



## Euan Ryan on the Finding Our Way podcast

**Content Alert:** In this episode, Euan, who suffers from Crohn's Disease, talks about his chronic illness, managing a diagnosis and treatment.

### #Intro music

**Mary-Ann** Finding Our Way is sponsored by Berghaus. For a long time, Berghaus kit has helped people access and enjoy outdoor experiences, and we're delighted to have them as partners for this podcast, sharing inspiration and expertise so we can all do our bit to improve diversity and inclusion in climbing, walking and mountaineering.

This episode involves a conversation about chronic illness, managing a diagnosis and treatment.

For more detailed information, have a look at the episode description.

**Cress** Hello and welcome to the new podcast from the British Mountaineering Council, the BMC, Finding Our Way. I'm Cress Allwood.

**Mary-Ann** And I'm Mary-Ann Ochota. This podcast is about diversifying the voices we normally hear talking about the outdoors. So in each episode, we'll be chatting to someone who's usually busy climbing, mountaineering, or walking and grill them to find out what they love, what they hate, celebrate their stories and insights.

**Cress** That's right. These are the people making real change happen, representing underrepresented groups, calling out inequalities and generally making the world a better place. We're going to get deep into the discussion and hassle them for practical advice.

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

**Cress** Today, an award-winning outdoors photographer and filmmaker who seems drawn to tell stories about climbers that are always about a lot more than just climbing. He's documented para-climbers on the Eiger, climbing with autism, and the mental health challenges and healing that climbing can offer. He also suffers from Crohn's disease, a painful and sometimes debilitating inflammatory bowel condition. So perhaps some of the insight in his powerful films comes from a very personal space. Connecting with us from Glasgow, welcome, Euan Ryan. Hello!

**Euan** Hello. How are you doing?

**Mary-Ann** Thanks for joining us on Finding Our Way

**Euan** No problem! Thanks for having me.

**Mary-Ann** And so, Euan, let's start with how did you get into climbing and how did you get into filmmaking?

**Euan** So I've been climbing since the age of eight. I started at a birthday party at an indoor climbing wall. It was the trend that year to go indoor climbing - every year there was go karting or paintball or something like that, and climbing was the trend that year for my school's birthday parties. So I went climbing and me and another friend really took to it, just enjoyed it, enjoyed the different challenges that climbing can pose, even to a beginner. So that sparked an interest for me and my friend. We joined the kids' club at the time. We started going every Saturday morning to the indoor climbing wall and from there I progressed into outdoor climbing, a little bit of competition climbing as well, learned to trad climb at the age of 11. For me, climbing has just become a bit of a life direction, you know.

Filmmaking - I guess I always enjoyed taking photographs and making short clips and things when I was climbing with friends, and I was never too bothered about being in them myself, much to my mum's displeasure, she was always asking, 'Where are the photos of you?! I don't want to see photos of other people, I want to see you do it!' I basically realised that I quite liked just documenting things, documenting the adventures that I went on with my friends, the adventures that my other friends were taking part in.

When I left school, and this ties a little bit into my condition, but I left school and didn't really have a direction. And I had a year basically after leaving school where I sort of floated about, wasn't entirely sure what I was going to do. I worked in an outdoor shop for a while, and then I kind of thought about how much I like taking photographs and making films for myself and thought, well, 'Why don't you point yourself towards that?' So I enrolled in a college course to do with television and film production and the obvious thing from that was to start making more serious climbing films.

I watched a lot of climbing films, trying to emulate them and trying to pick out my own style and pick out stories that I wanted to make films about. And yeah, I guess that, you know, the rest, as they say...is history.

**Mary-Ann** You make it sound so poetic and perfectly aligned. I'm sure there were bumps in the road along the way?

**Euan** Yeah. Before I enrolled for film and TV, I was about to go to Fort William to do instruction work. Adventure tourism, I think was the course. So that was almost where my career went...sort of, ML [Mountain Leader], MIA [Mountaineering Instructor Award], MIC [Mountain Instructor Certificate for taking people winter climbing] kind of thing.

**Mary-Ann** I have to say, I'm so pleased you didn't Euan, because I think your films are some of the most interesting climbing films I've watched. I'm not a climber, and often when I'm watching climbing films, I kind of oh, I'm sure it makes a lot of sense if you are a climber and you're into climbing and it's all about the particular route or how difficult something is. But otherwise, when you're not in 'the club' and you're not versed in the specifics of what that person is doing or the technicality or the exposure that it

represents...unless you see the shot, they all become a bit samey-samey. Except your films aren't, because they're about the people who are climbing as much as about the climb.

