

## The Cancer Professionals Podcast

### "I see you cancer, and I raise you the ocean"

**(intro music)**

**00:00:10 Carly**

Do you want to know more about the transformative power of cold-water swimming for people living with cancer?

**00:00:16 Nat**

It's changed my life. It has totally changed my life in some unbelievably and unexpectedly excellent ways.

**00:00:26 Paul**

Hello I'm Paul and my pronouns are he/him.

**00:00:30 Carly**

And I'm Carly and I go by she/her. Welcome to the Cancer Professionals Podcast, a podcast from Macmillan. In this series, we chat to a wide range of guests, including health and social care professionals, to lift the lid on current issues faced by the cancer workforce.

**00:00:46 Paul**

In this episode, we are joined by Ellie Ricketts, Macmillan's specialist Oncology Counsellor, and Nat Tarrab-Snooks lived experience expert.

Ellie tells us why she thought it was so important to set up into the blue, cold-water swimming project, whilst Nat expertly describes her experiences of cold-water swimming and how it changed her life.

**00:01:11 Carly**

In November 2024, at the Macmillan Professional's Excellence Awards, we had the pleasure of meeting Ellie, who won the Innovation Excellence Award. Her project truly inspired us, so we couldn't wait to invite her onto the podcast to share more about it.

**00:01:27 Paul**

So hello, Ellie and Nat. And thank you for joining us on the Cancer Professionals Podcast. Shall we start with you both introducing yourselves?

**00:01:36 Ellie**

Yeah. I'm Ellie Ricketts. I am a councillor working in something called the Mustard Tree, which is a Cancer Support centre in Derriford Hospital in Plymouth. I've been a Macmillan professional for 10 years and I am also an avid cold-water swimmer.

**00:01:54 Paul**

Lovely thank you and Nat?

**00:01:57 Nat**

My name is Nat Tarrab-Snooks and I'm a new convert to the glories of cold-water swimming. I'm a theatre maker and visual artist and mother of glorious tiny human.

**00:02:19 Paul**

Lovely. Thank you. So, Ellie, so we're here to talk about the Into the blue programme. So what inspired you to create this now award-winning programme and how did you get started with it?

**00:02:35 Ellie**

Well, that's that's a good question. I think there was a kind of confluence of factors really that were sort of worrying about in my brain for some time. I think all sorts of things. I think in my work as a counsellor hearing people kind of talk a lot about depression and anxiety after diagnosis or going through treatment or trying to recover or living with cancer pain as well. All sorts of really difficult parts of treatment and late effects and sort of hearing people were interested. Or maybe people were sort of secretly trying to swim, and they're a bit anxious about their clinical team knowing. Two members of my family had cancer, and neither of them had the opportunity to do anything that would have remotely helped them cope with the experience. Both coastal. Neither people who, and lots of patients don't, the last thing they want to do is go back to the hospital to have some kind of therapeutic input. They they want to be in their own place, and neither of them would have done something, but had there been something available on the coast that would have been a whole different ball game. And then I kept driving to work and passing this sign that said welcome to Plymouth, the Ocean City. I'm thinking this is just ridiculous. Why? Why are we not doing something for around cold water therapy? It's clearly going to be hugely important for people, and I think from my own experiences as a swimmer, I've swum all my life, you know, I'll fall into a puddle given half a chance. And you know, I've just gradually learnt how extraordinary regular immersion in cold water is, for myself, for other people, and what being with a wonderful peer group can do in terms of holding ourselves, holding each other through, you know, great difficulty, huge distress in life and the water plays a huge part of that. So anyway, one day I'd had enough of that. So I thought, right, I'm going to go and talk to Macmillan. So I did. And I met 3 amazing women, Who not only kind of, I think, saw me but, really got the vision as well. I somehow pulled together a plan and found myself standing on a beach with a group of people thinking right, that's today, then. OK, off we go. But it really, so to answer your question it really it was about just determination to set something up I believed would make a difference for people and that wasn't being offered anywhere. When I was sort of starting to think about it. I was, you know, idly Googling as you do and thinking, you know, surely somebody, somebody in the world has got to be doing something for people with cancer that's about getting them into water, and the only thing I could find was a paddle board programme in Australia.

So I did sort of pitch it to Macmillan. It would be great to go out and have a look at that, but they weren't, they weren't that up for that, but anyway, so I thought right. Well, in that case it's got to be me. So yeah, that's how I got there.

**00:05:59 Paul**

Brilliant, So you mentioned it's a course, so, could you perhaps tell us, did you say it was eight weeks the course?

**00:06:07 Ellie**

Yeah, absolutely, So one of the really important things was to, I thought when the biggest things I had to do was reduce the perception of risk around providing this, as I thought, why aren't people doing it? Because I think it's too risky, either as an activity in itself or for people with cancer, so I need to do everything I can to bring down that risk level, and you know, again, I was talking to Macmillan a lot about this and what I came around was to talking to an organisation called Chill UK and they what I really loved about them was they, they were already offering eight week courses for people with anxiety and depression and they'd already done some research around that, So there's some evidence there to say that that course was it was acceptable, it was effective, and longer term people carried on their practise of cold water Swimming and it's and it kept working for them. So that's where the eight week course got born. And it's a lovely course because it just very gently, there's a lot of sort of soft teaching that goes on through throughout it, around sea swimming skills around water safety techniques, lots around managing things like cold water shock response including as you go into the water how to prepare, and when you come out what to do? So we're all, we're all wearing our koala hot water bottles and getting ourselves dressed really fast.

