



Stu Skinner on the Finding Our Way podcast

Content alert: In this conversation, Stu talks about experiencing mental health challenges including suicidal thoughts and attempting suicide. He also explains he lost a friend to suicide. There are no details about the events. Stu also talks about recovery, hope and how important talking to each other and breaking down stigma is.

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 stigma and mental health, losing a friend to suicide and living with and managing self harm and suicidal thoughts. There are no details of the specific events. For more detailed information, have a look at the episode description.

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

Mary-Ann And I'm Mary-Ann Ochota. This podcast is all 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...

Cress ...to find out what they love, what they hate, the highs and lows of their journey so far and what insights they can share with us to make the world a better place. Expect good chat, memorable stories and hopefully bursts of inspiration from people who are making real change happen.

Mary-Ann So, Cress, who have we got today?

Cress Joining us today is a man who's not afraid to challenge the status quo outdoors or undertake daunting journeys overseas. Someone who positively encourages difficult and deeply honest conversations, relentlessly challenging stigma around mental wellbeing that cause so many to suffer in silence. He's an experienced expedition leader, a provider of mental health first aid courses, and the founder of a charity called Changing Horizons. He

believes everyone has the right to a good quality of life and that conversations are the catalyst for change. Connecting with us from Dorset, welcome Stu Skinner!

Stu Skinner Hello! Thank you very much for having me today.

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

Cress So Stu, tell us a bit about yourself?

Stu My name's Stu obviously, I'm a director of a small mental health charity called Changing Horizons. I'm also a freelance expedition leader who's passionate about the mental health benefits of outdoor activity, and making a link between the mental health world and the outdoor world.

Mary-Ann What triggered your interest in the outdoors and your interest in mental health education?

Stu The outdoors really came from my mental health journey. From the age of 14, I wanted to be an ambassador. I dreamt of being an ambassador. I wanted to work in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. And then I went to the U.S. when I was 19 years old. And I went through a very traumatic experience which really impacted on me. I went through things that I've never experienced before, I thought things, had feelings that I'd never experienced and I really didn't understand what I was going through. And I guess, you know, what I now know is that it was a mental health challenge, which developed into a mental health diagnosis.

I really struggled with self-harm and suicidal thoughts and ultimately, I made an attempt on my life. I was very lucky to survive that suicide attempt. There was this descent into, you know, deep struggles with my mental health and my wellbeing. And I never really got the support I guess I needed. I didn't get a diagnosis until much, much later, after I left university. And once I received that diagnosis, it was a diagnosis of bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, I was told that there was no career in the Foreign Office for me.

Mary-Ann Because of that, because of the diagnosis?

Stu Yeah because of the diagnosis and I guess the experiences I'd been through. Yeah, it was made pretty clear to me.

Mary-Ann Wow. What was the impact of being told that?

Stu Deeply distressing. I guess part of me maybe realised that a career in the Foreign Office probably wasn't appropriate for me anyway. But, you know, mental illness at that point had then robbed me of my career, it robbed me of my relationship, it robbed me of a home and my hopes and dreams. And I just thought that was a closed door. At the age of 25, I thought my life was over. I thought there was no coming back, I couldn't see a future for myself. And I guess that's when those feelings of hopelessness and despair and suicidal thoughts really set in, because I was just like, 'what's the point? What am I going to do with myself?' And I just didn't know and I couldn't see past my illness and my personal struggles.

Cress Stu, it sounds like there was very little support back then.... Did you go to a doctor?

Stu I did. And the support - I didn't really get much support. When I spoke to my university professor about my feelings and my suicidal thoughts, given that I also lost my best friend at the age of 21 to suicide, you know, he just put down my feelings. He was like, "You know, they're just exam nerves. Everyone has exam nerves. You'll be fine."

And I would constantly be told 'You'll be fine', and, "What have you got to be depressed about? You've got good friends, good family, a good life!" So there wasn't really, I guess, a lot of support at that time. And a lot of the support out there wasn't very helpful.

But there was also a part on my place and maybe some individual accountability. I think this is the problem with stigma. I didn't want to accept that I had a mental illness. And it's very hard to get help and get better unless you're prepared to accept that, you know, you do have a challenge or an illness. And it took a long time for me to accept that.