**Euan** Thank you, thank you very much.

**Cress** What draws you to a particular story or climber?

**Euan** I'm interested in the people that do climbing, if that makes sense, because climbing is such a strange sport. I mean, there's lots of strange sports. There's lots of weird hobbies that people have. But climbing is this one where you're, for the most part, climbing a route up a rock face or a hill to an arbitrary point, sometimes not even the summit, you know, and there are easier ways to do it. If the end goal is to get to the top then what you're doing is completely nonsensical. You know what I mean? The amount of times I've been climbing and there's been some local youths going by and go, 'Hey, Mister, there's an easy bit around the side!' You know? Yeah, I guess it is absolutely bizarre what I'm doing.

So I suppose I'm drawn towards finding out why people do it. And I know that the reason I do it is probably just personal challenge and it's quite a mindful exercise. When you go climbing, you're pushing not just the physical but your mental capabilities. And that's why I enjoy it. But trying to figure out why some people take that to the next level, like putting themselves in real danger or perhaps trying to gain something out of climbing that I never thought about, things like mental health challenges that some people face and how climbing's helped them with things like that. That's what draws me.

I think there's definitely a huge place in the market for the classic climbing film, the sort of "Find the hard thing, try to climb it. It was too hard, went away, trained, came back, it was still too hard, went away, did some soul searching, then climbed the hard thing." The classic hero's journey.

And for a long time, that's what climbing films were. Chris Sharma with his shirt off, climbing some really hard stuff in Spain! And it's really cool. And, you know, there's still a piece of me when I see a film like this come up at a film festival, which goes, 'Yeah!' I do just want to see Chris Sharma with his top off climbing cool routes in Spain. You can really geek out about all these cool routes and you're like, 'Man, that just looks so impossibly hard'. As a climber who is passionately into the sport, you can appreciate the effort and things that go into it. Perhaps, however, though, if you were a layman or someone not as interested in climbing, it all just seems a bit samey-samey, like you said. And I never really wanted to make films that were just solely for climbers. I wanted them to be viewable for everyone. You could show it to your gran and she'd have something interesting to say at the end, rather than 'It's just another climbing film that you showed me that I'd like to miss the whole thing'.

**Cress** Yeah, that takes it to a much broader audience, doesn't it? So whether or not the audience is going to climb or not, as you say, there will be something about that personal story that resonates with many people.

**Euan** Well, climbing's reached the mainstream in the past couple of years with films like Dawn Wall and Free Solo, that reached international cinema audiences. Free Solo, for example, winning an Oscar - that doesn't happen with just a climbing film. That happens when you manage to make the challenge, the task that a climber is facing like Alex Honnold, you manage to dig into their psyche and the character behind it. Then other

people can relate. Of course, there's an element of going 'Oh, that's scary what he's doing! And I'm terrified! Imagine being able to do that!'

But also just imagining the kind of person who's able to do that. And I think these films have been so successful because they've looked really deeply into the psyche of the person that it does these things. If that makes sense. Alex Honnold just appears to have no fear whatsoever. That's an interesting story for a lot of folk.

**Mary-Ann** That was my take-home from watching Free Solo - just, 'There's something funny with that guy's brain!' One of the films you've made recently, Euan, is 'We Need to Talk About Kev', about a climber called Kev Shields. Tell us a bit about that, and Kev's story and why you made the film.

**Euan** So I first met Kev through the dry tooling scene. In Scotland, Kev's quite instrumental in the Scottish tooling series. And we just crossed paths a couple of times through that sort of thing. And then I found out a little bit about him. If anyone doesn't know who Kev is, he's a Scottish professional climber and he lives up in the Highlands, he's from just south of Glasgow in Ayrshire. He has a physical impairment to his left hand. And so he's used to ice climbing with a prosthesis, and the ice axe is strapped to the hand. His right hand is perfectly functioning, but his left hand obviously is not. He doesn't just do that, he also climbs - rock climbing. So with his left hand impairment, he would climb some really, really impressively difficult trad routes. Difficult for an able-bodied climber and [he was] really excelling at that. He also battles with epilepsy. He's had epilepsy for a long time - he still has it, but it's medicated. But that affected his mental health and things like that.

He then had an ice climbing accident in 2010 where he fell from an ice pillar in Fort William and shattered his ankle. And that kind of added to the list of things that were working against him. And the ankle never really repaired properly and he had multiple surgeries on it to have various pins placed and then removed and then all these different things happened to him. I met Kev when he had already had his ice climbing accident, but he was sort of in between surgeries and already for me, I thought, 'Well, there's a story here!' This guy has clearly overcome a lot of adversity to be able to become a professional climber, considering the disability to his hand. Then also the level which he climbs at is interesting anyway. He climbs quite bold, trad climbing so that is an interesting personality anyway, somebody who climbs things like that.

Then add to that, he is just a great guy. He's a really good character and he's a lovely guy to talk to, a genuine stand up, lovely guy. And he makes a brilliant interview. He's really open and honest. When you first meet Kev, he can perhaps come across as sort of a typical 'Scottish male'. But he is very interesting and open and honest and he's really willing to tell you how it is and how he's feeling in interviews.

