

Want to Take Control of Your Life? 4 Simple and Empowering Life Lessons from a Navy SEAL

A few years ago, my cousin sent me a video clip that inspired me to do something my mom had been telling me to do for as long as I can remember: make my bed. It was entitled “If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed.” The clip was part of a commencement address by Admiral William McRaven. “If you make your bed every morning, you will have accomplished the first task of the day,” he said. “It will give you a small sense of pride and it will encourage you to do another task and another and another. By the end of the day, one task completed will have turned into many tasks completed.”

Admiral McRaven has since come out with a book called [*Make Your Bed: Little Things that can Change your Life . . . And Maybe the World*](#). In it, he describes ten life lessons he learned as a Navy Seal. Here are four of them:

1. Make your bed

For a Navy SEAL, making one’s bed is not just expected, it is required, and there are no gold stars for the completion of this basic task. For McRaven, making his bed is the first task he accomplishes every day, providing a sense of structure and accomplishment. And even if nothing in his day goes as planned, he knows that when he turns in that night, he will be reminded of his first accomplishment of the day: making his bed. He writes: “Sometimes the simple act of making your bed can give you the lift you need to start your day and provide you the satisfaction to end it right.”

2. Get over being a sugar cookie and keep moving forward

One morning in his SEAL training, McRaven was ordered to make himself a sugar cookie, that is, to roll himself in sand after taking a dip in the ocean, ensuring that he would spend the remainder of the day covered in sand. Coming to attention covered in sand, McRaven was asked "Do you know why you are a sugar cookie this morning?" "No, Instructor Martin," he responded. "Because life isn't fair," his instructor said, "and the sooner you learn that, the better off you will be."

"It is easy to blame your lot in life on some outside force, to stop trying because you believe fate is against you," writes McRaven. "It is easy to think that where you were raised, how your parents treated you, or what school you went to is all that determines your future. Nothing could be further from the truth. The common people and the great men and women are all defined by how they deal with life's unfairness."

3. Failure can make you stronger

During their SEAL training, McRaven and his swim buddy struggled to keep up with the rest of the class. When they finished the morning swim well after everyone else, they were both assigned to The Circus, an additional two hours of punishing training. The Circus was known for leaving trainees so exhausted that they generally failed at least one task the next day, getting them sent to The Circus again. Eventually, their time in The Circus made them stronger, and in the final open ocean swim, they finished well ahead of the rest of the class.

Looking back on his experience in The Circus, McRaven reflects, "I realized that the past failures had strengthened me, taught me that no one is immune from mistakes. True leaders must learn from their failures, use their lessons to motivate themselves, and not be afraid to try again or make the next tough decision. You can't avoid The Circus. At some point, we all make the list. Don't be afraid of The Circus."

4. Sing when you're up to your neck in mud

The first week of SEAL training kicks off with what is known as "Hell Week," six days designed to eliminate those who are not up to the challenge of becoming a SEAL. Wednesday of Hell Week sent McRaven and his fellow trainees to the mudflats south of San Diego. By evening, the recruits had been in the clay-like mud all day. Freezing and exhausted, the recruits were told they could get out, warm up by the fire, and have a meal of chicken soup. The one condition: five of them had to quit. As a young man next to McRaven moved to climb out, someone began to sing. As the rest of the recruits joined in, the ones who were about to quit changed their minds. "Once again, we learned an important lesson: the power of one person to unite the group, the power of one person to inspire those around them, to give them hope. If that one person could sing while neck-deep in mud, then so could we. If that one person could endure the freezing cold, then so could we. If that one person could hang on, then so could we."

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