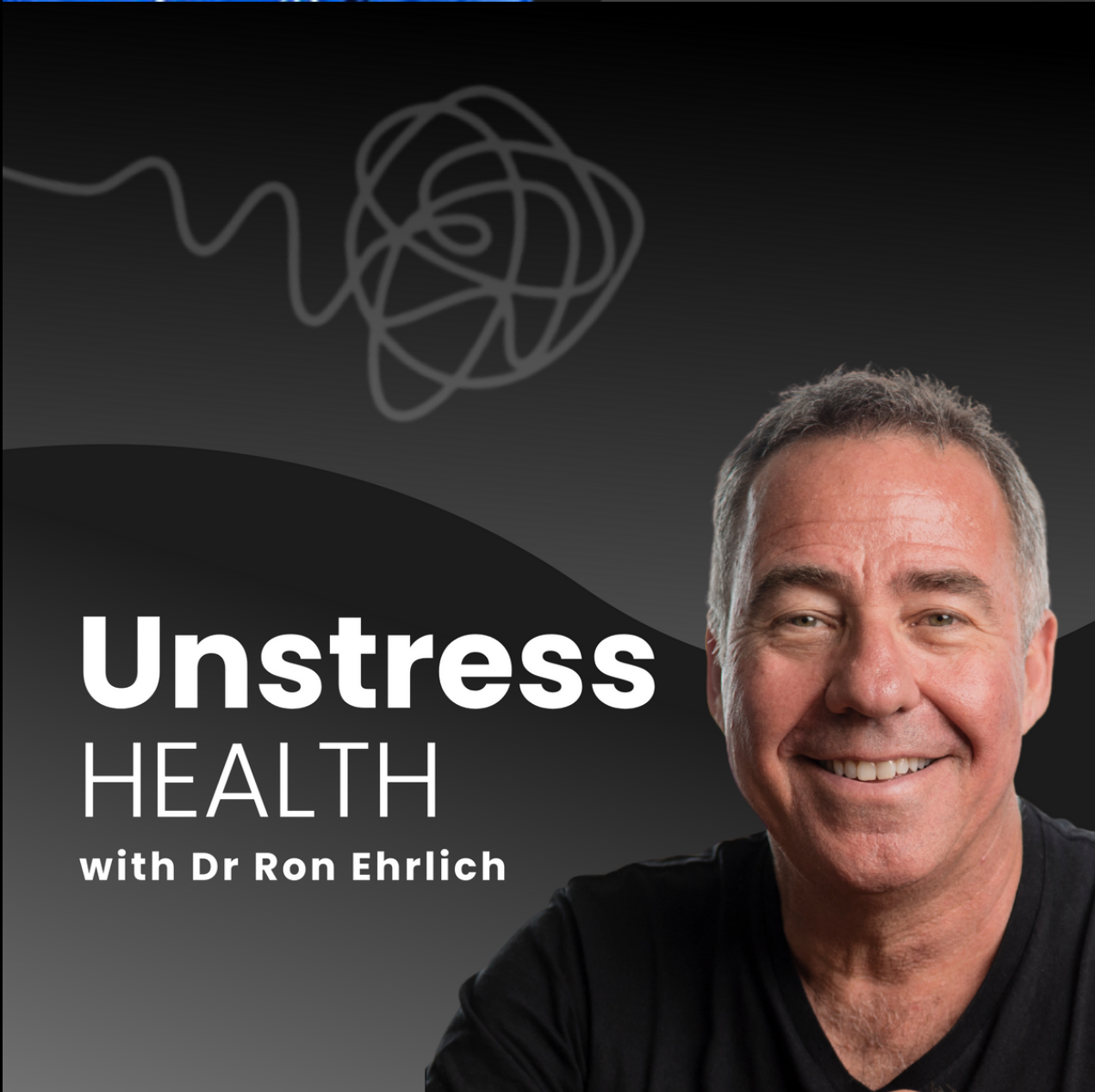




THRIVING THROUGH
**LIFE'S
CHANGES**

Carol Cooke AM



Unstress
HEALTH

with Dr Ron Ehrlich

Podcast Transcript

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:00:00] Hello and welcome to Unstress. My name is Dr Ron Ehrlich. Before I start, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which I am recording this podcast. The Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging. And as I have often said, the reason I do that, apart from paying my respects, is that I truly believe we have so much to learn from our First Nations Indigenous people about connection and respect, not just for the land, but for the people and the inseparable nature of both.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:00:38] Today we are talking about how to deal with adversity and change. Now, similar to trauma, I guess we all experience on a very personal level. And it's a very personal experience. I mean, comparing one person's change or adversity to another has very little relevance to an individual's experience of it on their own. So we all have our experience of trauma or of change, of dealing with adversity. And how we deal with that is a really important part of modern-day life.

My guest today is Carol Cooke. Carol has come from Canada, as you will hear from a police officer to be a three-time Olympian champion. She's been awarded the Order of Australia. She's an inspirational sporting figure in Australia. She's an expert in overcoming adversity and change and she will have audience members challenging themselves. That includes you today to embrace adversity and change in your life. Using her five steps to harness the force within. We deal with that at the end of this podcast and find their gold..., their own gold medal moment. Now, Carol is a three-time gold medal Paralympian and a nine-time world champion in Paracycling. Carol believes that nothing is impossible if we dare to face our fears and believe in ourselves. And she certainly is a great model for that and believes that the great pleasure in life is doing what people say you cannot do. I hope you enjoy this conversation I had with Carol Cooke.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:02:21] Welcome to the show, Carol.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:02:23] Thank you for having me Ron.