



Bonita Norris on the Finding Our Way podcast

Content alert: In this episode Bonita talks about about eating disorders, and eating habits and body image amongst climbers. She also describes falling and getting injured on Everest.

#intro music

Mary-Ann Finding Our Way is proudly sponsored by Berghaus, who are committed to sharing their passion for the outdoors with people from all backgrounds. This episode involves a conversation about eating disorders, and eating habits and body image amongst climbers. For more detailed information, have a look at the episode description.

Mary-Ann Hello and welcome to Finding Our Way, the new podcast from the British Mountaineering Council, a.k.a. the BMC. I'm Mary-Ann Ochota.

Cress And I'm Cress Allwood. This podcast is about diversifying the voices we normally hear talking about the outdoors. In each episode, we'll talk to someone who's normally busy climbing, mountaineering or walking and find out what they've learnt from their adventures.

Mary-Ann And we'll explore what the rest of us can learn from them, too. There's going to be good chat, memorable stories and hopefully bursts of inspiration from people who are making real change happen.

Cress So, Mary-Ann, who's on today?

Mary-Ann All right. Joining us today is a woman whose high altitude mountaineering career started when she attended a lecture by chance about climbing the world's highest mountain, Everest. She's gone on to summit three of the world's 8000m peaks and retains the record as the youngest British woman to climb both Everest and reach the North Pole. She's also written candidly about suffering from bulimia as a teenager and the challenges of overcoming fear and doubt to pursue her goals. Joining us from London, welcome, Bonita Norris!

Cress Welcome!

Bonita Thank you so much for having me, hello.

Mary-Ann I'm intrigued by this idea that you randomly go to a lecture with Rob Casserly and Kenton Cool, and they're talking about climbing Everest. You've never gone climbing before. You've never gone trekking. And you come out of that talk going, 'Oh, well, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to go and climb Everest!' Most people go to the pub and then, like, get on with the rest of their lives! What was it that changed things for you?

Bonita Yeah, I'm fully aware that most people, including the person that I went along to that lecture with, just left that room and got on with their lives. But for me, suddenly it felt like something just came alive. And in some ways something made sense. Suddenly it was 'This is what I'm supposed to do with my life!'

I just knew that I wanted to become a climber. And I think that's the story that people hear about me a lot, is that I went to this lecture and it was out of the blue. But actually, over time I've looked back at my childhood and growing up - and I was the person on the school trip to North Wales who literally would wake up in the morning, I couldn't wait to get out and climb the mountains and all my friends were complaining. And then on the ski school trip, being the girl on the chairlift that was...well, I would be crying because I'd think it was so beautiful to be in the mountains. And my friends would be like, "Yeah, it's nice Bonnie, but it's not CRYING nice." And then I went to South America when I was about 17 or 18 and went travelling on my own. I ended up going up to Machu Picchu and wrote about it in my blog after saying, 'This is the best day of my life.' I loved it. And all of those points, when I look back, they were all highlights of my entire life and they were all in the mountains, but I never put it together. And then finally when I went to that lecture, it was like, "Ah. I want to be a climber".

Mary-Ann Ah, so the signs were there.

Bonita Yeah, yeah. I think maybe there are just things that we're born to be drawn to. Guess it worked for me!

Cress Interesting! It's not cheap to get into mountaineering, let alone high altitude Himalayan expeditions. So how did you make it happen, Bonita?

Bonita No, it's probably one of the most expensive hobbies that you can get into. And that was one of the things that really put me off from starting, I guess, in the beginning, because my sights were set on Everest. And that was what I wanted to do - I wanted to go out to the Himalayas. But when I kind of talked myself down from that, I realised that it wasn't going to be the most expensive, most risky thing [to start off with]. I was probably going to start climbing, like most people do these days, at an indoor climbing wall. And then from there, just meeting people and going out on small trips just in the UK, even the petrol money sometimes felt a bit expensive when I was at university.

But when it came to the first big expedition to the Himalayas, which was Manaslu, that was around £8,000 at the time. And I used some of my student loan, part of my maintenance [grant]. I also got a job at uni to pay a couple of grand towards it and then the uni actually ended up giving me a grant I think for two and a half grand [£2,500]. With that and with a little bit - a grand or so - from my dad for my 21st birthday, which was amazing - how lucky to get that kind of gift?! - I managed to scrape the money together.