So yeah, There was lots about reducing the risk and using an 8 week course, and the lovely thing about 8 weeks is that you get that adaptation, that sort of physiological adaptation to cold water has happened just very naturally across those eight weeks. And if someone's, you know, maybe, they're not feeling good enough after treatment to miss a week, something like that. It doesn't matter so that anyway, so that's where the eight week course comes from.

**00:08:08 Paul**

Lovely. Thank you. And could you walk us through what a typical session might look like? How long are the sessions?

**00:08:16 Ellie**

So I asked people to allow an hour typically, people turn up a bit so, One session runs at 10 and one's at 11, so I'm there well beforehand kind of doing a dynamic risk assessment on the day and then people start to turn up in dribs and drabs and they come over and say hi.

The first session is always. It's a bit unique really. Understandably, there's lots of anxiety. You're asking people to go somewhere they've never been, take their clothes off, in front of each other, get into something that might look pretty unappetising and meet each other, so the first week there's lots of, It's very gentle as far as I'm concerned. It might not feel like that. Nat will tell you more about that. But it's it's very much about creating safety for me, and I try and work a lot around psychological safety for people.

But it's about making people feel really, really warmly welcome. Very safe. So that anything that's going on for them, either in that moment, that day or at any point during the course is OK and there's always space for that. Nobody needs to make themselves any different to turn up, so you come just as you are and what happens is people get changed into their swimming costume and I ask people to wear neoprene boots and gloves to protect their extremities, which has helped them stay in a bit longer and particularly for people on chemo, so they might already be having issues around neuropathy, so we're looking to really protect against that. The whole ethos of the course is that we want it to add, not take away.

So they're getting into their cosies and their neoprene boots and gloves and a dry robe. And if they don't have one and some people do, I've already got lots to lend out to people that they keep for the duration of the course. So we never want people not to be able to come because they can't get there or they don't have kit. Then we gather in a little gang when everybody's arrived, We walk down onto the beach, we run this at Bigbury on sea, which is really beautiful, Well, it's two we have two beaches actually divided by a tidal Causeway with a lovely little island called Burr Island, so we go down onto the beach and then we start with a bit of a chat and a check in, and we're just that first week, We're just sort of saying maybe who we are and I like to know from people what they want to get from it because I want to be the right coach for each person, and that might be really different. So some people have all sorts of reasons for why they come. Some people have heard it's really good for mental health. Some people desperately want to breakthrough something they're feeling related to their cancer.

So what? All sorts of reasons. So I want to know a bit about that and just start creating that sense that we're a little gang and we're a team and we're a tribe and we're in this together, which I think what I hope really helps people.

I'll do it on that first week. A little bit of teaching around how we're going to get in, normal, cold water shock response so that people know what to expect. We do a physical warm up and then we also just take some time to just do a little bit of a breathing exercise and just quieten down, calm the breath, because that helps people. When you go in, you'll you'll get that involuntary gasp, so that shock response and actually, if we can help people just reconnect to that nice calm breath and sort of steady that down once their breathing's under control, they're ready to immerse in the water, so that's that's why we do that.

Then we gradually go in and that that can look really different for everybody. So all sorts of things can be happening across eight people, so I've got, really important to say, I've got a lifeguard in the water with me. I work with a fantastic company called Coast to Coast water safety, so they're they're very much safeguarding the safety of the session along with me.

There's a often there's often so much going on emotionally for people, So I'm trying to work with everybody in the group. I've got an amazing volunteer as well, called Jill, who's also had an experience of cancer herself, and usually before we go in, I'm working with my lifeguard and my volunteer to just think about what people's different needs might be in the group. People are in physically very different conditions.

So, I tend to be with the people that are really anxious and Jill's herding along people and lyrics out at the front, making sure nobody's going deeper than their chest and really, the first week it's just about getting people in. It doesn't really matter what what they do, they're just going to get them in. And if I can, you never know. Each group's really different. If I can, I start to get them getting their head in and some people are really up for that straight away, because it really helps with that whole kind of rest and digest sense that if we get our heads under. It's stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system and and reduction in inflammation, as well as a sort of whole body immersion, and so, a little bit of time in the water and what happens is I tend to start saying, right, everyone it's time to get out and people are Going what? We've only been in 10 minutes or 15 minutes or whatever it is because they're starting to feel comfortable, and actually you need to be really, really careful. I think particularly with people who are on treatment, that we're not getting people, you know, we're obviously wanting to keep people as as warm as possible. So we're getting them out before we're starting to get that shaking and shivering, although as they will already, have been taught that shiverings are normal adaptation as a response to rewarming the body. So it's not something to be frightened of.

But I want to get them out before that starts in the water and then as as the 8 weeks go past, we're just spending probably incrementally more time in the water. But of course it depends on the conditions and the weather and trying to build up people's confidence. I am gently trying to push people beyond what they think their boundaries are. I think it's a really important part of it to help people move away from a kind of a fearful state. Into achieving things, what, whatever that is, and that's different for everybody in the group, but by the end of the eight weeks, I want to have seen change and growth in people and I have all sorts of little ways of doing that.

And then by the end of the eight weeks, we have a little a little ceremony at the end where I graduate people, which for me is really meaningful. And I I sort of whisper a few words in everybody's ear as I go.

About what I've seen in them over those eight weeks, so I try and sort of give people a personal message about what I think they've achieved and I'm truly, truly so proud of each and every person. You know, I find it mind blowing what people do and their courage, and then we have a we tend to have a bit of a muck about and get in the water and a little bit of a party afterwards, and then they go off into what is called the whole Shoal, and that is the second part of this intervention, which I didn't really know when I started that that's what we were going to be doing.