That, as a filmmaker, is a total godsend, because then you get that personal story that you're looking for. With regards to the film, we decided to just start filming some stuff. We filmed a few climbs, his recovery from his ankle injury and trying to document that. If you haven't seen the film, I don't want to spoil it for anyone - but it was a three year project because things went on. The resulting film was not even the film I started off planning to make! You start off making one thing and then so many things happened by the end of it, you have a completely different film. And in my opinion, a better film.

**Cress** Does that happen a lot?

**Euan** In my opinion, what makes a good film is something that has become organic. So you start filming because you know that there is something here, but maybe you don't quite know what it is yet. I think if you try and script a documentary or a climbing film too much - obviously there needs to be some kind of direction you're going in, but...one of my favourite documentaries is a documentary called 'Icarus', I think it was on Netflix. It was about doping scandals in cycling and professional sport. And again, I won't spoil it for anyone, but that's one of these documentaries where they clearly started out to make a documentary about one thing and then it just shot off on this crazy tangent. I don't know if any of you have seen it and but it's worth a watch, because it's mind blowing. The amount of depth the documentary went into in the end, I don't think it started off like that. And that's I think perhaps where a lot of filmmakers miss a trick. It's trying to script something or trying to really shoehorn a person or a character into the story that they want to tell, rather than letting their character tell THEM the story.

**Mary-Ann** I guess it must require quite a lot of courage as a filmmaker to give your character or the story that space to kind of grow. Because if you start a project, three years later and you're 'Oh, hang on. Turns out this isn't the story that I was hoping to tell, and it might not be anything'.

**Euan** I don't know personally, but I bet there are a number of filmmakers out there who have hard drives full of footage that they never did anything with because that did happen. But I mean, you're never going to find out until you try, right? Being totally honest, halfway through making 'We Need to Talk About Kev', I wasn't entirely sure how I was going to edit it, I was like, 'I don't really know what the story is here'. Kev's life, over those three years, took so many twists and turns that I didn't even know how to tell the story anymore. I still thought it was worth doing and it was good and it was interesting. I wouldn't otherwise have kept going. He was still the same person and he still had this amazing story to tell. But as a filmmaker trying to think about how then to relay that story to an audience, I had my head in my hands. I re-edited it about three times. I was trying to edit as I went, so that I would have some kind of basis of an edit to come into rather than just starting fresh with three years' of footage. And then I basically started from scratch again anyway! Because honestly, it took so many turns. And then the final twist in Kev's tale just threw me completely out the window. And I basically deleted my project file and started from scratch.

**Cress** But worth it in the end, Euan?

**Euan** Oh, definitely. And I'm really proud of that film because I feel like I did Kev justice. And that's something that's really important, I think, for me and for any filmmakers that you feel that your subject, you did them a service by making the film. At the end of the day I'm quite good friends with Kev now, we've got young children the same age and we've been on climbing trips together and things. It would feel pretty awkward to make a film about someone that you actually quite like, go into it as a friend and then you don't like the film or they don't like the film! I was nervous showing Kev the film for the first time, I didn't know what he would think of it, but luckily he liked it.

**Mary-Ann** You said that Kev might be perceived as a "traditional Scottish male", but he is forthcoming about mental health battles and how climbing has affected him and helped him. Do you think there is a change? Is there a change in those traditional male communities of people feeling more able to speak out about good and bad mental health?

**Euan** I think yeah. The real subject of the last year in particular with lockdown has been mental health, because this has been a trying time for the entire nation's mental health. I

think men traditionally don't obviously have as open a conversation about their mental health with their peers, definitely not as much as they should. But I feel like it is improving. There's a long way to go. There's a long, long way to go. And I wouldn't say we were anywhere near the finish line there.

But someone like Kev breaking down that stereotype of the typical Scottish male, and being open and honest, is really refreshing. And because someone like Kev who has been through so many issues with his mental health and also just times in his life that have been very challenging to him, and to come out the other side as the person he is and able to talk about it - that's very few and far between. There's not a lot of folk out there who can withstand so many barrages and still come out the other side smiling, and willing to talk to you about it.

**Mary-Ann** And express those emotions so eloquently as well, in a way that you as an audience member can totally relate to, but that's, I guess, your talent as a filmmaker as well.

**Euan** It's much easier to edit an interview with someone who talks eloquently and expresses themselves well, than someone that you have to try and draw stuff from. That's probably why I like this film so much, because I like Kev, he's a really good guy.

**Mary-Ann** He's got a lot to say!

**Euan** He does, yeah. And he's got a very good way of saying it. A very unique way of saying it. He has such turns of phrase that come out from time to time, they are just absolute gold.

**Cress** And when you're filming someone on a route, obviously you can't necessarily be on the same route, you need to be at the side somewhere. So how do you recce the site and work out where to be? And rig it so you're safe? Can you tell us about that?