But then Everest was a completely different story, there was no way I would find it. I needed £50,000 pounds to climb Everest and couldn't find that money in six months, which was how long I had, if I wanted to get on the expedition that I wanted to get on. It was six months to find the cash to go on that trip. I had to cold call British businesses looking for a sponsor. And eventually one said yes, but that was after five months and days and days, well, MONTHS of cold calling and not getting anywhere. It worked out in the end. But it is prohibitive - I would say I'm one of those people that would rather save up for a few years and go on a massive expedition than go on a beach holiday. So it's how you want to spend your money as well.

Mary-Ann How did you make that leap from going on club climbing trips in the UK to building up the skills and the network of people to build your experience with you?

Bonita Yeah, that network was so important. And I actually look back and I see so many lucky moments where I met the right people at the right time who were just open and willing to guide me and climb with me and teach me. Yeah, I owe so much to others. I think once you get into the climbing world, in some ways it's quite straightforward. If you want to get better at climbing big mountains like I did, then you just have to go and try and climb bigger and bigger peaks. You start in North Wales and then you go to Scotland and then you go to the French or Swiss Alps. And from there you can head out to Nepal or India or wherever you want to go, I think. Yeah. I mean, my personal trajectory was that I only did two trips to the Alps before I went to the Himalayas for the first time. So it was very quick. It was from zero to one hundred miles an hour, very, very fast!

Mary-Ann So zero to 100 miles an hour. And it meant that you successfully summited Everest in 2010. Congratulations on that!

Cress Absolutely.

Mary-Ann What was it like?

Bonita So Everest is...a circus. It's crazy out there. I mean, it's not like any other mountain I have been to. The amount of people for a start, the atmosphere is really electrifying even when you're walking to Base Camp because you're surrounded by Base Camp trekkers who...This might be their life's dream and they're so excited to meet you when you tell them that you're actually trying to climb the mountain. So as soon as you land in Nepal, there's just this fission, this energy.

And then getting to Base Camp, it's this tent city surrounded by these beautiful peaks. And you hear the glacier cracking underneath you. It sounds like gunshots. And it's just so spellbinding to actually be in this place, climbing the mountain. Again, a real mixed bag, because you've got all different people, different abilities, different backgrounds. It was the first time that...I've only ever met a few mega rich people and all of them I met on Everest! Billionaires basically, that weren't massively interested in climbing, but just wanted something to do. So you've got all that.

And then you've got people that really are there because this is what they've wanted for a big part of their life. And there are a lot of frustrations on the peak, I would say, especially from groups that are slow and don't really seem able to climb independently of having a guide right there with them, telling them when to inhale and exhale.

But beyond that, as you get higher up the peak, out of the icefall at the bottom - I climbed on the south side from Nepal - things spread out and sometimes you won't really come across another team all day. This is back 11 years ago now, so I think it might have changed since.

Going up into the Death Zone - it's really hard to know what to say about it! Because there was a lot of suffering, it wasn't very pleasant in so many ways. But every moment I spent up high on the mountain, it was just such a privilege. I felt so lucky that I was donning my oxygen mask and getting in my down suit to go out and climb. And there are, of course, moments when you think, 'I should not be here. Great mountaineers have died trying to get to the top of this mountain. Like, what on earth am I doing?!'.

A few minutes later, you've talked yourself around it and you tell yourself, 'Look, just take one more footstep and see how you feel in a minute'. And slowly, bit by bit over a few days, you kind of piece together all these little steps. And we were lucky enough that we managed to get to the summit. And you see the most incredible things up there. Beneath you, when you're climbing through the night to the top, you can see electrical storms, these green and grey flashes beneath you. You're looking down at all the weather and you look up and you're surrounded by the most incredible stars. And when the sun rises, it illuminates the curvature of the earth as well. So it's just stunning. And the day that we climbed, we were lucky there weren't any queues. It was just a beautiful, beautiful day. And, yeah, that was that was kind of what it was like!

Mary-Ann I imagine anyone preparing to take on an Everest expedition has pictured that moment of being on the summit so many times. Did it live up to your imagination, to your expectation of that moment, or were you just too hypoxic, too exhausted, too dehydrated, too aware that you've only gone half way because you need to get back down safely as well?

Bonita In a funny way, I did obviously dream about getting to the top, especially before I arrived on the mountain. But then once we were there, I felt like there was so much in the way that we had to deal with, that the top was the final thing you got to think about. I almost didn't dare think about it.