I kind of really hoped that the whole point is that after 8 weeks they won't need me because they know what they're doing in the water and they've got all the skills and they've got all the confidence and then they've got each other. They've got a little gang. But then I ran it a second time and I thought, well, I've got 2-2 gangs now, so, the obvious thing to do is to hook them up together and the whole show was then born and I think and again Nat will have things to say about this, which is far more Interesting than me, but what I observe is that this is a really wonderful and probably quite unique sort of way of being a cancer thriving community that is all about swimming and adventuring. But it's also about, providing really beautiful support for each other

through whatever's going on in life and I think that's really, really special and they look after each other really that that belongs to them. The whole show is theirs.

**00:17:25 Paul**

Wow, that does sound amazing. And Ellie, I think you know, your passion is truly inspiring. Listening to you talk about the programme and I think perhaps this is a great point to bring in, Nat, what led you to join the into the Blue programme? Did you have any hesitations or fears?

**00:17:46 Nat**

Yes. What led me to it was the senior nurse practitioner that I was seeing in my oncology review that day, Who now? I was out of 12 months of treatment and I thought that was it, and then there was another arc kind of suggested and that was quite a challenge and what I decided to do was kind of give my body over back, Because I thought I was getting it back, back over to the medical professionals and then take my soul and do something else with it. So I said, OK, you put me through another arc of chemo and I'm going to and I did, I started doing the couch to 5K programme and so I was talking to my senior nurse practitioner about that at that review and she said, Oh, have you heard of this? Let me get you a flyer and she came back with this into the Blue Flyer and I was, what was I, I was kind of, It was like a total body. Yes, yes, that's that's I haven't heard of that. But yes, I want that leaflet and Oh my gosh. But without really knowing why, just the kind of instinctual body response. So when I say because I've given my body to the medical practitioners, right? But the bit of my body that my soul lives in, I'm not sure they're different, but anyway it worked in my head at the time. Just knew that I needed to to go there and there was another. So I think the first 10-11 o'clock eight week cohort had happened and the second was about to start and the following day and so Kate said to me, well, let let me just hang on because I think maybe let me just take you to the mustard tree and, serendipitously, there was Ellie, and so we, I kind of had a like a live you know like the poster came to life in the excellent experience, that is Ellie rickets. As I'm sure you are already aware of, and so I I immediately felt totally safe. I felt a human connection with this person that made me feel like, oh, yeah, I really want to do ,And I want to do it with you. You're you're good.

And, Yes, there was a lot of, was there fear? there was. I'm not sure it was fear. I think it was, Oh, you know, you know that place that's really hard to discern between Excitement and anxiety, so, That there was that definitely that, I I had a very dear friend who was a cold water surfer, cold water swimmer, Wim Hoff convert. He just, and and I kept on kind of feeling this pull in his direction to kind of follow him in and that never happened and In an incredibly rubbish turn of events, his life suddenly ended and so I could feel him in me and he supported me through those kind of hesitations. He was in that knowing as well, like, yeah, I'm absolutely going to do this.

**00:21:09 Carly**

That's beautiful.

**00:21:10 Paul**

That is lovely.

So Nat what, what was the first session like for you? Can you, can you maybe describe how it felt when you got into the water for the first time?

**00:21:23 Nat**

Yeah, I think.

So it was very kind of, it was very quick, right, because I got the fly the day before, met Ellie, ping her, something that you have to ping her like some form that you have to overnight and then the next morning I was there, can I find my swimmers like that kind, like so, I didn't have any think time which is good because think time is you know a bit of a thing sometimes, a hinderer, So yeah. So I remember being in that little circle on the beach and standing and I remember that breathing exercise that Ellie was just talking about. And, So I was feeling like who? I've got this identity that I'm an outsider. So I was already in that part of me like in this group going. Oh, I don't know who these people are. I don't. You know, I don't belong. Like, I don't know. It's just this little thing that runs in me. And so I was feeling that not belonging, In my brain structures and then in that breathing exercise, I just felt like, Oh my God, that like, I just felt really kind of, solid and very tentative, both at the same time, connection with this group of people that I knew in their own way knew everything about what I had gone through and was going through, obviously, in their version of, but there's something so, unexpectedly unifying about it, and we haven't spoken to each other yet, right. We've just kind of introduced ourselves, but that breathing exercise and that feeling and the sand I wasn't wearing booties at the time, the sand on my feet and that feeling and that quieting of the breath and there was this sense of oh, this is like something massive and magical is about to happen and that also is tingly and a little bit teary, and, and so then we kind of walked quite quietly because you've just, even though you're feeling a little bit like that, you've just done a breathing exercise. So you've quietened down and we all walked into the sea, and I was a very, very slow like, slowly inching in like, Oh my God, that's really cold and the back of your knees is the first place backs of knees? No. And then you know further up and then you're what do like, there's so many gentle euphorisms for your bits like everybody when it when the wave or the surf or the lull or the surge hits your bits that's when you 'OOP' and you think I just can't go any further and then there's also a bit across your belly like, 'OOP' oh, across and that's my sound. I always make that sound when I go in. I can't. I can't not do that. And sometimes it's extremely loud and sometimes it's just a little 'oop' to myself, Just as you get through each kind of like what is like a Rubicon like, each kind of you know, you go through another gateway and as you get further into your into your the submersion and I remember it being just ridiculously cold. This is the bit where I I would be using swear words to describe it, and because it is just so, it just feels like it makes swear words in your body because it is. That is that. That's it's so cold and it was when was it was September 7th so that's my into the blue anniversary. More important than my cancer birthday actually.