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:02:25] Carol, I know you talk a lot about change, dealing with change and adversity. And I think it's part of modern life. You know, we kind of all have that to varying degrees. And I wondered if before we kick into that and I know that change in adversity, a very personal experience and I want to hear your story, obviously. But I wondered before we got onto that, you might share with us a bit about your journey because you haven't always been... Australia hasn't always been home.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:02:57] Oh, definitely not. And when you hear me speak, you'll realise that it hasn't been. It's also not been part of the United States. So let's get that out there right now. I'm Canadian-born. So us Canadians are very partial to being asked if we're from the US. So yes, I was born in Canada, just one of two girls. Both parents were police officers when they met. Mum became a teacher and my dad stayed on the job and we had a great life growing up in Canada. I was actually speaking at a school yesterday and I just said to the teacher, I'm so happy. I grew up in the '60s and 70's because I think it's so hard nowadays. And I ended up joining the police force and following in my parent's footsteps and was about 13 years into the job. And I had done a whole bunch of things. I started in uniform, I worked undercover in the drug squad and prostitution areas, and then moved into the detective office. And it was a couple of years into that job where I dealt with a really bad sexual assault and it really got the better of me. And I thought, "Is this something I really want to be doing the rest of my life? so I decided that I would take a year off and travel to Australia, and I had friends here that I had met through the world police and fire games and they welcomed me with open arms. One couple were like second parents to me and they gave me an old 76 Ford Falcon to drive around Australia and I spent a year doing 37 and a half thousand kilometres around the country, had an absolute blast and in that year just decided that policing wasn't something that I wanted to do the rest of my life about... I guess so about three months before I was heading home, I'd come back to Melbourne because I'd made Melbourne my home base and I went to a local AFL football club and I met my husband. It was certainly not love at first sight. I thought he was really weird because this guy walked in. We're in the city of Melbourne, we're in the suburb, but he walked in with a Driza-bone on and an Akubra hat and he looked like you just come out of the bush. And I just said to my friend, "Does this guy realise he's in the city?"