So when I got there, I didn't really know what to do! I mean, you're there for ten minutes and in my head - and I'm sure a lot of people listening will know this exact feeling - as soon as I get to the summit, all I want to do is get back down. I'm like, 'Right, done'. I don't need to stand there and look at the view for half an hour. I can just look at it quickly. I don't feel the need to take it all in because I'll do that Base Camp. So we got there and there was just this weird moment where I sort of sat down and kind of had to keep saying, 'This is it, this is it, I'm actually on the summit'.

And I think my hypoxic, oxygen-starved brain was just like, 'Yeah, whatever'. And then I saw one of my teammates and he had unfurled this T-shirt that he'd written on at Base Camp - this plain yellow T-shirt and it said something along the lines of, "Boys, I'm living the dream". And I'd heard so much about Rick's "Boys" on the expedition, every night in the tent, and how much he missed them, and how he was scared that he might never go home to them. So when he pulled out that T-shirt, that's when the floodgates opened for me and I was so, so proud of him, so proud of the team.

But there wasn't much of a view. I remember a big cloud coming across us. And, yeah, all I wanted to do from the moment I got there was just get back down again. Which doesn't make any sense when you put that much time, effort and risk into climbing! But I've pretty

much been like that on every mountain I've ever climbed. I think for me, the summit is the goal to go on the journey. And it's the journey that is way more important. And when you get back to Base Camp you celebrate and you're safe. For me, celebrating when there's still a lot to do didn't feel right.

Mary-Ann It was right that you weren't celebrating, because bad things happened on the descent. Tell us what happened.

Bonita Yeah, so we left the summit and I was climbing with Lakpa Wongchu, he's a Sherpa. And we were climbing down, we were actually pretty much racing down. I remember overtaking a lot of people on the descent and just thinking, 'What are they doing?' And I wish I'd slowed down and kind of been more at their pace. We weren't rushing, but we were just excited. And I picked up a dead piece of rope, didn't take the extra split second to just check it was anchored properly. And I put my weight onto it. And I didn't come tight on the rope. Because you're just arm rappelling down these fixed lines, so you sort of pick it up and then pull forward. And I just went forward like that and fell forward down on to the Step - I was on the Hillary Step at the time - so I was extremely lucky that I landed on the Step and not thousands of metres below in Nepal or Tibet. I was really, really struggling to walk, to move. And just the pain, it was like a hot iron bar was going up into my head and down my neck and shoulder and back. So any doctors listening, you might be able to tell me what was going on! So, yeah, from that point, it was a snail's pace to the point of stopping. And saying, 'I don't think I can do this. You should just leave me here'.

It was something I never expected to happen, obviously. And in the Death Zone, the smallest mistake can have the biggest consequences. And it just didn't feel real. It didn't feel like it was possible, but it was happening in real time. The amazing thing was one of my teammates, Rick, he had waited for Lakpa and I, and he was just fantastic. He came down with us a little bit. And then eventually a few of the Sherpas came back up and helped me back to Camp Four.

And then fortunately, the next day I was well enough - and on a cocktail of drugs, I have no idea what they were, I just put my hand out and someone poured a load of pills into my hand! The mountain was kind of moving as I climbed down, swirling around me. And I was having a great time! So I was on some serious painkillers. And that's what got me back to Camp Two. And then the next day we came to Base Camp. And yes, stepping into Base Camp after that I was just feeling like my body was broken. It wasn't the celebration that I wanted. It was a really bad mistake to make at that point on the hill, and it took a long time to come to terms with it.

Mary-Ann Yeah. Wow.

Cress You wrote a blog about the 2019 season when people died because of the queue to the summit, and said you felt unease about playing your part in the circus. I was just in Base Camp at that point - I was lucky enough to get into Base Camp! - leading a trip to the Base Camp and down. And, you know, I wasn't comfortable just in my role as an expedition leader with that aspect [the crowds]. And I wasn't climbing higher! What do you think needs to change?

Bonita The situation on Everest was really highlighted when there was a collapse in the icefall in 2014. And unfortunately, many Sherpas lost their lives in that icefall collapse - it was the year before the Nepal earthquake. And the Sherpas then went on strike. And said, 'we want better conditions' and I think rightly so.