So it was September the 7th. So the sea was warm. Oh, my friends, it was warm. This is what these crazy sea swimmers tell you. Oh, it's what? It's warm in September. October, November. Sorry. What now? So that's warm, apparently. And, It was, It was just brilliant. It was just brilliant and Ellie and Loic and Jill hold you in the water in this way that you can't feel them, but, they're there in a way that is the safety element, like

the emotional safety, the physical safety. You're just like they've got this. This is absolutely fine, I can break. I can cry, I can sink, I can whatever and that's going to be. That's going to be held and kind of caught, and Ellie kept on looking at me, not kept on looking at me. Ellie cast her eye across the group and, and says you OK how you doing? How you, you're alright?. Like just, you know, amongst however many there were of us maybe I don't know 10. 12. 8 something like that and she went to me, and she went how you doing? and I said yeah really good and she went just one more minute maybe and I was like, What?

She came back and she went. How are you doing? And I said I'm really, really loving it, Ellie, and she went time for you to get out and I said, how do you know? and she said I can see the colour of your top lip changing and your hairline. I was like, changing to what Ellie? and she said, There's just colour drain. Like just white. Like, just so now that's telling me that your body is telling you time to get out and I was like this person has got, like we are so beautifully held.

**00:26:40 Paul**

Wow.

**00:26:40 Carly**

Wow, the way you described that Nat, I felt I could visualise that. I felt like I was there with you in that really cold water feeling it on the backs of my knees. That was amazing. And that's true safety, isn't it? The way that you described how you felt being in there and being fully supported and being able to just be as you are and knowing that it's going to be OK and they, you know, Ellie and the others have got you, that was really incredible.

Can I ask Ellie from your perspective? So you were talking about the fact that you knew that when Nat needed to get out of the water and I know you touched on a bit earlier about, for example, the parasympathetic nervous system. But I wondered if you would be able to talk a bit about actually what happens from a physiological point of view, what happens when someone goes into the water?

**00:27:47 Ellie**

Yeah it's a good question, Carly. I'm always sort of interested that to sort of focus on this because really for me, what's really important is how people feel and what their experience is. But what actually happens is so the skin is full of receptors. So as we go in, the skin picks up the cold and we start to cool very quickly away from our limbs and into the centre of our bodies. You might find that your heart rate goes up, your blood pressure goes up. So as part of the safety that we were talking about, it's it's very important that we know that going isn't going to be harmful for anybody. All sorts of endorphins start to fire off in the brain. That's why we get this amazing kind of mental uplift from being in there.

As the limbs cool that's why you can get you have to be really careful about how long people are in, so the muscles stop working and that's why you can get people often get almost like clawing of hands and so on because the muscles that work, the fingers and the hands can be really cool. So that that's why that's quite important.



As you've as you first go in, you do get that gasp response as well. But actually cold water shock response starts to slow down really quickly. So maybe with the first time you might find a minute and a half, two minutes, that sort of thing, which is, you know, it's great, you just you're just talking to people all the time and that actually does pass very quickly. It's quicker than you think. And the more exposed you are, the less you have that, so it's not that you don't feel it, but it just lasts less time.

**00:29:42 Carly**

Yeah. And so what other particular considerations might you have to think about, particularly if someone has a cancer diagnosis when they're going into that situation? So, I'm thinking is there anyone that maybe it isn't appropriate for?

**00:30:03 Ellie**

Yeah, absolutely. So get going back to the safety and setting this up well, so I work with one of our consultant oncologists to just make some guidelines about what what was going to be right for us. There are not very many hard lines. So who is not suitable? So if you have lesions in your brain you are not suitable because of the risk of fitting in the water, but other than that I think we've had people from all the different cancer pathways. So it's not that we're just getting a particular type of patient, but what we're looking for is for people to be at least three months post-surgery and the other obvious risk is around open wounds in the skin. So if somebody's had external beam radiotherapy, then we're looking to make sure if they have had any kind of breakdown in the skin externally that that's really nicely healed, but actually irradiated skin responds really well to saltwater.

Um, so we. I've learnt a lot over the last sort of couple of years about how people who are on treatment or recovering from treatment respond to being in the sea. There needs to be a discussion with and generally that's with clinical teams. So if somebody's on systemic anti-cancer therapy. So chemotherapy or immunotherapy there's the risk of neutropenia there, so we're absolutely looking for a conversation with the team to see if they feel it's appropriate and safe at this time, and sometimes it might be that it might not be right just at this moment, but that doesn't mean it's going to be not right for you the next time. So it can be really lovely actually just to plant something on the horizon for people. And it's a little bit of hope, something to look forward to.

**00:31:51 Carly**

Yeah.

**00:31:55 Ellie**

If somebody's got bone mets we're looking for those to be treated, stable, low volume again. So because the sea can be quite rough. So we don't want anyone in the position where if they had got metastases in the bone that there was they were in any way at risk of a fracture. If somebody's got a history of clots, that's something to check out as well. Like, why has that been? Because of the potential of the cold water stimulating a clot. And then the last thing is really, is there any involvement in the chest? That potentially could sort of maybe impede lung function in the water. So that would be something like a pleural effusion, enlarged lymph in the mediastinum, any lesions? So

those are things to be checked out. But you know, I've just had someone come through who's had who's got lung cancer. So it's not a no, but it's about making sure it's it's absolutely right for you. So I've I've then got written sign off from the team to say, yeah, this person's good to go. So we want people to be able to walk about a mile and that's because certainly at the beach I'm at, they've got to be able to walk down from the car park. And if it's very low tide they possibly got to walk right out to near where the shoreline is, they've got to do a warm up, they've got to do their swim, they've got to get dressed, walk back up, up a slope. So we're looking for a basic level of fitness and I need them to be able to swim at least a couple of lengths of a pool. So basic swimming ability, we're not about taking people in to learn to swim in the water.

