

WELL-BEING

# Sometimes the toughest wars are at home

As his memoir is published, veteran journalist Mark Austin talks to **Gabrielle Fagan** about war-reporting, his daughter's anorexia and how keeping himself physically fit helps his own mental health

For more than 30 years, Mark Austin has covered some of the biggest news stories in the world for ITV and now Sky, and witnessed first-hand some of the most significant events of our times while working as a foreign correspondent.

The award-winning reporter – his accolades include five Baftas – has covered the Iraq War (during which his friend and colleague, Terry Lloyd, was killed by American gunfire), South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy under Nelson Mandela and the Rwandan genocide, as well as natural disasters such as the Haiti earthquake and the Mozambique floods.

But the 60-year-old father-of-three, who lays bare his experiences on and off-screen in his autobiography, *And Thank You For Watching: A Memoir*, reveals his most traumatic experience was far removed from war zones.

It took place at home, watching his eldest daughter, Maddy, battle to survive the eating disorder and mental illness anorexia nervosa. At her lowest point, she weighed only five-and-a-half stone.

Here, Austin, who lives in Surrey, talks about the experience, looking after his own mental wellbeing, along with his journalistic career and why he has no plans to retire.

**What's the event that's most shaken your world?**

"Undoubtedly, the toughest personal time was my daughter, Maddy, suffering anorexia nervosa. It nearly killed her. Her illness began in 2012 when she was 17 and lasted three years. At one point, I was convinced I was watching her slow, inexorable death.

"You experience a lot of terrifying



moments when you cover wars, but that was the most shocking personally because it involved someone so close to me."

**How did you cope during that time?**

"I still feel guilty that I didn't understand what was happening, or that it was a mental illness. At first, I thought it was just a teenage fad and kept telling her to 'grow up' and to eat. "It was very difficult for several years and almost tore our family apart. I worked, because it gave some sense of normality in the middle of a nightmare and was a distraction, but I don't know if that was the right thing to do. I didn't know how to handle it all.

"You couldn't communicate with Maddy, because anorexia had its hold over her, controlled her, and was like a sort of demon within her. I feel so guilty for telling her at one point: 'If you really want to starve yourself to death, get on with it'. That came from complete desperation, frustration, being at my wits' end and just wanting the whole situation to go away.

"It's a great relief that she's now at university, healthy and happy, and

I'm incredibly proud of her for talking publicly about the illness. We made a documentary together to help other parents and highlight the lack of mental health resources needed to treat a condition which costs lives. We're so lucky to still have our daughter."

**Has the experience changed you?**

"I've consciously made an effort to worry far less about day-to-day little things, which has come about partly because of Maddy's illness. I used to waste worry on the small stuff of life, say whether I was going to miss out on covering a story, or being in the right place to report an event.

"I know now that, every now and then, big things will come along when you really have to be strong, and they are what's really worth worrying about and concentrating on. The rest, you can't control and doesn't really

*"As a father of young children it was even harder seeing children suffering, maimed or dead"*



**Mark Austin, with his daughter Maddy, taking part in the Heads Together mental health initiative, main; Austin reporting on the Rwanda genocide in 1994, above left, the most traumatic assignment of his journalistic career**

Photographs: PA

matter much anyway. There's a very good saying: 'Nothing matters very much and few things matter at all'.

"My wife, Catherine, a doctor dealing with life and death on the front line in A&E hospitals, has always been very good at grounding me whenever I've got stressed about work over the years, by telling me, 'It's important but in the end it's only television.'"

**What was it like writing the book?**

"It was very upsetting at times, but cathartic in a way to revisit memories of what I'd witnessed over the years. At the time things happened, I was lucky I was able to mentally file away in a box the bad stuff I saw.

"The only exception was the Rwandan genocide in 1994, which was horrific, and as a father of young children it was even harder seeing children suffering, maimed or dead. I know reporters who still experience nightmares and flashbacks of that time.

"The book proved to me that I hadn't processed a lot of what I'd seen, and I think it's been good for my mental health to finally do that. Frankly,

viewers only see a tiny percentage of the sheer horror and dreadful things, because you have to self-censor on grounds of taste and acceptability."

**You've been in some incredibly dangerous situations – what's kept you safe?**

"I survived, or at least have so far, largely due to an innate cowardice. I've found cowardice is a much better protection than any amount of flak jackets, helmets and armoured vehicles.