**Euan** A lot of it is experience from being a climber yourself. And I think trying to make a film about a climber and not being a climber yourself always produces sub-par content. I've definitely watched pieces on TV about climbing or climbers who've been filmed by a bog standard film crew and from an adventure filmmakers' perspective, it's just rubbish.

Being a climber, you understand the route, you understand where they're going. You can perhaps converse with the climber beforehand - where is the crux? Where are the difficult parts that I'll really want to film? Where are you likely to fall off? If you're thinking this is maybe a fall-off situation, what bits do you really want me out of the way for? Things like that. Gaining a lot of information about the route before you even start any kind of filming is really helpful.

And there are so many different types of climbing - filming those different types of climbing can be so different as well. For example, sport climbing - you've generally got an equipped route, so you've got bolts and perhaps if it's a popular cliff, there's multiple lines to choose from. I did a project with Steve McClure in Spain a few years back where I was able to equip and fix a rope up an adjacent route and then use lanyards and clips to pull myself into his route, and then release myself as he came towards me and move up the route with him. And I could even say to him, 'Where are you going to rest? Where are you going to stop and shake out on your route?' He could tell me where and I knew that was a time I could quickly sling the camera around my shoulder and go up my ropes to the next

section. And it's a full body workout! I remember being absolutely knackered at the end of that week and but we got some great footage out of it. But that's sport climbing, that's really easy.

Trad climbing, climbing a route that doesn't have equipment, you're talking about abseiling, getting to the top of the roof beforehand and rigging up a belay and abseiling down routes and then jumaring back up the ropes. And then the next step up from that is [something] like the Eiger. How do you recce the Eiger without climbing it?! I did two projects on the Eiger in the space of a summer. The first one was on the West flank with paraclimbers.

Myself and my partner who was going to be filming, we went and climbed about three quarters of the route about a week beforehand, just as a recce, just to see what it was like - the angles and that kind of thing. And we were lucky that obviously we were quite able bodied, fit mountaineers, so we knew that we could go up and recce it quite quickly. And that meant that for the next week, climbing with the para climbers, we had a bit of inside knowledge there.

Filming on the north face of the Eiger with Robbie Phillips and Willis Morris was a whole different kettle of fish because it's suddenly a route that's too hard for me to climb, you know?! What do I do in that situation? Luckily - I honestly couldn't have been more lucky - there were two Alpinists who had been working another route on the face at the same time. They had fixed ropes positioned on the cliff face all the way from the Stollenloch window - the north face of the Eiger has a train access window - pretty much from there, most of the way up their route. They had fixed ropes in place and they just happened to run perfectly adjacent to the route that I was filming. And so with kind words when talking to them, they agreed that I could use the ropes to gain access to film Robbie climbing this new route Paciencia and I am just to the left on this new route, Odyssey.

I could never have gotten to that situation without an entire team of rigging people. It literally was myself, Robbie and his partner Willis belaying him. There was no other crew or anything like that. So like I said, being a climber and mountaineer certainly helps when it comes to recceing and setting up, keeping yourself safe and in check. And at the end of the day, on that route in particular, I filmed about three pitches more from there and then I bailed. Because it got too scary! The North Face of the Eiger's a horrible place to be. It really is. It's raining rocks. This is in the summer as well. So the ice at the top of the mountain is melting and releasing rocks and it's raining rocks the size of fridges. And then a brick sized rock scuffed past me and clipped my camera, and I just kind of went, 'Yeah, I'm done with this now!' I gave them some go pros and then abseiled back down to the train tunnel and got a train down to town and got a beer!

**Mary-Ann** Oh, that sounds like the good bit of the day! But that's the thing, I mean, in your experience, not only do you take on mountaineering routes for yourself, but also you've watched people really pushing the boundaries. And you're right there in their faces, in their heads. Why DO people do that?! Why would you want to climb a route where something the size of a fridge might end it all in an instant?

**Euan** It's the old quote from Hillary, 'Why climb Everest? Because it's there'. I don't know. I think for a lot of climbers it's such a personal thing. So many people have different reasons for doing it. And I guess it's the same with most climbers - Why does anyone put themselves in a dangerous situation like hard trad climbing? Because it feels amazing when you do it. Personally, when I've completed a hard trad climb that's been near my limit, you get this amazing rush. When do you ever get to push yourself like that in life,

really? Stepping onto the top of a climb when you've completed something and pushed yourself and tried hard and perhaps even risked injury or worse - the exhilaration you get from the end of that, like any other adrenaline sport, is really quite something. So there's definitely an adrenaline aspect to it. But again, why [do] people go hill walking? A lot of people would rather stay home and watch the TV of a weekend. Some people are happy not to leave the house on a sunny day. Why does anyone go a walk up a hill to the top and down again? It's just as nonsensical and pointless as going trad climbing or sport climbing to other folk.