Unfortunately, the way that Everest was climbed back in the 1920s and then the 1950s was this very imperialistic colonialist mindset of foreigners coming into a country and, you know, basically being a different level to everyone beneath them. And I think unfortunately there's a hangover from that. There's a lot of history, there's generational trauma from years of Westerners going over to Nepal and climbing with Sherpas and not always necessarily treating them as equals, which they are.

And now we have a situation where there's a lot of Western - mainly - companies making huge amounts of money on Everest and not demanding much of their clients. So, for instance, when I turned up on my team, bar the leader, I was the only client that had gone to an 8000m peak - I had been to Mount Manaslu - or actually gone into the death zone. I just would never have turned up to Everest as my first 8000m peak. And yet some people who had joined this trip - like a rich lawyer who didn't get to the summit, basically people with money - they cost the Sherpas on the mountain a lot of time and energy because they just shouldn't be there.

I think the least that needs to change is that the Sherpas deserve to have people to climb with that have been to an 8000m peak before, and Nepal deserves an economy that isn't just completely based on one mountain in one valley. So I think the first thing that they could do is say, 'Nobody gets to climb Everest if you haven't come to Nepal first and climbed a 7,000m peak or an 8,000m peak and then the tourism would spread throughout the country, you would kind of whittle out those people that just want to have that Everest tick and aren't interested in climbing at all, that are a danger on the mountain. I think that would be great for everyone. But there's a lot of resistance to any kind of change with the mountain. And I think it's only going to lead to a lot more disasters, a lot more deaths, because there is such bad overcrowding.

Because of Covid I think it's going to be very, very quiet this year. But, yeah, something has to change. I mean, that queue in 2019 was just awful. I mean, who would want to go and stand in that? I can't imagine how that must have been for people that really thought they were trying to achieve a dream and were stuck dying in a queue.

Cress I'm really shocked that companies don't insist...the bit that I've looked into, the companies say you have to have climbed 8000 metres. But clearly that's not the case for all organisations. I think that's outrageous, myself.

Bonita Yeah, I think so too. It is often on the website, but it just takes one email. And of course, they want your money. There was one person who I knew, I was working very closely with...people were saying behind her back, 'We know she's not gonna make it, but we had to take her money because we trust that we'll keep her safe. Whereas if she went with someone else, maybe they wouldn't keep her safe'. If that's the standard that you're holding the mountain to, then it's just not...it didn't sit particularly right with me then, it doesn't sit right with me now.

I feel very conflicted about my part in it all. I felt like in some ways I was very...not naive, I knew what Everest was going to be like...but it did take until I got there to be like, 'Really, literally there is a billionaire here who doesn't know how to climb! Is this seriously happening? Guys, this is 2010, I thought 'Into Thin Air' was written years ago and we'd all gotten over that?!

It seems to have been getting steadily worse in terms of numbers since. I think it's a beautiful mountain. It's got so much amazing history. And the people, many people that have dedicated their lives to climbing it - Sherpas and western leaders - love that mountain, it's in their blood. But at the same time, there's this thing where people are just willing to bend their own value system just because of that extra client, that extra bit of money, and it all adds up when you've got every team on the mountain doing it.

Mary-Ann So you've climbed Manaslu, Everest and Lhotse. And you talk about that a lot in motivational speaking that you deliver to corporate groups and general people who aren't climbers and mountaineers. What is the response that you get from non-climbers when you're talking about your expeditions? What are the takeaways that they most enjoy?

Bonita It's really mixed from non-climbers and half the questions I get at the end of a speech are, 'How much trash is there on Everest?' People really have that thing in their minds, that it's just a garbage dump. Which it's not at all! I mean, my goodness, when I was there I just thought it was beautiful, pristine. Look at any of my photos of the trip and it's a stunning climb. So I would tell them what I've just told you.

And then the other half of people tend to think that it's an impossible thing that someone like them could never do. And again, that's not true either. A lot of people that do climb Everest I would say are average climbers like me. So there's a lot of misconceptions there. But, yeah, people really think it's one of those Boys' Own adventures, it's something that you grew up hearing about as a kid. I think for all of us, Everest has a special place in some ways of [being] a good story at least. So, yeah, it's generally well received.

Cress My niece listened to you just very recently as it happened. She said that for her - she's 24, she's not a climber, she lives in London, she's reasonably sporty - what resonated for her were two things. One was a sense of resilience that she was impressed by. And secondly, the question that you posed is, 'What story do you want to tell?' And for her to think, 'Oh, yeah, when I'm older, what do I want to look back on, what will be my story?' That clearly left a powerful impression on her, and no doubt other people in the audience.