"I'm not a naturally brave person, who likes covering wars and gets an adrenaline rush from it, so I decided early on I'd take risks but they'd be calculated. That's stopped me going to many places and doing many things in war zones, which has probably saved my life and the crew's.

"Sometimes, of course, you get it wrong, and my biggest mistake was in Bophuthatswana, South Africa, in the months before Nelson Mandela was elected.

"There was rioting and violence, and at one point I was marched into a field with a gun pointing at my head. I thought, 'What on earth am I doing

here? I must be mad. I'm going to die'. In general and very worryingly, I think the world's a much more dangerous place for journalists, as they're now seen as legitimate targets by people such as Al-Qaeda, Islamic State and other terrorist groups, who view them almost as extensions of the state."

**Will you retire?**

"No, I'm still as passionate about reporting news, as I was when I started out in my 20s. News is an addiction, and working in 24-hour news for Sky is a new lease of life.

"Although I'm 60, I feel the clock stopped at 52. I simply don't count the rest of the years. Running and swimming around three times a week helps clear my mind, and I play golf. I think keeping fairly fit helps mental health." ■

**And Thank You For Watching: A Memoir by Mark Austin is published by Atlantic Books, priced £20. Available now.**



HEALTH

## How sophrology can take mindfulness to new levels

With so many of us battling with the effects of stress, it's no surprise that we're increasingly turning to mindfulness-based therapies as a way to switch off.

When life gets overwhelming, you might have tried yoga, meditation and deep-breathing exercises to help matters – but have you tried sophrology?

The wellbeing trend has actually been around since the 1960s and is already popular in France and Germany, but it's only now that it's starting to catch on over here.

Here, Dominique Antiglo, founder of BeSophro (be-sophro.co.uk) and author of *The Life-Changing Power Of Sophrology* (£14.99; Hodder & Stoughton), tells us more about the healing practice, and how it might just change your life.

**So, what is sophrology?**

Sophrology is best described as a stress management system, that uses a combination of different exercises and techniques to achieve an alert mind in a relaxed body.

"It's an evolution of meditation and mindfulness, that blends Eastern philosophies and Western science to tap into your resilience and strength," explains Antiglo.

The practice uses a combination of breathing, relaxation, gentle body movement, meditation and visualisation techniques that allow for what Antiglo calls a "true mind-body connection".

**How does it differ from other forms of mindfulness meditation?**

Sophrology is often described as "the next step on" from traditional mindfulness.

As Antiglo explains: "Sophrology engages both the mind and body to bring you into a state of dynamic relaxation – where the body is so calm that your heart rate lowers, but your mind is clear and fully alert."

She believes that the mind-body connection in sophrology allows you to enter this state of full relaxation more quickly and easily than other practices she's tried.

Watching someone drill through sophrology exercises looks sort of like a cross between Tai Chi and meditation, with lots of slow body movements mixed in with moments of sitting down with your eyes closed.

Antiglo first began practising sophrology when she was just 15 and living in Switzerland. "I noticed a change in the way I was thinking after



**Sophrology is an increasingly popular method to deal with stress** Photograph: PA

just one session, and I immediately felt more positive and energised," she recalls.

She began a career as an osteopath – but a growing belief that many of her clients' pains and tensions were linked to stresses in their daily lives eventually led her to train as a sophrologist.

For beginners, guided sessions are the best way to grasp the basic techniques (Antiglo's book comes with guided audio downloads to help get you started).

**Two techniques you can try at home**

**The Pump** "Standing tall, let your arms fall straight alongside your body and clench your fists.

"Now exhale through your mouth, then inhale through your nose and hold the breath.

"As you hold the breath, 'pump' both your shoulders up and down until you need to exhale again.

"As you exhale vigorously, relax your arms and hands completely, allowing all tension and tightness to drain simultaneously through the arms and hands. Repeat until you notice you feel calm once more."

**The Tratat**

"Hold one arm straight in front of you and focus your gaze on your thumbnail.

"Inhale through your nose and hold your breath, while very slowly drawing your thumb towards the space between your eyebrows (your eyes will naturally cross).

"Then close your eyes and exhale through the mouth. Then repeat.

"This technique, which engages your brain and body, increases your ability to focus on a single task.

"Repeat three times or until you feel focused and fully engaged." ■

**Liz Connor**