**Mary-Ann** That is, to be fair, exactly what my husband says, 'But you've just got to walk back down again... So why are you doing it?! And there might not be a view at the top. I mean, genuinely, why are you doing it?' Because, because, 'Why not?!'

**Euan** And at the end of the day, you feel like you've achieved something. So I mean, that is the age old question: Why do climbers do it? Pfffft. Someone much wiser than me can give you a fuller answer!

**Cress** We're going to talk about Crohn's disease. For those of us who don't know, what is it and how do you manage it? Tell us about how it affects your life and your climbing.

**Euan** OK, so if anyone doesn't know - Crohn's disease is in a group of diseases called inflammatory bowel diseases. And so it's different from things like IBS - irritable bowel syndrome. Inflammatory bowel disease is an immune problem. In most basic terms, your body thinks your intestines are an infection and they're trying to fight it. It's in that class of diseases where you've not done anything wrong, your body is just malfunctioning. A wire has been crossed somewhere.

When I was about 14 or 15 at school - I was always quite a skinny lad - but I started to lose weight quite quickly and I felt the urgent need to go to the toilet a lot. And as a teenage boy at school, it's really an unpleasant thing to have to do. If you've ever set foot in a boy's toilet in a secondary school, that's not a nice place to be for any length of time! I got progressively more ill and there wasn't really an explanation. But it was quite a gradual process, it happened over about six or seven months. I lost so much weight eventually that I couldn't walk to school. I was begging my mum for lifts to school and she'd say, 'You're a young, fit teenager, you don't get a lift, on you go!' Because it was about a two mile walk to school, up to a big hill. Basically, my school was at the top of the hill and I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't walk, I couldn't concentrate in classes. I was falling asleep in classes. Everyone thought I was just being a lazy teenager. But eventually I got so bad, I had stomach cramps, I was curled on the sofa in tears most nights it was that bad. And I went to the doctor and my parents say that when they saw me in the context of the hospital, they realised how stark the problem and the change had been in me. Seeing me in a hospital bed, they realised I was skeletal. I looked like I had an eating disorder or something, you know.

But it because it had been so gradual, they hadn't really noticed or they hadn't really fully appreciated the extent of it. So I was really quite ill and I was in hospital for a while on steroids and things like that to try and gain me some weight and to try and figure out what was wrong. And so eventually I was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease, after a few unpleasant procedures like colonoscopies and MRI scans and things like that.

It felt like a bit of a death sentence at the time, as a 16 year old. 'You've got this thing, Crohn's Disease, it won't go away. We can't give you medicine that'll make it disappear,



but we can give you medicine that can help control it and can help you to live with it.' And it floored me. I left school, I dropped out of school at my first opportunity. I had a bit of a teenage life crisis, suddenly it was just like, 'What's the point in doing anything?' I dropped out of school and that's when I decided, once when I got fitter again - when I was ill, I couldn't climb, I stopped climbing and I couldn't walk up hills and things like that - but when I got a diagnosis and started to become a bit more fitter, that's when I decided that I was going to grab this by the horns and I was going to become a mountaineering instructor and I was going to move up to the Highlands and never see my friends ever again.

**Mary-Ann** And was that like, two fingers up to the disease, prove that you can do anything regardless?

**Euan** It was a knee jerk reaction. It was because at the time it felt like, well, either roll over and don't do anything and let this thing take over my life or I decide that I'm going to have to deal with this or at least learn to live with it. I think a lot of people around me at the time did see the change in me, where I decided that I was going to deal with this, I was going to get a handle on it. I started to gain weight again, I started to get medicated, various different medicines - some were more effective than others and eventually we found the course of medication that works for me, that kept my disease at a base level, in remission, more or less. As long as I watched what I ate and I watched how tired I got - things like fatigue can be a big problem. Then I could probably carry on doing the things I loved without really any problems. And that was the light at the end of the tunnel for me, was realising that as soon as you get something like this under control, it doesn't have to be a death sentence.

**Mary-Ann** I imagine that some of the specialists or doctors that you were talking to when they're saying, OK, if you're careful about what you eat, if you make sure you don't get too tired, you know, you take care of yourself, then you can have a decent quality of life with this. It doesn't need to take over. I'm imagining that they're not, in the forefront of their minds, imagining you then on the north face of the Eiger! Because surely those big mountaineering journeys, that adventure filmmaking, [even] some of the stuff I do, the bottom line is that you don't know quite when you're going to eat, it's difficult to know what you're going to eat, it's exhausting. You have to pull long days. I mean, how do you manage those two demands?!