Bonita Yeah. That was definitely in my mind when I was working towards Everest and especially trying to find that money to climb it. Every time I was very close to giving up, I would think, 'What do I want to tell my kids one day?'

Do I want to tell them I kind of wanted to climb Everest once and then it got hard and I just threw in the towel? That was not a good story. If I'd have tried and tried and tried until I failed, at the point where I couldn't go on any longer, it's a better story. But the best story would be if I didn't give up. And I think that's always a good mindset to have. So I'm glad she picked up on it.

Cress Yeah, she certainly did.

Mary-Ann So is high altitude mountaineering mostly just suffering? And every now and then you get a good view?

Bonita Yeah, there is a lot of suffering, I guess...

Mary-Ann I knew it! I knew it.

Bonita But the thing is, you've got to love it. And I think I am one of these people - I really love it and the people that I love being in a tent with are those people as well. This is raw and it's real, and you're sleeping on the mountain. On K2 [we were] pitching our tents on tiny little edges and hearing avalanches roar down all night long. And you just feel so alive. And yes, it is painful. But, you know, all of the work that you're doing - when you're sitting there, hunched over a stove for three hours, boiling ice to make water for the next day, and the water's just boiling into steam at 70 degrees because there's no air pressure, you're at such high altitude. There's no air to hold it in the pan anymore - so all your water is just floating away and you end up with a tiny bit. And all of those things - waking up in the morning with hoar frost from your teammates' sweat and breath that's frozen on the tent overnight and then when the sun comes up, it just plops into your eyes. And that's your alarm call - your teammates' sweat and breath condensation falling back on you. And then peeing in bottles. And for a woman, you know, having a period on the mountain... there's all of those things that aren't ideal, but this is what we live for.

And the rewards are so huge. As soon as you step out that tent, the days are just full of pure joy and bliss a lot of the time. Until there's an avalanche, or bad rockfall or something goes wrong. But generally I sort of climb in a euphoric state, because I just feel so lucky to be there. So the suffering tends to happen in the tents at night. And then you get up in the morning and you have the best day and that sort of drives you onto the next one!

Mary-Ann How do you cope with a period when you're in the death zone? Or, you know, climbing an 8000 metre peak? I've never thought of that...What do you do?

Bonita Well, I mean, it's like you would at home basically! The same kind of way. I think the hardest thing is you can't dispose of things up there because you can't leave trash. So I was having to - this is not going to be a very nice conversation! - basically packaging things in plastic bags, rolling them up really tight and putting them somewhere that I could then take back to Base Camp. The thing about having a period, now that I'm older and especially as a mum - I have so much appreciation for the female body and what it can do! - at the time it was a bit annoying. But I did use it to my advantage.

On Everest, and in fact all the 8000m peaks I've climbed, you always try to reach the summit on a full moon because there's much more light. And lo and behold, I'm very much in sync with the full moon! So the point at which we were climbing towards the summit was when I would be on my cycle. And yeah, it's not ideal when you're breathing oxygen, losing a lot of iron, which you need to create red blood cells. But the thing about it for me, is that the day that [my period] starts, I get this huge release of energy. It's not the same for every woman, but it's always been the way for me. And secondly, your body temperature increases so I felt a lot warmer. So in actual fact, it was in some ways an advantage. And I think that's the way you've always got to look at those things - like, how do you harness it and use it? And it does in some ways just feel very - I don't want to be too sentimental about it - but it is an amazing thing. For the blokes in my team, yes, it's hard, but I'm climbing alongside you and I've also got my period. So that's even cooler. And you know, you've got to embrace that!

Mary-Ann I love that. I love the idea of the full moon and the mother goddess, combining to get you to the top of an 8000m peak.

Bonita Yeah, and as women, we should never be put off from going out in the outdoors or on an adventure for those reasons.

Mary-Ann You were involved with a summit attempt on K2, and that was the first high altitude expedition where you didn't reach the summit.

Bonita Yeah.

Mary-Ann What happened? And does that feel like unfinished business? K2 is a pretty gnarly mountain, right?