Mary-Ann Do you think those unhelpful responses, do they come from a place where people are effectively well-intentioned but ignorant, or is it something more more harmful, more sinister, if you will?

Stu I mean, I guess some of it was, you know, sinister. I always want to focus on the positives. And I've led an incredible life and a richly rewarding life that probably wouldn't have happened had I not gone through these experiences. But, you know, when I spoke to my GP and said, 'You know, I'm struggling with self-harm', and she said, 'You're clearly an intelligent person, why are you doing something so stupid?'

[Cress and Mary-Ann groan]

Stu I mean, I don't know if that comes from a place of ignorance or whether that's really sinister!?! Thankfully that was over 20 years ago.

I went on to have an incredible relationship with a very helpful GP. I see a counsellor who has just done wonders for my mental health and I see a psychiatrist. It took a long time for me to find out how to access these services. There's a lot of helpful, supportive people out there. But unfortunately there's still a lot of people who, whether through ignorance or prejudice, still buy into that stigma and reinforce those beliefs that are massively unhelpful for people who are experiencing mental health challenges.

I got into the outdoors because I joined a friend on a four and a half thousand mile bike trip through South East Asia which proved to be the catalyst for change.

Mary-Ann That's that's quite a first journey! Did you literally go from nothing to a four thousand mile bike ride?!

Stu Pretty much, yeah. I mean, I barely left the house for about sixteen months. Yeah. I really struggled with social anxiety and just being around people, and with depression. I became very introverted where once I was very extroverted and very confident. I was massively into my sports. I've always loved sports, I played American Football at university. A friend said, "Look, you know, dude, I know you're going through a really difficult time. How about you come join me on this journey?".

And that was the light that I needed because, you know, there was no light. I couldn't see a future. There was no hope in my life.

I went to work for the first time in a long time and deliberately worked in a coffee shop, because that would help me manage my social anxiety and make me have conversations with people. I flew to the Philippines. I didn't even own a bike, didn't do any training, just bought a second hand bike, got out there and just winged it, basically! Yeah. It was a proper adventure and a massive step into the unknown.

Mary-Ann That's so courageous. Tell us about how things changed when you were on that big bike ride, and when you've been on expeditions since then.

Stu I mean, it was massively transformational. That's like almost like the next chapter, you know, the middle section of my life story. Where there was only despair, I suddenly found hope, I found my passion again and I found my zest for life, I found purpose. Every day brought something new, every day brought adventure. And I had all these incredible experiences and these interactions with people I probably would never have met. And these human connections. And I can't begin to describe the change within me. It was like suddenly I wanted to live again. And suddenly I saw a future for myself. And it was something I'll never forget, you know, and I will always be eternally grateful for my friend for asking me to join him on that trip, because it changed my life. It saved my life as well.

Cress Wow. Is that where this passion for expeditioning stems from Stu? Did you go on to do more training after that trip?

Stu Yeah. I came back from that trip and then I thought, 'well, what next?' That's a question people often ask you when you undertake the journey - 'So what's next?' And I didn't really know. I knew that the career that I wanted had gone. So I had to find something new. And I heard about this career, this job - an expedition leader, basically. So I looked into it and I thought that would be amazing to facilitate the experience I had on this bike trip for other people. It sounded perfect, to transform all those negative experiences into something positive.

I found out there was a six month expedition leader training course. So I signed up on that and went to the Welsh mountains for a month, which was quite shocking! I hadn't had any experience of the British outdoors before really, except for being stood out on the wing on a rugby pitch, you know, getting slightly cold. But I can remember going into the mountains dressed for the jungle, dressed in cotton and was looked at like I was bonkers, to be fair!

I wanted to become comfortable in the Welsh mountains. Because I was deeply uncomfortable, very much out of my depth! I'd never used a compass before and never really come across fog! And it was just all these new skills. Every time I learned something new or I accomplished something new that really helped build up my self-esteem and self-worth, which I guess for many people like myself who live with mental health conditions or challenges, you know, it tends to rob us of that at times. So, yeah, it was a great experience.

Mary-Ann So then what did you do with your expedition training?

Stu So we spent one month in the Welsh mountains, did our Mountain Leader training, and then we went to Belize for six months. There were four of us doing this expedition leader training, and then we became staff assistants on a gap year expedition. There were twenty four 19 to 26 year olds. And we went on a remote jungle expedition. And when I mean remote, it was remote! We trekked all our food and we bathed in rivers. Everything

we cooked was on fires. We built latrines and we were completely shut off. No electricity. So again, it was an incredible experience, something that I'd never encountered before.