But other than that, you know you can be really quite disabled by what's going on for you. And people often have lots of other comorbidities or their treatments causing, you know, awful joint pain. So I've seen people kind of hobble down to the water's edge. But actually, as soon as they get in the cold works its magic, and they're released from the pain the water holds them and not only do they come out feeling not in pain so often, you've got, you've obviously got pain in joints from either hormone therapies or chemotherapy, but actually that effect can last. Maybe all day or maybe more than a day. So yeah, it's it's really very broad in terms of the the amount of people that can come and get in. So it's it's doable for everybody. And I think what's great about it is that it always works because you cannot go in and not be cold and not experience it. And you you can achieve it. So we're not asking people to do something that's impossible for them. So they get that amazing uplift in kind of, yeah, a sense of sense of self really about what they can do. We obviously ask people not to go in the water if they're feeling really unwell or they're not sure you know, I always say listen to your body because your body will tell you if it's not right today. So again, safety first, safety first, safety first all the way.

**00:35:07 Carly**

Yeah, that's very important. I I just wanted to to touch on quickly you mentioned a bit earlier about doing when you go down to the the water, you do a dynamic risk assessment, does that include things like water safety? And how the water is for people on that day?

**00:35:26 Ellie**

Yeah, absolutely. So the reason I chose Bigbury Beach as a place to do this is because it's a nice flat level entrance into the sea so that we're not making it difficult for people to get in and crucially out of the water. It's got the tidal islands, so it offers quite a lot of protection from weather and whatever is happening weather wise you've got a couple of or even 3 different beaches to choose from. It's got a history of being beautifully clean the water there because obviously we wouldn't ever be taking people who are potentially at risk of infection into water that wasn't clean. But yeah, so the dynamic risk assessment, so we the whole place is risk assessed before we start and then what that means is on the day I arrive and it could be you know you turn out there might be a massive film crew in the car park, for example, exactly where we normally get together and find each other. Or there was, you know, this happened this course probably about a 6 metre wide and 2 metre tall dump of seaweed right at the bottom of the slipway

onto the beach that was actually potentially quite hazardous for people. So it can be it can be absolutely anything, but really it's about making sure that we can safely enter and be in the water and exit the water. So yeah, you never quite know what's going to happen. But yeah, all all about back to safety.

**00:36:56 Carly**

Yeah, absolutely, and you mentioned about going back to perhaps talking about the benefits of it. One of the things that you said Ellie was very much mainly around how people feel and how it makes people feel. And I wanted to come back to you, Nat, about during your time when you're when you're there, what impact did it have on you in that sense? How did you feel and what impact did you find that it had on on you being in the water?

**00:37:26 Nat**

So I know I've already stated that I'm a drama queen, but I am going to say something pretty immense about it and try not to cry. It's changed my life. It has totally changed my life in some unbelievably and unexpectedly excellent ways.

So the actual the actual, like immediate experience of, you know, having a cancer diagnosis, being in cancer treatment and the, you know, the kind of multiplicitous kind of challenge of that. All of the levels that that hits you on and then and being in that life experience and then doing this. So this, you cannot go into the water and come out of the water the same person. It totally changes you. So whatever you come with, whatever bit whatever challenge life challenge which you know for me at the time was parenting and cancer treatment. Whatever bit of that you're in when you take your body into that freezing cold, sometimes it can be crystal clear and the sky, just like the most beautiful expanse of blue and you really you can't kind of believe the beauty. And that you're in the sea, like lying. Sometimes at one point, Ellie taught us to lie on our backs and just let your body float and the feeling of being a star on the surface of the ocean. When you know when, when life is super expletive deletive, expletive deletive then it's just it's, it's so glorious. And every cell of your body is being done to in things that I don't know about. Ellie knows lots about the kind of science of what actually, you know, there are fantastically healing phenomena going on don't care. I absolutely care. Love that don't need to understand it with my brain, but my body is exhilarated. My soul is ignited with joy, even like when it's not that beautiful crystal. When the waves are smashing you and it's hilarious and you've got to pick yourself up and pull your trunks back up and they're full of sand. And it's just, it's so funny and and wondrous in an in another way. And the kind of power of it takes you over and you know.

I was thinking about this last night, before coming here, and I was thinking about the power of cancer and how, you know, it's a powerful creature and when you're kind of welcomed into that family of people with a cancer diagnosis, it's kind of it's many things terrifying. I'm sure it's terrifying for I imagine every person that's gone through it and all the other things. But the power of it, it's so big. It's such a strong, ferocious creature, and so is the sea. And cancer took me and did a whole load of terrible things to me. And then the medical system did a whole load of terrible, terrible things to me that

were brilliant and helped me survive. And then the sea with it's kind of almost similar like ferocious power. But I was choosing I was taking myself choicefully into that space.

And it felt like something about the power of it that I was in and embracing and taking the positive and the healing from at the same time as this powerful disease was doing its thing. I just felt like, you know, cancer, I see you and I raise you this amazing expletive deletive amazing ocean. I see you and I raise you the ocean. Take that. Because I know who's know who's going to win. Mic drop. Sorry. Mic drop.

**00:41:51 Carly**

That was a real mic drop over. Thank you.

**00:41:54 Nat**

Your welcome, it's alright.

**00:41:56 Carly**

And Ellie talking about the physiological benefits from what you said. Now it goes way beyond that. It goes way beyond actually what might happen to your body from a physiological point of view. It's much more a much more powerful than that.