**Euan** I'm very lucky that my Crohn's disease is well under control and managed by my medication. There are some people who really struggle to get any kind of management from their medication or from lifestyle changes. There are people that have to go through surgery to have sections of bowel removed - sections that have got too strictured, they become scar tissue and you just have to remove sections of intestine - people end up with stoma bags and things like that, colostomy bags, that kind of thing. These are the real dark places of Crohn's. It can start to really just destroy your quality of life. However, I know people with stoma bags who say it was the best thing that ever happened to them because it gave them a quality of life back.

And like me, the diagnosis that I got was the best thing that ever happened to me, because I could then start to understand what was wrong. And I was lucky that my medication works. And I could get back to a point where I almost didn't feel ill anymore. And I don't feel ill. I've had a couple of climbing trips with you, Mary-Ann...would you have guessed, looking at me, that I had any kind of chronic condition?

**Mary-Ann** No, absolutely not. No. And it's only when we were standing in a Sainsbury's on the way up to the Isle of Skye that you said, 'Oh, there's certain things that I need to buy'. And I was like, 'Oh, right, OK'. Kind of thinking, 'Fussy eater!'.

[Euan laughs]

**Mary-Ann** So how do you manage it on an expedition? What are the things that you can or can't do, that you need to be careful about?

**Euan** On expeditions or climbing trips, you tend to be eating when you can, or perhaps eating foreign foods or shopping in different supermarkets and things, where you can't rely on the things that you're used to eating or you know that won't make you ill. It is a bit of a minefield.

I have had times on climbing trips where I've eaten the wrong thing and I've just had to lay up for a day or just take it easy. I've had an upset stomach. Managing it is just a case of taking my medication at the correct times and not doing anything foolish, like eating a massive curry the day before I'm meant to go up a hill! I find that for me personally, anything that upsets my stomach tends to be the kind of thing that upsets most people's stomachs - big, rich meals, lots of very spicy foods, things like that. But they tend to affect me tenfold on the average person. But if I'm sensible, I should get away with most meals. My medication is powerful stuff, the medication I'm on is the kind of stuff they give to transplant patients to stop the body rejecting your organs. The side effects list is THIS long and it really makes very scary reading. But it is effective. I take oral medication, I also self inject medication and it keeps my disease at a level where, like I say, I don't feel ill anymore. And for that I'll be eternally grateful to the NHS and to my consultant and the nurses and doctors who have helped me over the years to get to that stage. Because, like I say, they gave me my life back. I can do these things I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise.

**Mary-Ann** You're absolutely right, Euan, that if you were walking down the street or having a chat with someone at the pub, no one would know. You know, that is the nature of hidden disability, isn't it? And if I'm standing in the queue for the loos and you're walking past me to the accessible toilet, I hope that I wouldn't say anything, but I might give you a second look, kind of like, 'Oh, is he allowed to use that loo?!'

**Euan** It's about cultural perceptions. How many films and comedy programmes have you watched where there's been a storyline of someone using a disabled toilet they shouldn't have, and this big, horrible social situation has arisen from it? There's this massive social taboo about using a disabled toilet if you're not disabled. But there are so many hidden disabilities or people that just perhaps need that extra space. How would you, from a line up, to be able to identify someone who has a colostomy bag or stoma bag? You know, they could look like any one of us. And just because it's on the inside, it is on their stomach, how do you know that they don't need to go in to empty that, or to change it, or they have an issue, they have something they need to sort?

I like the campaign Crohn's and Colitis UK ran, 'Not every disability is visible', and there are obviously many others [hidden disabilities]. Crohn's disease and colitis are very much ones that you probably wouldn't guess that people had. Personally, I try not to use disabled toilets unless I really need to. I will wait in a queue or I'll use regular toilets 95% of the time if I feel that my going to the toilet is like 95% of the population, you know?

If I stopped at the Motorway services and I'm going to go for a wee, I'm going to go and use the regular men's toilets, I'm not going to go to disabled toilet because that's abusing a privilege that sometimes I really do need. And that's, I think, an important thing for myself to make me feel a little bit more normal sometimes. It's not exciting, but I can use a toilet like a normal person, you know?! Whereas sometimes I stop at the motorway services and I cannot wait. I don't have the time to wait. It's not because I've pushed it too long, I waited til the next services. It's not that. My body didn't give me notice. My body's said 'You need to go to toilet RIGHT NOW' and short of pulling over on the hard shoulder, this is a situation where I need to go to the toilet right now. If there's a queue or if the disabled toilet is the only one available, I'm afraid I have to use it. I don't have the luxury of an average person of being able to, as an adult, able to stand and wait to use a toilet. 'Sudden urge syndrome' is the term given to it, but it's a side effect of Crohn's and colitis. Even IBS sufferers can have it as well. You don't get the opportunity to wait.

**Cress** I believe there are over 300,000 people in the UK alone that have inflammatory bowel disease, but we still seem to be really poor talking about it! How do we break down the stigmas from talking about things to do with, you know, that area of the body?