Bonita Yeah, today with a two year old, it doesn't feel like unfinished business. It feels very much parked. And we had a successful failure because we all walked off the mountain alive. And that season on K2, it was 2016, nobody had reached the summit of K2 by that point for three years, maybe more, maybe four years. So we went with very low expectations. And for me as well, at that point, no British woman...ok, there's Vanessa O'Brien, she's half British, half American, so I don't know if I can fully say it...but for me, my heroes were Alison Hargreaves and people like that who had sadly died on K2 back in 1995, I think.

And so I was thinking, 'Well, there hasn't actually been a British woman that's gone to K2 and returned alive for decades. And so just to come off the peak alive, I think that's what I was hoping for. The idea of getting to the summit just felt like a different world. I mean, we would have dealt with it if we got the opportunity. But I just wanted to go and in my mind I was thinking maybe this will be the first of a few attempts. It's the most incredible place. The Karakorum, the mountains are like these jagged shark teeth. It's just stunning. It's completely different to the Himalayas in that regard. And it's really isolating because you have this very treacherous walk to Base Camp over a glacier where you're in trainers or hiking boots. And I remember thinking, 'If this was anywhere else, we'd be roped-up right now'. There are full-on crevasses, you could easily slip, but that was just the walk in to Base Camp.

And then even from Base Camp to our crampon point was probably a three or four hour walk, to the base where we put our proper shoes on. If that was Everest, I mean, that was basically harder than climbing anything in the icefall. So it was just a different level completely. And you're just sort of doing it in a pair of trainers! So, yeah, a very, very different level of experience and skill required. I was climbing with a really great team, really properly experienced climbers, and I had to definitely up my game every day to keep up with them.

But we didn't reach the summit. No one did. I didn't reach the summit because I had, for the first time in my life, had the opportunity to really train like an athlete for this trip. And so I prepared for about six months. I had a hypoxic tent in my bedroom, which I slept in every night.

Cress wow!

Bonita Yeah. I full-on went for it. And I was training at this altitude chamber in London. I was doing everything. Absolutely. The nutrition, everything was nailed. So I went to the mountain pretty much in the shape of my life, felt amazingly fit, blasted up the peak. I wanted to be first all the time, because I've got a massive ego! And I got altitude sickness.

Cress Oh no!

Bonita What an idiot. And I learnt a massive lesson. I've learnt this lesson before as well. The days when I have rushed up the peak, I've paid for it big time. And I just got

overexcited, my senses left me and it was only getting to Camp 2 and I just completely crashed. Was very sick, very ill. The doctor on our team said 'You need to get down now'. So that was that. And then a few weeks later, those huge avalanches just wiped out of the route on the mountain that we'd prepared. So that was that for everyone else.

Mary-Ann Wow. But - a team of Nepalese Sherpas completed the first winter ascent of K2 earlier this year. As someone who's seen the mountain that they climbed, you know, up close and personally, what do you make of the achievement?

Bonita Ah. Incredible. And I'm so glad. When I was following the climb, from knowing the Sherpa community as well, I was just getting pretty emotional. Thinking, 'This has been literally nearly 100 years in the making'. In some ways, they were representing all of the Sherpa people that came before them, and it just felt so fitting and so right that the ultimate prize in high altitude mountaineering was the winter ascent of K2, and it didn't go to a Western team. Not to take anything away from anyone from the West, but there just felt like something very special about how much the Sherpas have given to Himalayan climbing in particular and it just felt so right.

I think for a lot of people watching the climb, it was very emotional. And it just felt right. It just felt like it was going to happen for them. Unfortunately, there were a few deaths also on the mountain around the time as well. So it wasn't without its tragedy. But for that team...the images of them walking hand-in-hand to the summit are just amazing. I was so inspired.

Cress Earlier this year, a filmmaker launched a documentary on YouTube called 'Light' about the culture of disordered eating and professional climbing. And as we've said, you've talked about suffering from bulimia in the past. What did you think of the film?

Bonita I thought it just scratched the surface. And I think she was very, very brave, and put into words a lot of the things that I've thought for many years and never been able to articulate as well as she did. As I watched it, I hoped this in some ways would become a watershed moment - when it's no longer okay to see or to be around the kind of disordered relationship that a lot of climbers have with food, that I've seen close up. And yeah, it felt like the right time. It feels like people are definitely more ready to talk about these things now than perhaps they would have been only two or three years ago.

Mary-Ann Do you think it's across the whole of climbing culture? Is this something specific to climbing?