Thank you for sharing that.

**00:42:12 Nat**

Yeah. Thank you.

**00:42:15 Paul**

I had a question for Ellie, but actually I'm going to come to you, Nat first, because I think you know you described that so amazing and so well and what would you say to someone who perhaps has cancer who might be considering joining a programme like this? but is feeling really nervous about it?

**00:42:34 Nat**

So. I totally get that and I think that that would describe the majority of us in different ways and some people, you know, I clowned through my nervousness mostly. So I became a kind of clowny jokey member of the group, I think. And that, you know, supports some people, holds some people up in a way and probably puts other people off, but I think, you know, I think most of us come with a level of nervousness. So I think that the structure, if this programme gets disseminated through the land slash world, which I really profoundly believe that it should. Then it's got, it's got that structure, that kind of three-point, you know, that triangle of lifeguard lead, Ellie, fantastic person and volunteer. So it's such, a it's such a beauty. I mean, you know the triangle is a really powerful shape, isn't it? It just it's got everything it needs and we are all there in the middle of it. So I think that the structure of the programme provides some holding for that nervousness and for the personal, what would I say, I'd I think that if you can take your nervous one by the hand and lead her or him, or they or them into the sea, then you're nervous one and you will never be thank you enough.

**00:44:06 Paul**

Wow. Gosh.

You've made me really want to do this because it's so, so compelling and and life changing so you know, thank you for for sharing that.

Ellie, how how is this unique? And, and how have, and in what way have kind of participants responded to the, to the programme and and has there any? Has there been any really memorable or meaningful feedback that you've heard, In one of the programmes? I know, I know.

**00:44:41 Ellie**

Oh, how long have you got Paul?

**00:44:42 Paul**

I know, I know

**00:44:43 Ellie**

Wow, So in terms of how is it unique, I think it still is unique in terms of this programme comes out of the hospital, So I'm part of the hospital And it, it comes through me, so although some people have found this on social media, largely this is about clinical nurse specialists, physios, counsellors, support specialists, people that work day in, day out with people who are living with cancer, looking at them and saying, I think what you need to do is go and talk to Ellie about doing into the blue, and I think that's really unique for it, for it to be seen as a pillar of cancer therapy in its own right, that it's got a unique place.

I think starting into the blue has really seen a culture shift in, certainly in our hospital around how we're thinking about utilising this amazing extraordinary natural resource that we have another, you know the sea is one thing, but other bodies of water we can develop amazing relationships with as well, so I don't think it's just linked to being able to get into the sea. I think you know, there are extraordinary lakes and rivers and quarries and all sorts of things. But I think what we're doing in Plymouth is pretty unique. I think it forms part of we're starting to think more about nature based therapies for people with cancer, which is absolutely fantastic and as it should be. But what's really exciting to me is that clinicians are saying we think this is the best thing for you at this moment and is going to really support you, which I'm just completely thrilled by.

What kind of feedback have I got? I mean, I could literally, you know, we we could be in the pub for four years, Paul and I could keep talking to you.

**00:46:52 Paul**

Sounds like a plan.

**00:46:57 Ellie**

I thought when I started I know this is going to work, but that isn't good enough. We need to do some proper research so that we can go back to Macmillan, back to the NHS

and say this is what happens for people when they get into the water. We did a lovely thing actually called what, 3 words. So we just devised this ourselves slightly borrowing from the app. So I just asked people pre and post course to tell me in 3 words what it feels like to be them and the before words are all about anxiety and agitation and anger and fear and low mood and love and feeling grateful and supported. That's that was absolutely part of it. The after words are absolutely extraordinary. One that really leapt out at me was a huge number of people said that they felt a sense of courage and sort of determination. And what what we absolutely see is that spills out into other parts of people's lives. So something that happens to them through into the blue, just very beautifully filters out and so I've seen people who before the course are so anxious that they can't leave home. They can't work. They they can't really do anything very much except get to hospital appointments. And that's a big challenge. And somehow they got somebody to bring them to the course and post course set off around Scotland in a camper van, swimming in all the lochs. And applied for a job, got it and went back to work. And that's just one, one tiny example. I've seen people just overcome huge amounts of fear, really.

But the research that we also did, sort of going back to really valuing what people's experiences are, not what we think science is telling us. It's not that that isn't interesting, but I want to know what it's like for someone with cancer to come to be part of the programme. Is it important that it's cancer specific? Is it important that the coach, me, is part of the oncology world? What actually happens? How does this impact you, your body, your life, your mental health? So we did an ethnographic study, which is in fact, Macmillan has encouraged us to carry on with. What we've learned is that that kind of tripartite arrangement of psychological safety, because they're known and they're understood, and for me quite a big part of that, is meeting either like I did with Nat, so I met her in person before the course or I have a phone call with people to really understand who they are, what's going on for them, you know, certainly with their cancer. But in every way actually what they need to be able to come and access this course. So that makes a difference for me on what happens with that person when they turn up on day one and Week 2 and week 3. Then the physical safety. So Nat's already mentioned we've got, you know, a lifeguard with us in the water and then peer safety so I think I mean Nat just described that so beautifully and what people repeatedly say in feedback is that other people get it. But just understanding you're with people who get what it's like to be you. So that lovely triumvirate of safeties, if you like. That's what allows people even to turn up, get their kit off, and walk into the water. And what comes from that is what I think some of the key stuff is around changing relationship with self, changing relationship with body so the body stops just being a place of maybe distress or fear, anxiety that body doesn't work properly and body can become a place of absolute joy, of freedom, of pleasure, of play, and I've I've absolutely seen real changes in people's relationships with their bodies as they've gone through the course. And I think part of the whole shoal that's incredibly important is, for people that are coming through seeing some of the old guard like Nat and all sorts of others who are so warm and welcoming and generous in welcoming other people in into the into the party, as it were. Just witnessing their confidence and joy and joy in their bodies is, you know, they I've literally had people stand in my ear saying that's just changed everything for me. Just seeing that has changed everything for me.