**Mary-Ann** We can't even say it! Poo! We're talking about poo!

**Euan** Spot the people with young kids! Talking about poo has become a daily occurrence for me now, especially with a two year old trying to potty train them!

**Cress** But it's different in adults, isn't it? You know, we can talk about it with kids, and it's somehow acceptable. But, you know, as we become older, it's... 'ooh, not sure about that'.

**Euan** There's no need to dwell on it, but there's also a need to be frank about it when it's appropriate, like, for example, a medical condition. I think for me, getting diagnosed took a bit of time because I was embarrassed. As a teenage boy, I had to hand in stool samples and get colonoscopies and things like that. And I put them off as long as I could because they were just embarrassing. And, you know, as a teenage boy telling your friends why you're off today, 'I'm going to go to the hospital and they're going to put a camera up my bum'. How could any teenage boy look at you with a straight face and say, 'OK, that's fair enough'. Of course, you're going to get jokes and laughs and things like that. And that was a horrible experience for me, trying to find a core group of friends who understood the real situation that was going on there, that I could confide in.

**Mary-Ann** Do you think that was part of the reason that you got so ill before you ended up getting medical help, that on some level you knew something was wrong, but it was about your bum?

**Euan** Yeah, yeah, definitely. I'm sure it's just as embarrassing for a teenage girl as a teenage boy and you're going through so many difficult periods in your life there. Everything about your body is hormonal and changing at a rate of knots and you can't keep track of it. Add to that something as embarrassing as a toilet problem that you're just like, 'Kill me now, really'. I remember at school, they gave me a key to the disabled toilet and I was like, 'How embarrassing is it now to - in front of people - go and use a disabled toilet?' 'What's wrong with you? How come you get to use the disabled toilet??' There's no winning!

The way we overcome that is starting at a young age and the early years and talking about disability, talking about people with other needs, that sort of thing. It slowly becomes not as

big and horrible an issue. I think everyone's going to always struggle to talk to each other about their bowel movements, it's not a particularly pleasant topic! For example, think of a food substance that you absolutely hate, it will make you vomit instantly. People universally have the same reaction if you start talking about poo. Everyone goes, 'uuuggghh'. Everyone poos. Everyone knows what it is, what it smells like, and that instantly garners up that repulse reflex in everyone. And unfortunately, if you end up in a situation where you need help because you're not pooing like everyone else, then I'm afraid it's a very difficult situation to deal with.

Like I said earlier, finding a core group of either friends or family or a partner that you confide in is a huge, huge help and benefit. My wife knows my needs and ins and outs. Whenever we're out and I go, 'I need to go to the toilet', she goes, 'No problem, we'll go and find a toilet'. There's no question, there's no 'Why? What's wrong?'

It's the same with my climbing partners, most people I go climbing with just know that if I scoot off into the bushes all of a sudden, no one's panicking that I've run away. They just wait a few minutes, I'll reappear and we carry on with our day.

**Mary-Ann** I imagine that particularly for young people who are grappling with diagnoses like the one you had might be thinking, 'Oh, this is the end of everything I thought I was, everything I'd hoped to do'. They'll hear your story and take great strength and comfort from it. What would your advice be to someone who's dealing with a diagnosis of a chronic condition?

**Euan** First of all with a diagnosis, is congratulations! Because I know how hard it is before you're diagnosed with anything. The amount of time that you spend in and out of hospitals, being unsure about what's wrong with you. That is really, I think probably the most tough time.

Being diagnosed is also exceptionally difficult and very hard. But you should view that as the starting step to - perhaps not recovery, if it's a chronic illness - but dealing with it or getting a handle on getting your life back. There are obviously so many chronic illnesses out there. I am a very lucky person where my chronic illness is dealt with and medicated correctly, and I can lead a normal life. I really sympathise with folk who don't have that luxury or other people with Crohn's disease, who are still battling with it. I don't know if I can offer a whole lot of advice to that, other than you have to keep battling and you have to make sure that the medical professionals know exactly how you feel and that you're honest with people, and you're honest with yourself more than anything.

Days when you're not feeling well, just take a day off. Just relax - even if it's just your mental batteries, just recharge a little bit. I know from personal experience that trying to do too much, for any kind of condition, is just not good for you. Dealing with chronic illness and exhaustion, they just don't meld very well.

**Cress** You have a young daughter now. Has being a dad changed your attitude to climbing, changed your attitude to risk?

**Euan** I have never been a particularly risk-led person. I mean, perhaps less risk averse than the average person walking down the street, but I have a very acute sense of when I feel safe. If I'm dangling in a harness on the north face of the Eiger, but my harness is well secured and I'm attached to the rock face and there's no rocks falling on my head, I feel safe. I could be 10 feet off the ground, I could be a thousand feet off the ground. It makes

no difference to me. But being in a dangerous situation, where I know that there is real risk to my health right now - I don't like that. And I think becoming a parent hasn't changed my outlook on that, with regards to climbing, I still climb trad climbing and I still do a lot sport climbing - sport climbing doesn't feel particularly risky to me, a lot less risky than getting in a car! And trad climbing within my ability - I've been climbing for so long that I like to think that I know where my limits are. Obviously accidents happen. But like I say, driving a car, accidents happen. If you live your life avoiding any kind of risk then you're not setting a very good example to your kids, are you?