Cress I can resonate with that, having led an overseas expedition with Raleigh International. It's quite challenging, isn't it, and throws up various aspects because people are very much out of their comfort zone. How did you experience that?

Stu I mean, yeah, the jungle I see is one of the most challenging environments to work in. It can be very claustrophobic. Everything is out to eat you, bite you, sting you and it's hot and you're sweaty all the time. And there were no home comforts. Taking away all these home comforts from people, in some ways that's great because that's how communities are formed. You know, going through this shared reference, we were all going through the same thing. We built this incredible community.

But also those challenges did impact on our wellbeing to a certain extent because it's nice to sleep in a nice bed sometimes, it's nice to have a home cooked meal. It's quite nice to watch a film from time to time. So, yeah, definitely I wasn't really prepared for the mental health challenges. I knew it would be a physical challenge, but I really wasn't prepared for the mental health challenges of the expedition.

Mary-Ann Do you mean your own and your fellow leaders, or do you mean the participants?

Stu We all definitely experienced it at some points. All of us ended up getting beef worms, botflies, a kind of larvae that's living in your body, eating away at you. And it was definitely challenging. Some people were really impacted and really affected by the jungle in terms of their mental health.

If you think about preparation and briefings - and as expedition leader, I'm sure Cress can testify to this - we always talk about physical health and safety, we talk about the environment, we talk about drinking water, we talk about putting sunscreen on and taking your malaria tablets. And, you know, putting talc on your feet and making sure your feet are dry at the end of the day. But there was never kind of any briefings around what can you do to look after your mental health, how to manage the mental health hazards and challenges of the jungle. And I guess it was unsurprising when you're away from your home comforts, away from your support network for three months with no comforts, that it threw up a lot of mental health challenges. And some of the young people really did struggle with their mental health, to the point where one person was experiencing suicidal thoughts. And there were feelings of self-harm, panic attacks and sleeplessness.

Mary-Ann Did you feel qualified to deal with that, to help them, or were you kind of in at the deep end going, 'ooh, I don't know what to do about this!'

Stu It was kind of left to me to manage people or support people with their mental health, because I'd been through this journey and I was very open about that. And no one really knew what to do. The other staff assistants didn't really know what to do. The expedition leader by his own admission was a little bit out of his depth, even though he's an incredibly caring and empathetic individual. And suddenly it felt like everyone would come to me to talk about the issues, the struggles. I guess I was kind of out of my depth at times but I was kind of happy to do that to some extent. But I didn't really have the proper tool kit and I was kind of making things up as I went along. And all I could really offer was an empathetic ear.

It really baffled me, I had all this first aid training and, you know, someone was bitten by a snake and all our first aid training kicked in and we knew exactly what to do and there was no panic, it was very systematic. And we got the person the help they needed. But when it came to mental health, everyone was out of their depth. And I was just like, 'Why don't we have mental health first aid? Why isn't there a first aid equivalent for mental health? If we need to support people with their physical health and physical injuries, why isn't there a mental health equivalent?'

Cress And thinking about all the years...I've been leading expeditions for 20 years, pretty similar to you, Stu and yeah I'm just laughing now and looking back and going, 'All those people overseas, of course, they're going to be out of their comfort zone, of course there are going to be loads of issues.' We were just so naive. And yet it just wasn't a thing, was it? It was just like, 'oh, man up' and those sorts of really helpful expressions. 'Just get on with it' - classic British outlook, I guess. Old School.

Cress So tell us about how you've managed to get your mental health first aid courses into the outdoors. That's no mean feat Stu, is it?

Stu No. It was a massive undertaking. I mean I became a certified mental health first aider back in 2010, and that's when immediately I started to drive it, or try to drive it, in the outdoor industry. And I knocked on a lot of people's doors. And I managed to get funding to run fully-funded courses. And people seem to get a lot from the course and would like it. But still, there was a lot of reluctance and hesitancy around it.

And I was an expedition leader for World Challenge, and would constantly just say, 'Hey, guys, you know, I run this mental health first aid course' and eventually we got there.

