite the challenges, many people *do* manage to make it work. Let's investigate these positive role models, people who have practised mindfulness and integrated it into their lives in a sustainable way. Each has been practising meditation for at least three years, some for up to forty years. They come from all walks and stages of life, from the recently graduated to the recently retired, from government employees to entrepreneurs. They include a teacher, a legal secretary, a psychologist, a doctor, academics, writers, corporate executives and a massage therapist. None of them is rich or famous.

They all had to find their own way in to navigating the learning curve. They started, stopped then restarted practice. They varied their mindfulness techniques. They found helpful supports for their practice. They found ways to integrate practice into their day. They developed a more nuanced expectation of what is involved and how long it may take to change your brain. They made a point of noticing small but permanent changes in their lives. They came to enjoy daily practice.

Through finding ways to consistently practise and apply mindfulness skills, these ordinary individuals have achieved extraordinary lives. Theirs are stories of struggle and adaptation, of resilience in the face of challenge leading to unexpected flourishing. I asked them how they got started and continued, what

the impact on their lives has been and what advice they would give to you. I'd like you to meet one of these people, James.

James: Coping with Compassion Fatigue

James is an emergency physician who has explored the world. As a young man travelling around Asia, he was attracted to Buddhist philosophy, so he started practising meditation on his own, using the breath-counting method. He had some deep experiences, felt very close to God and knew that in some profound way his life had shifted. But then it was back to the hectic life of a medical resident, living at the hospital, working all hours. He and a colleague used to encourage each other to find the time to meditate, but in this environment it was hard to do. After a move to another city, his meditation practice pretty much disappeared.

Then, in 2007, James set out for a six-month stint with Doctors Without Borders, a global medical and humanitarian relief organization, in the contested border town of Abyei, Sudan. He spent his days treating malnourished children, coping with a measles epidemic and watching for war. Worn thin by the struggle to meet overwhelming needs with few resources, he returned home more affected by the experience than he had anticipated. He wrote of his experiences in *Six Months in Sudan*.

How did you get started again in meditation?

“This time, I had a specific reason for practice. A friend asked me, ‘How are you going to stay close to your original intention in writing this book, without getting distracted by all the attention you will get?’ Having a meditation practice helped me to tell the story as nakedly as possible, to stay in touch with my commitment to humanitarian work.

“In 2011, when I worked again for Doctors Without Borders, this time in Somalia, I wanted to see if I could go through the experience and not be so sickened by it. So I meditated every day, twice a day. There are very few moments of quiet in a refugee camp. I took one hour before breakfast for meditation and yoga, then tried to fit in more time later in the morning, before it got really hot and busy. By this time, I was using some of the Unified Mindfulness methods. Mindfulness enabled me to be more effective in a way that didn’t diminish my competence or my compassion. It allowed me not to get used up all the time. There’s such a wellspring of strength and vulnerability once you’re able to work from that place. I was able to mourn deeply, then leave the mission with none of the prior regrets I’d carried out with me from Sudan.

“As an emergency room doctor, I meditate every day in the morning. First, I have to caffeinate myself, then I’ll spend from twenty to forty minutes using a variety of meditation methods. My wife and I meditate together, so I really enjoy that. But the big difference has been mindful moments throughout the day. This could be while walking down the hallway to a patient’s room or preparing myself for the difficult conversations that are an inevitable part of emergency medicine.”

What has been the impact on your life?

“I can’t imagine a greater opportunity that one could miss than an opportunity to be really clear in every moment of your life. People talk about doctors getting hardened, cold or detached. But I find I’m able to be more loving and forgiving of myself and others. I’m less bummed out by the suffering, even though I see lots of it. There’s a humility that comes from touching beyond the knowing mind; we realize how much we’ll never know, how ephemeral our experiences are.”

What advice would you give to others?

“Like anything where you want to make progress, mindfulness requires a commitment of time and effort. The outcomes may not be an instant difference for everyone. You have to learn to be okay with that. Equanimity is part of everyone’s practice, at one point or another. Try to sit for at least a little bit every day. Find a teacher who speaks to you, or a community of support. Actively try to detect little changes in your life, not just in you but in how people respond to you. Are there things that you used to find challenging where you now experience a little more ease? Perhaps you’re not as freaked out as usual? Then hold that direction. If you experience some quiet during meditation, then fall into it. You have to keep creating opportunities to cultivate new neural pathways. But ultimately the goal is not some special state but to become a person who consistently demonstrates admirable behaviour.”

Dr. James Maskalyk has recently published *Life on the Ground Floor: Letters from the Edge of Emergency Medicine* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2017).

See *Mind Your Life* for more stories of ordinary heroes and a practical guide to cultivating a sustainable mindfulness practice. Combining Integral Coaching® techniques with Shinzen Young’s Unified Mindfulness System, *Mind Your Life* offers essential tips for inviting more attention into your day, from the boardroom to your commute and at the dinner table. Learn how to incorporate attentional skills into your daily life and customize a path that suits your style and schedule.

See www.megsalter.com for more information.