Bonita I mean, I can't talk for all of climbing because I just only know my little corner of it. I would say that in 8000m peak climbing, it's not really an issue. But when you're down the climbing wall and you're going to watch competitions or you're out in Spain or wherever and you're doing sport climbing, there's definitely a lot of talk around normalising [the idea of] being light to climb and losing weight and stuff like that. Which, for someone like me, who's dealt with a full-on eating disorder, anything that encourages you to lose weight just doesn't sit with me comfortably at all.

As I wrote about it on social media, it seems so easy at the time. For a lot of people, if I want to set that goal to get light for a [route] - I mean, I'm a terrible climber, I've never climbed a 7a for instance, I've climbed just beneath that. So 7a, I could be like, 'Oh, if I lost a few kilos, that would be way easier'. I could do that in a few weeks, it wouldn't be an issue. But then I wouldn't be able to stop. And I think that that's the issue. It's a trap. You know, you think it's going to be easy and then you step away and it's not. It drags people in and

then it's a few more kilos. And before you know it, your relationship with food and nutrition has completely changed. And it's just not healthy.

I think the point of the film was to say, isn't it way more cool to climb hard, to climb the hardest that you've ever climbed, without taking that shortcut of dropping weight? Isn't that way more cool? And it takes a lot more determination, takes a lot more strength. It takes a lot more mental strength, I think, because dropping weight in the short term is easy. Especially for people like us who want that climb, that tick, more than anything. But it's just coming back from it, it's recovering from it, which a lot of people find hard, to varying degrees.

So I find the whole culture, especially in sport climbing, quite uncomfortable. But yeah, I'm glad of this documentary. I'm interested to see how, as we open up after lockdown, how it's all going to actually translate and what changes we might see.

Mary-Ann How do you protect yourself? So if you're spending lots of time doing sport climbing, at the climbing wall, at the gym, how do you protect yourself from those conversations, from those pressures, from those people demonstrating, performing their disordered eating?

Bonita I think I can see through it. So when I do see people talking about the bullet coffee that they're drinking and how they lost all those kilos or whatever, I can just see through it. Because I've been there and I know it. And it's a place of insecurity. I get frustrated by it, because I know the damage it can do. I think what's more insidious and dangerous is just the general culture that girls and women - and men - live in every day. The bombardment of advertising that we get, the way that people talk without even realising.

What worries me a lot is the way you hear adults talking around children, because that was definitely something for me as a kid, hearing diet culture spoken about from adults and being able to hear about it. I think coaches especially have a really important role to play in language and how they speak, and parents do as well. But generally I don't find it overly tempting. I see other people doing it and I just want to shake them.

Cress What do you think is needed in the sector to help?

Bonita I think definitely it's the parents and coaches. Because the amount of moulding that they're doing of young climbers - I'm talking about sport climbing, that's where I see the issue - those kids are at their most vulnerable. They're willing to train really hard because they're competing. And the competition adds a whole new layer of pressure. I know lovely, amazing coaches that would never mention that kind of thing. But it just takes one comment from a parent or a coach, and that could give a girl an eating disorder, for sure. I know, it's happened. And so you've just got to be really careful. So I would start with trying to educate older people that, 'maybe it was OK when we were younger. But, you know, this is what led to us all having odd relationships with food'.

Cress The good news is that I know that at the BMC there's some research being done by experts and there will be some great guidance and good practice for coaches in particular.

Bonita In some ways, I wish it hadn't happened that the documentary came out during lockdown. Because it's been harder to have those conversations with your friends in some ways, like at the wall or wherever. And that's what we needed, really, was to watch it and then all go out and see each other at the weekend or whatever and talk it through.

Sometimes people will be opening up for the first time, and actually, when you're only talking into social media, the next day there's new things going on. And so [now] those conversations might not happen. People need to be willing to open up and things like that do trigger it.

Mary-Ann [to the listeners] Next time you go down the climbing wall, or hang out with your gang, remember the documentary - raise it, have that conversation.

Bonita I think if you have struggled with it, then I think if you can, then the power that you have to be able to share your experiences of it and say, 'this is where it ends up', is really important. And it's very vulnerable and not very nice, [it's an] exposing thing to talk about something so private, like an eating disorder.