To be honest, they made a very bold and brave step to make mental health first aid mandatory for all their expedition leaders, which I think is incredible. Not just for the benefits of the training, but to make that statement, 'We take mental health as seriously as physical health. We believe that all young people should have their mental health supported on expeditions and we want to make expeditions more inclusive for young people'.

Mary-Ann Do you think the resistance from [other] organisations in the industry was because of the old-fashioned thought of, 'Oh, well, if you're a bit 'weak-minded', then you probably shouldn't be on an expedition anyway'. I use that term with inverted commas!

Stu I think there's the idea that perhaps maybe that we're pampering to people if we start talking about feelings and emotions and that, you know, we should definitely 'buckle up' and just get on with it. But also, I think people don't really recognise the importance of this training or perhaps didn't know enough about it or even want to know enough about it, to see how it could help. It could help leaders support young people with their mental health and help them manage crises.

Cress and I both have had to manage mental health crises as we have physical health crises. So it was difficult for me to understand because I'm really passionate about it and I see the value. I guess I got frustrated and struggled to understand why people are so reluctant to it and are still very reluctant to it.

I think it's also because, let's face it, mental health still scares a lot of people. And that's part of the stigma. You know, words like 'psychosis' and 'schizo' and all this unhelpful language reinforces this idea that people with mental illness or mental health conditions are unstable or scary or crazy. And that's simply not true.

I think we're not very...I guess maybe it goes back to being British. We don't like having uncomfortable conversations, do we? We just like to put them to one side and, you know, just gloss over things, really. So I think there was a lot of fear about having conversations about mental health. And also I think a lot of people are quite scared about going on this training because they have to look inside themselves, don't they? They have to maybe take a look at themselves and kind of recognise, or realise, that they've been through their own mental health journey. Because we all have to some extent, haven't we?

Cress Absolutely. And I think Stu, going back as well, just mentally flicking through my mind...For many, many years, all the training for expedition leaders - certainly if you wanted to lead a trip overseas - it was all about technical expertise and pretty much nothing else. Whereas nowadays, certainly Mountain Training I know are far more open, and understand that to be an effective leader, yes, you might need the technical qualifications. We all need those, that's not in doubt. But actually you need to be able to empathise, you need to be a great people person because you are with people 24/7 in often extreme environments. So you need to know how to handle people when they're not at their best. And no technical expertise will give you those skills!

Mary-Ann Are those skills that you can learn or is that just a kind of person specification? Either you are a good people person, that people can feel confident in turning to you if they're struggling? Or is that something that someone says, 'oh, I'm really good at climbing up mountains and doing rope work and dealing with scorpion stings, but I'm not great with, you know, people who are crying!?

[Cress and Stu laugh]

Mary-Ann Can they fix that?! Can they come on a course with you, Stu, and you'll set them straight?

Stu I would say some people are naturally empathetic, aren't they? And some people, you know, we're all very different and we've all had very different life experiences, which really influences how we respond to situations and how we manage people. But I most definitely believe that empathy is a trait, but it's also a skill. You can learn empathy and there's even something that exists called the empathetic formula.

It's really not that difficult. Supporting someone with their mental health isn't that difficult. For me, it starts with a question: 'I just want to check in with you, is everything okay?' Or 'I'm really worried about you, mate.' And if all you say is 'that sounds really difficult' when someone opens up, or, 'that sounds very painful', or 'that's rubbish'. And then just say, 'tell me more', or 'go on'.

If that's all you say, then you're going to support someone with their mental health, you can make them feel valued and validated and it will de-escalate. You know, kind of bring them down to a more centred place, make them feel heard. And that's a really supportive thing that you can do for a person. And anyone can do that. Anyone can start a conversation. I don't think you need to have all those soft skills. You need to just recognise when

someone might be going through a difficult time and start the conversation and just let them know that you care, because that's how we support someone.

Mary-Ann From the questions that you just demonstrated, none of those questions were solution-focused or judgmental. They were all about listening.

Stu Yeah, I mean, it sounds quite simplistic. But for me, going back to First Aid, for me, that's really like the bandaging of Mental Health First Aid. That's how we create a supportive environment. That's how we can de-escalate a mental health crisis. And it's incredible how powerful listening is. There's a reason why the Samaritans save thousands of lives every year. They're not trained counsellors, they're volunteers who are trained to listen. And, you know, all of us, I guess all of us could learn how to listen a little bit better. And all of us could improve our listening skills. Most definitely.