**00:51:49 Carly**

Yeah. Amazing. And is there anything Nat here that you wanted to add in about how that looked for you? What Ellie was talking about around relationship with self, is there anything there that how that was in your perspective?

**00:52:04 Nat**

Yeah, it's it's interesting because I said to my wife last night that I was doing this and I said, you know, how do you think it's changed me? And she said well it's changed all of your relationships and as we are, you know, relational beings, that's like everything. And so I was sitting kind of considering that and thinking, yeah, it's it's it's totally changed my relationship to my body. My body was quite strongly treated by cancer and and I've had a double mastectomy and actually into the blue was the beginning of me, you know, taking my clothes off, as Ellie said, in a way that I hadn't ever done before. I mean, I was six months post-surgery, but I hadn't, you know, I'd kind of edited out the summer, really. And so it was my first time in that experience. And I didn't know how to do it or be it or be in this body in swimwear. And and there I was with a group of people who. Well, you know, I was saying at the beginning like this kind of outsider kind of personality disorder that I have about, you know, I'm just I'm, you know, I'm not not one of this lot and yet knowing that I totally was. And having that feeling of it's so hard to describe because everybody's cancer journey is different and everybody's cancer is different. And yet there's this unifier of that experience where I can be in my body supported by watching that person in their body and going, Oh yeah, you can you can just do that like with your body looking differently after cancer. Like that's that's amazing. And look, you just walk like that. And so I'm going to try that one and see how it goes. And then you know, the knock on somebody can watch me doing that having watched that so that that kind of that living with cancer without talking about it. Although I have, you know, become very close buddies and talking a lot about cancer and crying about cancer and swearing about cancer and laughing about cancer. So there's been a lot of that as well. But there's also the we don't have to talk about this but it's so integral. And those so that my relationship to my physical body, my relationship to my body as something that had failed me because it had got cancer, like, what was it doing? And then you know, moving through that and learning to absolutely celebrate this thing that I was living in and the sea is such an exhilarator like you, you can only be exhilarated. And then and then you have this experience of your body like, Oh my God, my body can be exhilarated with joy and laughter and screaming and swearing. And. And there's a kind of like, it's so total. It's so total of the the joy of being in this feeling, sensing glorious thing. And then my relationship with my wife, which you know all of that joy, all of that aliveness kind of feeds into into.

And it's like my Thursday. I go swimming on a Thursday. My Thursday reset. Like, body reset, joy levels reset, exhilaration levels reset, mental health reset. I can go. I can parent this tiny human who is difficult and glorious. And bring all of that. I can take your my sea energy and pour it into my parenting and pour it into my life partnership and my relationships on and out from that in a way that I didn't even know, I didn't know that was going to happen. It's it's amazing and it and then I can feel it like running out, I could feel it like I could feel life kind of squishing it down and then I go to go it's ok it's

Thursday, tomorrow. It's Thursday tomorrow, Thursday, tomorrow and then back into the sea and back into the week. Sometimes it needs to be twice a week. It's fair to say sometimes life gets [blows raspberry], but then there's two resets. So yeah.

**00:56:50 Carly**

Wow. Yeah, a reset. That's such a great way of phrasing it, isn't it? That Thursday reset. Ellie, when you said you set this up, you mentioned that you'd had a bit of a Google about what was there anything that was similar that's been offered and you said you found one thing in Australia, which is just incredible, really because hearing about the way that Nat describes it and the impact that it has, it's amazing to think actually it hasn't been something that really has been available or that other people have set up. And I'm thinking about there'll be lots of professionals who are listening to this episode in various roles in various settings in various geographical locations who will no doubt understand and recognise how brilliant and how amazing it is and how inspiring it is, and probably thinking I really wanna take this idea and do something with it. And I was interested to hear your thoughts. How can they take this idea and transfer it into something that they might be able to set up regardless of where they're based?

**00:58:02 Ellie**

Yeah. I mean, I think one thing just to sort of note before kind of saying a bit more about that is I have been blown away by how far people are prepared to travel to do this in terms of time and distance. I mean, we're a, we're a rural, very rural catchment area as well as having a big city. But our hospital covers a huge swathe of land and you know I've got people who are driving at least an hour and a half to come and do this, and they're on weekly treatment. I mean that is just extraordinary and it tells you a lot about what this is offering that isn't available anywhere else. I think for other people who are potentially interested, I don't think you need to be a counsellor to do it, I think many, many, many people who work in oncology have got, you know, really wonderful skills around working with people. So I think that's the first thing to notice. I think the the oncology part is important, having that that link, that knowledge, that background. So that if somebody says oh, I'm seeing Doctor so and so tomorrow that they know that you know who that is, or they ask you where the scanner is or whatever. It's it's all of that just feeds into that safety. So I think that link is important and I think what that does is it I think probably we get people coming on into the blue who might be very, very anxious about doing so. Going back to that question for people who are really anxious about doing it, I think speaking to people in in the hospital really helps with that sense of safety.