But actually, hopefully what it does, is just gives other people an opportunity to go, 'I notice that in myself, too. I'm going to do something about it'. And that's why I'm quite happy to be vocal about it. That's why I wrote about it in my book, that's why I've always been very open about it, because I just don't want to have a girl like me growing up, falling into the same traps because she didn't have anyone that was out there saying, 'I've been there, I've done that, it doesn't take you to a nice place'. So if it changes one person, then that would be worth it.

Mary-Ann It's a pretty inspiring story, that you can wrestle those demons and overcome them to the point where you're at such a point of athletic and technical skill that you can summit 8000 metre peaks. So hats off.

Bonita Thank you.

Cress Yeah, absolutely.

Mary-Ann So you've climbed to the roof of the world. What do you do next? What are you up to at the mo?

Bonita After K2 in 2016, I was fortunate that time I'd met my now husband and it was very much on my mind that I wanted to start a family with him. So we had a baby. She was due in 2018, she showed up in 2019, just after New Year. And then we've pretty much been raising her. I've been on maternity leave for 2019 and then 2020 we were in lockdown. So it's kind of like, 'Where have the years gone since K2?!' It felt like it was only going to be a little break. But I've got all sorts of dreams and things - I have been reading a little bit around what happens to the brain at extreme altitude if you're not using bottled oxygen. As you're climbing, say an 8000m peak without "O's", as we call it, supplemental oxygen. There's more science around it than there was ten years ago. And it's definitely leading me in a positive direction towards wanting to do something like that.

And then there's things without the risk. I remember the one time I met Ueli Steck, he said to me that he wanted to step away from mountains for a while and try marathon running, because he wanted a challenge that was purely physical. He didn't want any risk, he just wanted to see how far he could push his body without any fear of what might happen. Unfortunately he's not around now, but I never forgot those words because it's so true. As mountaineers, we have chosen a sport which has just got this risk attached to it, which in some ways can limit you, and it can also make you do things that you never thought you were capable of.

But for me, there is this niggling feeling of like maybe now with my daughter especially, I should try and do something that pushes me physically. Not anywhere near Ueli Steck's kind of level! But yeah, there's lots of other dreams like big marathons and things I'd love to do.

Cress OK, so I think we're going to finish off with our quickfire questions. That sound OK? So we have ten questions we ask every guest on Finding Our Way. So Bonita, are you ready?

Mary-Ann Quickfire questions! Describe yourself in three words.

Bonita Focussed, independent and big thinker. I don't know if that counts as one word!

Cress Favourite mountain snack?

Bonita Biltong

Mary-Ann Best mountain memory?

Bonita The summit of Lhotse and the sunrise

Cress Bucket List destination?

Bonita I'd love to get back to Nepal, I actually haven't been in a good few years now, so that's definitely eating away at me. I really miss it.

Mary-Ann How often do you get lost, Bonita?

Bonita I would say I'm actually a really good navigator. I was terrible at it and I hated the fact that I was so rubbish. So I spent loads of time looking at maps and navigating in all sorts of conditions and now I'm actually really proud of how good I am. So I don't get lost that easily.

Cress Are you funny?

Bonita No.

[Cress and Mary-Ann laugh]

Mary-Ann If you were an animal, what animal would you be?

Bonita I would probably say it would have to be a mountain goat.

Cress One thing you always carry on the hill?

Bonita A book. I always take a book. I know it's a ridiculous waste of space and weight, but there's nothing worse than just lying in your tent and you can't sleep. So I always take a little torn up Michael Crichton or something like that. Good escapism I've read a thousand times.

Mary-Ann What does climbing mean to you?

Bonita Just joy. And also the process of nature teaching you something that's within you, but nature unlocks it. That's what I find when I'm on a rock climb, a sport climb or in the mountains. You might be struggling with something internally, and through this trauma and the suffering and the struggle of being in this environment, you unlock that answer. And nature is what gives it to you really. And for me, I connect with nature through climbing.

Cress And lastly, we want more of you, Bonita, where do we go?

Bonita Well, you can go to @BonitaNorris on Twitter or Instagram.

Mary-Ann Amazing. Thank you so much. It's been absolutely fascinating talking to you.

Bonita Thank you so much!

Cress Thank you, Bonita, and thank *you* for listening. Let's grow this thing. Subscribe so you don't miss an episode. Share this podcast with all your friends and please let us know what you think. Use @TeamBMC on Instagram and Twitter and use the hashtag #FindingOurWay. See you on the next one!

#outro music

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