Cress Can you tell us about this empathetic formula you mentioned?

Stu It's a very simple formula. So it starts off with a 'tentifier'. So using something like, 'it seems like', or 'I wonder if', or 'what I'm hearing is'.

And then you want to use a strong feeling word to really validate their feelings. And we were encouraged to use really strong, powerful words. So if someone said they're feeling scared, then we'd say maybe 'feeling terrified' or 'feeling anguished' or 'that sounds very painful'.

And then you want to identify the source of the feeling. So maybe because it's being isolated or, you know, there's no connection with friends because of the pandemic or they've gone through a bereavement or they've been made redundant. So: 'it sounds like you're feeling really anxious because you've been made redundant and you're unsure if you're going to be able to get a job in the current climate'. That very simply and simplistic is the empathetic response formula.

You know it's very powerful. My girlfriend, who I love to bits, she's probably not the most naturally empathetic person. But, you know, I think she's really learned the power of using the empathetic response formula. And it's definitely helped our relationship and I'd say it's helped her relationship with her friends. I definitely believe empathy can be learnt. And it's quite a simple and easy formula to remember and use.

Mary-Ann Yeah, definitely. That resonates for me because I suspect maybe I'm a bit like your girlfriend. I feel like I'd go, 'Oh, well, why don't you do this?' Or 'Oh, it might be okay, you know.' And that's SO unhelpful. I've got to the point in my own personal journey to realise that's not helpful. But sometimes I say it and then go, 'oh, oh, oh, I shouldn't have said that!'

Stu Expedition leaders, you know, they do try and say, 'Sit down and tell me how you feel' and they'll try to fix that person. And that's not really supportive and it's not really helpful. And rarely does an empathetic response start with 'At least...' Or, you know, 'Things are always better...' Or, 'Why don't you think about people who've got it worse off than you'. It's not gonna make anyone feel heard, listened to or valued.

I also think silence is incredibly supportive. Just sitting with someone, not saying anything is also really powerful and very supportive.

Cress Do you think that perhaps some of the reticence to address issues is related to, uh - I'm really wary, but I'm going to ask - gender and that many men may not have had role models or feel comfortable where they feel safe to talk about feelings? Do you think that [gender] plays a part?

Stu Skinner Oh massively. I mean, you know, growing up as someone who played a lot of football and rugby, we were taught if we got hurt on the pitch to get back up otherwise, you know, we're being a girl, or big boys don't cry and you're kind of emasculated. That's not what men do. It really is something I'm really passionate about challenging and making people aware of how detrimental and the impact of it.

I don't think it was depression that killed my best mate, I don't think that's what drove him to suicide.

It might have given him suicidal thoughts and feelings, but words like 'man up' and 'big boys don't cry', the idea that you're less of a man because you're experiencing emotional and mental health difficulties, that's what stopped him from speaking to me, stopped him from speaking to his best friend about the emotional challenges he was going through.

It stopped me from speaking to my best mate. You know, it is very difficult, because I can look back and and go, 'just imagine if we both felt safe and able to say, 'this is what I'm going through'.' He'd still be alive. And, you know, I probably wouldn't have attempted suicide. So that idea, that mental health challenges is just something we can click our fingers and get over, or look at the bright side, it's not true and it's not helpful. And it definitely plays a part in why suicide is the leading cause of death for men under the age of 50.

Mary-Ann There's been a lot of talk about mental health and there's royal support for mental health foundations and I get the sense that particularly during lockdown, people have felt to some extent more able to talk about finding things difficult and having difficult feelings. But do you think there are aspects that we're ignoring in the narrative that is going on in society at the minute?

Stu I think one silver lining of the pandemic is that suddenly everyone is aware of this thing, "mental health", you know, people are talking about mental health. I ask the question, 'what is mental health? What does mental health mean to you?' And still, a lot of people think, you know, mental health is something that 'they' have...you know, those people with problems and anxiety and depression.

We all do a lot of things to maintain and manage our mental health. Things we took for granted, or maybe we did subconsciously - and then the pandemic came along, lockdown came along, and these things were taken away from us. And suddenly people's mental health was affected and impacted and they sort of realised, 'Okay, so the reason why I went for a walk by the river is because it's really good for my emotional and mental health wellbeing. The reason why I stay connected and see my friends and family, is because that's good for my mental health and emotional wellbeing'. So I definitely think there's a lot we've learnt about it.