I think in terms of setting this up elsewhere, yes, you can be a long way from the coast. I looked that up actually, because I thought you might ask me about that and I think I think on average I think the furthest place from the coast in Britain is in the middle of Derbyshire and it's something like 75 miles to the coast, which is a long way. However, I think there's an absolute proliferation of groups all over the country of people who want to swim. So cold water swimmers are finding places, they're finding their their lochs and their lakes and their rivers. I also think that there's a huge, huge amount of support out there in the world for people with cancer because all of us have personal experience of someone who's been affected in our lives, whether that's us or it's a parent or



grandparent or child or a friend. And people understand the crushing impact of the disease and I would say be creative. Go out and explore and inquire because all sorts of people are willing to help make this happen is what I found. And also here I am, I'm a resource, you know I've started doing some consultancy work around this for other places. So those conversations are starting. So come and talk to me. I think it's about having conversations rather than thinking this isn't possible, think this is possible. It's absolutely possible, it just needs a bit of determination and a bit of creativity.

**01:01:29 Carly**

Absolutely. Yeah, that's really great advice.

**01:01:31 Paul**

As we bring the episode towards the end we we have three questions that we like to ask our guests. So Ellie, if I could start with you, and if you could go back in time to when you were setting up Into the blue, what advice would you give yourself?

**01:01:51 Ellie**

I think the advice I'd give myself is talk to as many people as possible because I think when you're trying to manifest something, the more you talk about it, it kind of it starts being out there in the world. And what I found was and what I'm continuing to find is the more I talk to people about it the more comes back to me, people want to be involved, people want to support it. Just yeah, get as get as many people involved as possible. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

**01:02:24 Paul**

Thank you. And and Nat, if you could go back in time to before you started the swimming group. Any advice that you'd give yourself?

**01:02:37 Nat**

I think I'd say to myself to trust, to trust my gut and to brace yourself, because this is going to be more impactful and life changing and profound than you could imagine, so hold on to your pants. Quite literally in the waves, but also metaphorically.

**01:03:03 Paul**

Brilliant. Thank you. And Ellie, back to you. What change would you like to see to improve the lives of people living with cancer?

**01:03:17 Ellie**

Well, I'm obviously going to say I think we should be absolutely seeding this and growing it all over the UK so that more and more people who are living with cancer have got the opportunity to use cold water to support themselves. And just thinking about a thrive based care for people with cancer, so where we're obviously the priority is to offer treatment to treat the cancer. But actually we've got to either recover from it or we've got to live with it. So, you know, thinking about really helping that place based personalised care that is about thriving. It's not just existing, it's about growing and thriving. How do we help people, really thrive. And for me cold water is it's such a rich

intervention. It's absolutely extraordinary. There's a kind of alchemy that happens for people and the more and more we can offer that I absolutely that is the change I would like to see.

**01:04:24 Paul**

Thank you. Thank you, Ellie. And Nat what change would you like to see to improve the lives of people living with cancer?

**01:04:32 Nat**

I mean, I was lucky enough to come across Ellie. I also work with a cancer exercise specialist online who is awesome and has a bunch of post mastectomy women who train weight train together online. But it it feels like it would be brilliant if that was like if that was a known thing like you can go into chemo and sit in a chair or, in Australia you can go into chemo and get on a treadmill. And you can go into chemo and then come out and go into the sea or come out and go home and feel really sick. I have been into the sea feeling really sick, chemo sick, and come out feeling way better. And so it feels like that, that kind of knowledge, if that was, if that was more generally available like a change in a change in social attitude or something within the medical profession, but also without it, like just around what happens when you get cancer, you flourish. You can flourish when you get cancer.

**01:05:41 Paul**

And lastly, Ellie, what would you like our listeners to take away from this episode?

**01:05:49 Ellie**

Oh, it's so powerful to hear what Nat's just said. The word that comes out again and again and again is that this is transformational for people. So what I'd like listeners to take away is that we've got an evaluated transformational intervention that is ready for adaptation as a public health intervention. You know it's reasonably low cost and yet it fundamentally can change people's experience of themselves and how they go forward for the rest of their lives, however long that life is. And I I would challenge listeners to really think about what they what they can do with this idea in their own place and yeah, get in touch.

**01:06:40 Paul**

Lovely. Thank you and and lastly to Nat?

**01:06:44 Nat**

You know, I don't want to downplay the, you know, the incredibly difficult bits of, physically difficult, bits of being in cancer treatment and and emotionally, but, you know, felt a little bit too light to say you can flourish with cancer. I recognise that there are bits in it that are utterly gruelling. You know you like cancer is, it's terrifying. It's terrifying to be told you have cancer. It's terrifying. But what I'm moving through and into is that you can look at it as a whole new way of life. So you're given this potential, you know, here is here is the potential end of your life diagnosis and or here is an invitation to live your life differently and newly and fully and vigorously and accepting

that there are times when you won't be able to do that, but that there are times that you that you can do that and the sea so encapsulates that invitation, that potential you can live cancer through the sea.

**01:07:59 Paul**

Thank you.

**01:08:02 Carly**

Wow, It's been an absolute pleasure and honour to speak with you both today, such a powerful, inspiring, beautiful conversation. Thank you so much. Thank you for coming on to the Cancer Professional podcast.

**01:08:19 Ellie**

It's a pleasure. Thanks for inviting us.

**01:08:20 Nat**

You're welcome. It has been a pleasure too.

**01:08:26 Carly**

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**01:08:48 Paul**

If you enjoyed this episode, follow us so you don't miss our next conversation, where we'll be joined by Jeff Hanna and Siobhan Heaton to discuss how we can best support someone with a cancer diagnosis and a mental health problem.

**01:09:03 Carly**

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**01:09:16 Paul**

I'm Paul.

**01:09:17 Carly**

And I'm Carly and you have been listening to the Cancer Professionals Podcast by Macmillan Cancer Support.