The only thing I gave up when I had a child was a speed flying, paragliding. Because I didn't feel as in control. I used to fly paragliders, and I sold my equipment when I found out that my wife was pregnant. Because that was one of these sports that I felt I could possibly get into a lot more, and it was a lot more risky than climbing. Not justifiable!

**Mary-Ann** Euan, thank you so much, you've given us so much to think about that. And listeners, I would urge you to hunt down Euan's films, a lot of them are online on Vimeo. Is that the place to go to see them?

**Euan** Yep, Vimeo page and BMC TV on YouTube has a few films of mine on it as well on it. I've produced a few films for the BMC, as well.

**Mary-Ann** Including one with me, climbing up The Inaccessible Pinnacle. One of Euan's films about someone who is NOT a good climber but does get to the top and down safely. I've given it away now!

**Euan** Oh, I know, c'mon, the jeopardy!

**Mary-Ann** I know! We were all wondering! Cress, should we finish with our quickfire questions?

**Cress** OK, so Euan, we have ten questions that we ask every guest on Finding Our Way. Are you ready?

**Euan** I'm ready.

**Cress** Describe yourself in three words.

**Euan** Ambitious, creative and inspired. I take inspiration from a lot of places. And so I feel inspired by a lot of things.

**Mary-Ann** Favourite Mountain or Crag snack?

**Euan** I'm very, very partial to a pork pie

**Cress** Best mountain memory?

**Euan** Probably topping out the Eiger with the paraclimbers. A wholly overwhelming and emotional experience, because of the situation and the achievement

**Mary-Ann** Bucket list destination?

**Euan** I would love to visit the Himalayas.

**Cress** How often do you get lost?

**Euan** Every trip. I have absolutely no sense of direction. I was stood in the middle of Chamonix pointing in the wrong direction, saying that that was Mont Blanc and my friend I was with righted me and said, 'That's Mont Blanc'. We took about ten paces and then I pointed again to the wrong mountain and said, 'Is that Mont Blanc?'

**Mary-Ann** Euan, are you funny?

**Euan** Funny? Ha ha funny or peculiar?!

**Mary-Ann** Either. I think that's our answer!

**Euan** I have embraced my dad jokes.

**Cress** If you were an animal, what animal would you be?

**Euan** I would probably have to be a red deer. It's one of my favourite things when we go to the Highlands, is seeing the deer just galloping through the moorlands, it really is a great sight to see. And I quite fancy having that ability to make good progress through marshland at seemingly unbelievable pace.

**Mary-Ann** One thing you always carry on the hill?

**Euan** I always have a camera of some kind, if it's a little point and shoot or if it's my big DSLR, I always have something on me. Because I can't let a photo or a view go uncaptured.

**Cress** What does climbing mean to you?

**Euan** Climbing means community, I guess. I met my wife through a mutual love of climbing. My best man at my wedding is my longest climbing partner. Some of my closest friends and the biggest life experiences I've ever had have been with people that I met through climbing. And it is such a great community for that alone.

**Mary-Ann** All right, last question Euan: We want more of you, where do we go?

**Euan** OK, so I'm on Facebook. You've got Final Crux Films on Facebook. I also have an Instagram page. I have a Twitter although I don't use it so much because I'm confused by it! I don't have any witty political opinions to make, so I don't think Twitter's exactly for me. And I have a Vimeo page where all of my full-length films are there to watch for free.

**Mary-Ann** So on Vimeo, Final Crux films, BMC TV on YouTube. And what's your Instagram handle?

**Euan** @Finalcruxfilms. No complications. That's it!

**Mary-Ann** There you go. Thank you so much, Euan, it's been absolutely brilliant talking to you.

**Euan** Not at all. Thank you for having me. It's been good to delve into these things.

**Cress** Great. And thank you for listening to this episode of Finding Our Way. Subscribe so you don't miss an episode, share the podcast with friends and also really importantly, let us know what you think. Use @TeamBMC on Instagram and Twitter and use the hashtag #FindingOurWay.

**Mary-Ann** We'll see you for the next one!

### **#Outro music**

**Mary-Ann** Finding Our Way is brought to you by the British Mountaineering Council and is proudly supported by Berghaus. It's produced and presented by Cress Allwood and me, Mary-Ann Ochota. It's edited by Chris Stone. The artwork was designed by Neil Arch. Follow us on your podcast app so you don't miss an episode, and join the conversation on social with the hashtag #FindingOurWay.