But I'm still unsure as to whether we as a society are ok to talk about mental health, whether we're still ok to start a conversation. And when they ask, 'how are you doing mate?' are they actually asking, you know, 'how ARE you doing?' And really wanting to

know how that person is doing rather than just a greeting? 'You alright, mate?' 'Yeah, I'm alright, mate.' You know, that's how a lot of the conversations go!

Mary-Ann 'No, I'm not alright.' 'Woah, I didn't want to know that!'

Stu Skinner Exactly!

Mary-Ann 'Let's talk about football!'

Stu Exactly. I still don't think we're quite prepared for, 'Well, actually, I'm feeling pretty rubbish, mate.' I think that still scares us. That still needs changing.

And that's okay. It's okay for people to feel that way, because we haven't had any real education or training on emotional literacy. You know, it still baffles me that we had physical education at school and sex education at school. We had no kind of mental health, education or emotional literacy. So it's no wonder that we're afraid of these conversations, because we're just not used to having them.

And that's why I just think it's so important that we normalise them. And it's great that the Royals and professional football players and celebrities are doing great work around this. But I think there needs to be more work on the general population having these conversations, and hearing stories of success of the general public.

Let's hear more real stories, as well. I definitely know from having lots of conversations with people, asking 'What stops you from having a conversation about mental health?' It's that people are so afraid of saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing, that they just do nothing.

Even a simple question, you know, even about the weather or what you did last night, that can be enough to change a person's life. And just asking a simple question like 'is everything okay?' 'I'm really worried about you and I just want to know how are you doing?', that can start someone on a journey to recovery and can possibly change their life.

You don't have to have the answers. You don't need to have the solutions. It really is about listening, asking open-ended questions and just giving that person to share whatever they feel comfortable sharing. And not trying to fix them.

Cress You went to Egypt recently - I'm going to change tack here - Tell us about that.

Stu I think like many people, you know, my mental health really was impacted by the pandemic. I worked so hard to establish my charity and things were going so well and then this thing came along and it knocked everything down again. I lost a lot of work and I was just in...I went to a dark place. And for me, I live with suicidal thoughts, they're something I have to manage on a daily basis. Most of the time I can ignore them, I can put them to one side. But in a third floor apartment with no garden and just being here on my own, things kind of escalated. And I got lost in my thoughts and I recognised I needed to do something because I didn't want to go back to that place I've been before.

And for me, you know, the outdoors has become, I guess, it's my sanctuary. It's been hugely instrumental in my recovery and how I manage my mental health. There's this incredible individual who's been creating all these trails out in Egypt. So I just gave him a

message and just said, I want to come to Egypt, I want to hike a trail. And he said, 'Well, actually we just created this new trail called the 'Seven Summits Sinai Trail', which is a 180km trail taking in seven of the biggest summits in the Sinai region. Do you want to do it?' And I was much like the bike trip! 'Yes, that sounds perfect for me.' So I flew out to Egypt, spent some time with him, and I undertook this journey in the remote Sinai desert with my Bedouin guide and camels.

Cress Wow, sounds great.

Mary-Ann When you make that decision, for that radical shift to go on an expedition, something fully committing that takes you away from where you were before, do you sometimes worry that it actually won't be the kind of magic balm to give you space to breathe, and recover to some extent? Or do you go, 'I KNOW this is going to work for me.'?

Stu I guess for me, it wasn't about going away. People [were] asking me, 'Are you just trying get away from all this? Are you trying to escape?' And for me, it was about going back to it all, you know, going back to what's important, going back to to where we're from. Because we're of this world, aren't we? We're not of social media and being bombarded with news and Brexit and Trump and the pandemic.

So for me, it was about reconnecting to Mother Earth and Mother Nature and being in the outdoors and seeing the stars in the skies and not being connected 24 hours a day. Not worrying what's going on in the world and [instead] spending time with the Bedouin and living that simple, slow pace of life.

Every time we met someone, it didn't matter if we had another 18km or 1km to do, we would sit down and we'd make tea. They'd sit and chat, and I'd just get my book out and read.

