

# OUTDOOR MINDSET: WHY I RISK TO BE FREE

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I grew up in the outdoors of Northland. As I was finding my way in the world; Scouts, mountain biking and getting into the outdoors gave me a positive focus. Before I was 21, I had bungee jumped, sky dived, learnt to dive, caught an 89kg marlin, learnt to fly a plane and sailed from Tauranga to Brisbane. Back in NZ, I worked as a chef and ended up in Christchurch. I was working very hard with no gains and started to question my purpose in life.

This led to some soul searching. I knew the outdoors was calling me, so I signed up to CPIT (now Ara) for the Certificate in Outdoor Education, class of 2004. By 2006 I'd gained two diplomas. I knew I was in the right place and it felt very satisfying to have found my crew, these people got me.

I worked for lots of companies around NZ and overseas and met people with diverse instructing styles. It made me question why I was in the outdoors and think about who I wanted to be. I liked the hard skills and I needed these to be safe, but it was the soft skills that gave me a sense of satisfaction. Pushing myself was great, but I needed it to be balanced with good company in a beautiful place, or having the time to watch the sun go down from the crag, or paddling an easy run and having a laugh. This flowed into my instructing and I learnt that making a positive difference in people's lives was important to me. As I worked and gained more experiences I got my NZOIA Rock 1, Flatwater Kayak, Canoe 1 and Bush 1.

I was working at OPC (now Hillary Outdoors) as an instructor when the Mangatepopo Accident happened on 15th April 2009. This shook my beliefs to the core and challenged me in many ways. Despite what happened, it also confirmed that I loved the outdoors and all that it offers. I am very grateful for the support that the outdoor industry gave OPC and its staff at this challenging time.

In October 2010, I moved to Christchurch and got a job as an instructor, and later as the Outdoors Manager at Living Springs. Then the February 2011 earthquake happened; this was another life changing experience as many of you know.

My main point of action from these experiences, was to start writing a book. Two other practical things that helped me process was spending time in the outdoors and creating my own personal values; I got a tattoo representing these. My book is called "To Risk to Be Free" and is about my life and the challenges I have had, what I learnt and how I have healed. If you would like to know more about this you can find me on fb; <https://www.facebook.com/To-Risk-to-Be-Free-with-Rosalind-Potter>

At the end of 2011, I was offered a job at Dilworth, starting the Rural Campus. I loved my job and the challenge of starting an outdoor school from scratch. I was just about to sit my Sea Kayak 1 when I found out I was pregnant. I took a year of maternity leave and then resigned because being a mum was important to me. This felt like I'd lost my career and I realised how much my identity was tied to my job, I was determined to stay in the industry.

My Bush 1 was up for revalidation, I tried multiple times to get onto a refresher but it didn't line up. I then realised that I was going to lose all my qualifications due to the new revalidation system. I had worked so hard to get these qualifications and it felt wrong to have to choose between being a full-time mum and losing my qualifications.

I then had my second child and any thoughts of keeping qualifications went out the window. I felt frustrated about this so started a fb group called [Outdoor Educator Mums](#). We were amongst the first wave of mums to go through the new revalidation system; mums losing qualifications were an unforeseen implication of it, and it was also affecting those with injuries. I soon realised quite a few of the 90+ mums in the group were finding the system hard to navigate. Some had made it work and revalidated their qualifications but the more qualifications you had, the harder it was to keep on top of them all. I needed to be the voice, because if someone didn't stand up for all these amazing ladies, their knowledge would be lost from the industry.

As you know the NZOIA qualifications hold a lot of mana and are hard work to get. I started asking questions and trying to figure out how to make positive change. I was invited by NZOIA, to be part of the Revalidation Review group, who had also noticed the issues members were facing and were keen to ensure the system was fit for purpose. I said "yes, I would love to do that". One of the outcomes from the review was that your NZOIA qualification is with you for life. It felt so good to go back to the ladies in the group and say they wouldn't lose their qualifications if they were unable to revalidate; they would become unregistered instead. Revalidation was pushed out to four years instead of three and putting qualifications on hold was extended to six years. If they wished to re-register their qualification in the future, they had more time to do so and the option of attending a recognition of current competency assessment once back up to scratch. This was the positive result we were after.

We (my husband and kids) moved back to Christchurch and in 2019 and I crashed my car. I don't remember any of the crash and I am unsure if I got knocked out or something happened before I crashed. I got moderate concussion and whiplash and was very lucky to not do more damage.

In September that year I had my first witnessed absent seizure, then I had a few more and got a referred to Neurology. I had multiple tests but they could not find anything substantial. I was diagnosed with epilepsy and was told I was not allowed to drive. My world was again turned upside down and it all felt like a big joke – really life; do I need to learn more?! Not driving would be a challenge and being a mum to two kids under six added another layer of complication. I had to admit I had a disability; this was way outside my comfort zone and very hard. But it did allow me to get funding to buy an electric cargo bike to transport me and the kids around that we named Ninja.



The outdoors now seemed impossible, after the diagnosis appointment I had a steep learning curve about epilepsy as all I knew was from my PHEC course and that didn't quite cut it! My comfort zone went from kayaking white water to fearing a bath, from climbing multi-pitch trad climbs to fearing the stairs in my house and from taking my kids into the outdoors to be scared to be home alone with them let alone getting them to school and crossing roads.

I was deeply grieving the loss of the outdoors and I felt alone again. I was determined to get back out there, occasionally I found friends to go with but there was still a big gap. I wrote myself an epilepsy management plan which gave me confidence to start growing my comfort zone. I got out mountain biking and tramping and camping with family and friends, this felt like a massive mountain that I had climbed in my head. I started working with a health coach, I changed some habits and my mind-set from "I have epilepsy for life" to "I can heal and get back into the outdoors."

I found a podcast which I loved listening to called "Seize your Adventure" by Fran Turauskis who lives in the UK. It gave me hope at the right time. This then led me to an American group called Outdoor Mindset, an outdoor focused community for people affected by neurological challenges. It was exactly what I was looking for. Their values line up with mine; the positive power of the outdoors and community, enhancing quality of life and inspiring people to live their best life.

I felt disappointed that I needed this in NZ! I joined the Outdoor Mindset Community and soon realised they were keen to become a worldwide organisation. I became a NZ Ambassador and I am very excited to be representing this group here. Now we need the most important thing and that is you! More NZ folks joining the OM Community makes our group stronger. He tangata, he tangata, he tangata, it is the people, it is the people, it is the people.

If you would like to join me on this adventure, sign up at <https://www.outdoormindset.org>, you'll then be linked to the NZ Facebook group. The first face to face meet up groups will start in Christchurch and I will also hold some meetings online. If you are based in another NZ location and want to join the group then get in touch. We're looking for more ambassadors for NZ so if you love a challenge, have a neurological diagnosis and are keen to impact others in a positive way then get in touch.

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