For me, I know that going into the outdoors and disconnecting and being in Mother Nature, it's deeply helpful for my mental health, because it gives me space to think. It gives me clarity. It helps me better understand my thoughts and feelings. And I find a stillness and peace that I don't necessarily always feel in this world that we've created for ourselves.

Mary-Ann Tell us a bit more about your charity, Changing Horizons.

Stu The charity predominantly runs mental health courses, whether that be mental health first aid courses or shorter mental health awareness courses. Lots of the courses I'm running now are about how to have a conversation about mental health, how to start a conversation, how to manage that conversation and what next, what signposting is out there, what help is available for that person. So debunking the fear around having conversations about mental health.

I work with organisations like Burberry and am currently working with Dyson. So, you know, it's quite a varied mix of clients. But still, my passion is always for the outdoors. And still my passion - and I guess my ultimate aim - is to make it that wherever someone has to have a first aid qualification, they should also have a mental health first aid qualification. We should have as many mental health first aiders as we do first aiders, because I truly believe that there's still a disparity between how we see physical health and how we see mental health. And I guess I want to address that imbalance. I'd like to think we're getting there. I mean, we're having this conversation now, aren't we?

Cress So Stu, what's what's been your highlight so far in this incredible career of yours to date?

Stu For me, the highlight has most definitely been World Challenge saying, 'Right Stu, we're going to make mental health first aid mandatory for all our expedition leaders.' And in that process, I trained over 370 expedition leaders and operational staff in mental health first aid in about an 18 month period. And that was, in its own right, an incredible journey and an incredible adventure. I got to have open conversations with some truly inspiring and amazing individuals that, to be honest, had not always had the space to talk about their own mental health. And it was great to have these conversations.

Mary-Ann Do you think things are changing? That perception that the expedition leader is the superhero at the front, you know, carrying the biggest pack, hacking through the jungle, shows no fear, shows no weakness? Is that changing, or are we still living with that stereotype? I guess, it's a question to you Cress as well, because you're an expedition leader as well as Stu.

Cress I think there's probably still a way to go. And there's probably a difference for males and females, I would imagine. I think for some people, talking about feelings is pretty terrifying! Yeah, so we just have to normalise it, as Stu says.

Mary-Ann Stu, what do you think? Are we still living with the spectre of the superhero?

Stu Yeah, I think that was definitely the notion and my understanding of what I should be. And then it didn't take me very long to realise that it was deeply unhelpful for myself, but also it was doing a disservice to the people in my group.

I think we are starting to recognise the importance of soft skills and and the power of vulnerability. That there's courage and strength in being vulnerable and showing your whole true self and not having to wear this mask.

More people are starting to recognise and realise that. I also think young people are challenging adults to be that person as well, because definitely young people are embracing mental health and wellbeing. So I think we have to adapt, if we are to support young people.

Mary-Ann It seems really startling to me, Stu, that there are so many outdoor organisations that are promoting the benefits and the wellbeing and mental health benefits of being outdoors. And yet they seem slow to embrace the importance of mental health first aid training.

Stu That is the stark contrast in the outdoor industry. You know, we're very good at promoting the mental health benefits of outdoor activity. And adventure providers are very good at promoting the wellbeing benefits of what they provide. But, you know, the contrast is they do very little to train people to support people when they access those services or when they're in the outdoors. So, again, I think that's something that needs to change.

Mary-Ann Missed opportunity and a missed responsibility, if anything.

Cress But the good news is that we can do something with this, and we can take it forward. And we will.

Mary-Ann Yeah, listeners! That's on you, as well!

Stu And they need to, you know? I believe the outdoors has a hugely instrumental part in healing the trauma of what people have gone through. And for many people, this last year has been traumatic. And outdoors and adventure can play a pivotal part in healing that trauma. So we need to be prepared, we need to know how to support people with their mental health because people have been so affected in this last year.

Mary-Ann If someone is listening to this podcast and they're going, 'Ooh, mental health first aid course, I've heard about that and this sounds intriguing and Stu sounds like a good bloke.' What is it that they would expect, what's it going to be like if they sign up for a course?

Stu It really is a first aid approach to mental health, so it's not about being a psychiatrist, psychotherapist or counsellor, it's not about diagnosing people. It's just recognising those early warning signs. So if we see someone with signs or symptoms of distress, if we see someone's in crisis, I'm always keen to stress, trust your instinct. I think we know if something's not quite right or if something's up. And then we provide that help on an initial basis. So try to de-escalate the crisis or try and create a supportive environment to help that person manage their emotions, process their thoughts and feelings, and then guide them to more appropriate professional help.

You learn about what help is available out there and how listening, and active listening creates a supportive environment and can de-escalate a mental health crisis.

It's really not about diagnosing or learning loads of information about mental illness and schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. It really is about preserving a life where ultimately someone's a risk to themselves and learning how to have conversations about suicide and ultimately how to save a life when it comes to a person's mental health.

I can't stress this enough. A conversation can not only start someone on a journey to recovery, it can also save someone's life. Recovery, not only is it possible, it's more than probable these days because there's so much effective treatment out there. There's a plethora of support. There's so many places, organisations and individuals where we can get help. And I just think more people need to know that.

Cress So, Stu, if we had listeners out there who want to do something positive, they may be a bit concerned about a friend or family member, what can they do?

Stu I would say, check in with that person and try and start an honest, authentic conversation and really ask that person how they're feeling. And if they just say 'fine' or 'I'm okay', or 'yeah, doing all right', just to ask twice and let them know that you're actually asking how they're doing.

Cress What's next, what does the future look like?

Stu I'm really focusing on normalising conversations about suicidal thoughts and feelings. One in five people experience suicidal thoughts at some point in their lives. We've been talking about this pandemic and the lives have been lost to that. But with suicide, every single life lost is preventable. It is so important that more people feel comfortable having

these uncomfortable conversations and creating a world, a society, where people feel safe to open up about how they're feeling.

Because, you know, we can't always spot the signs. We can't always spot the symptoms. People are very good at wearing their masks. So it has to be a two-way thing. So I want to help create a world where there is no stigma, there are no barriers so people feel safe to share how they feel and don't feel like they need to hide a part of themselves just so that they're not burden or to not worry people.

Mary-Ann It's important work. Thank you for doing it. It sounds also quite emotionally exhausting!

Stu You know, it's not always all about mental health! I do go out on my paddleboard, I go out for walks, I have a great social life! It's important to have a sense of humour about these things and to make sure that I do have fun, because that's important as well. It's important to try and find the joy in life, I guess!

Mary-Ann Yeah, absolutely. Amen to that. Cress, should we do our Quickfire Questions with Stu?

Cress Yeah, I think so. I think so.

Mary-Ann These are ten questions we ask every guest on Finding Our Way.

Cress OK, Stu, describe yourself in three words.

Stu Passionate, compassionate and determined.

Mary-Ann Your favourite snack for taking on a big old expedition?

Stu Beef jerky

Cress Best mountain memory?

Stu Summiting Mount Katahdin in Maine in the USA.

Mary-Ann Bucket list destination?

Stu Alaska.

Cress How often do you get lost?

Stu Every time I go shopping in Asda.

Mary-Ann Are you funny? I think yes. See previous answer!

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

Stu I think a manta ray

Mary-Ann Oh, interesting.

Stu I've always wanted to fly and I love the ocean and manta rays fly in the ocean. And they're beautiful as well.

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

Stu Beef jerky.

Cress What does walking or expeditioning mean to you?

Stu Serenity.

Mary-Ann And lastly, Stu, we want more of you, where do we go?

Stu You can visit my charity website at www.ChangingHorizons.org

Mary-Ann Brilliant. And there you will find links to mental health first aid, to educational talks and courses that you can book onto as well.

Cress Stu, thank you so much. I always love talking with you and that's been really thought provoking. And yeah, I'm going to take a lot away from this conversation today.

Mary-Ann Yeah, likewise. Thank you so much, Stu. Thank you.

Stu Thank you. It's been a privilege and honour. So thank you very much.

Mary-Ann And thank you, lovely listeners for listening! Let's grow this thing. Subscribe so you don't miss an episode of Finding Our Way. You can share the podcast with friends and your networks. And please do let us know what you think. Use @TeamBMC on Instagram and Twitter and the hashtag #FindingOurWay.

Cress See you on the next one!

Mary-Ann Bye bye!

****Outro music plays****

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.

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or email jo@samaritans.org (24hr response time)

<https://www.samaritans.org>