Where do you leave his horse?" You know, it wasn't long actually it was probably just a couple of weeks and I knew that it was, it was who I was, completely the opposite of anybody I'd ever dated. But I knew that it was meant to be and I had to go home three months later, back to work. I had no money left I went back to work. I went back as a training officer in uniform and after about six months, I thought, yeah, know, this is definitely not for me. My husband and I, we had, you know, we were married then we travel back and forth and it was getting very expensive. There is no such thing as mobile phones and text messaging. It was landline calls which were really expensive. And he finally, about eight months later. Yeah, He finally proposed. okay, that's it. And two months later, August 31st, 1994, I was on a plane heading to Australia and I'll tell you, I got on that plane and I thought, "What am I doing?" Like, I'm leaving a career that was, you know, very well paid. I'm leaving all my friends, all my family, everything that I know to go to Australia, to a few people that I know, and one man and no job. And the emotions when you talk about a big change, you know, and the emotions that I was sitting on that plane, I was excited, I was sad, I was in tears, I was laughing. I was like, you know, everything that you can imagine went through my head that day. And... But once I landed, I thought, yeah, I've done the right thing, you know, So...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:07:11] Canadians...

Carol Cooke AM: [00:07:12] And I have...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:07:12] Have a... There's a great affinity, isn't there, between Canadians and Australians. I think they settle into it. Well, I don't know about Australians settling into Canada, I don't know many that have done that. They probably have.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:07:24] Yeah.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:07:24] We have an affinity, don't we?

Carol Cooke AM: [00:07:26] And oh, most definitely. And there are Canadians err... Australians who have settled into Canada very well. My niece on my husband's side married a guy from Toronto, which is where I'm from. So she left here, went there and I came here there... I came here so it's quite funny. They've now moved to Europe.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:07:47] So an exchange program?

Carol Cooke AM: [00:07:48] Yeah, very much an exchange. A few years younger than me, mind you. But yeah, I think it goes back to our British heritage. You know, I think it really goes back that far that we come from the same... The colonialism, the same type of backgrounds. Canada has a lot of immigration. So it's a very multicultural country which Australia is now. And I think it's very, very similar, very same.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:08:16] Although climatically very, very different. I mean you guys get down to temperatures in the ridiculous... it makes me wonder that anyone will have ever chosen to live there before central heating or thermals, you know. But, they seem to Australia...

Carol Cooke AM: [00:08:32] It's... I'll tell you just about the weather I do not miss winter one bit and, I remember being there in 2010 for Christmas and as Russ and I were leaving to come home, it stormed and we didn't know if the plane would get off the ground. And I looked at everybody in my family and I said, None of you die in the winter because I'm not coming back. Well, unfortunately, what my dad do? My Dad decided he was going to die in the winter. Yeah, So he made me come back. So, yeah.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:09:04] But... Moving countries and I. That's a very familiar tale for me because my wife is English and we similarly had this backwards and forwards. And eventually, I understand very well the big move that one makes and the sacrifices and changes that occur. But you will face them. Well, when you got here you were faced with well, not long after. I mean, tell us a little bit about because you've gained great fame and you've got great achievement there through your sporting achievements, through the Paralympics. And, you know, there's a change in adversity. What happened? What led up to that? Had it... Well, tell us about what drove it. What drove you into the Paralympics?

Carol Cooke AM: [00:09:45] No worries. Well, life was great. You know, I had been here since 94. In 97, we bought a house. I actually got a job with Australia Post and I was climbing the

corporate ladder and Russ had a great paying job. And we were we had a great life and building a life together. And my husband is ten years older than me and has children from a previous marriage. So, you know, things were going really well and I had some unusual since... I actually joined because I had been a swimmer growing up in Canada and I joined a local masters club. That's where we're going to meet friends and that was perfect and I was down in Hobart at the National Masters Swimming Championships in February of 98 and I was really fit. I was looking forward to doing well and I had some very unusual symptoms and I swam like a rock. I thought I had the flu coming on. I just couldn't get out of bed. After... Even after 7 or 8 hours of sleep, I just felt like I had a ton of bricks on me. And then when I got home from Hobart, my balance went and so my doctor thought I had an inner ear infection which made sense. We tried everything. Nothing took it away.

Carol Cooke AM: *[00:11:01]* About a week later, my eyesight started to go where I had double vision. My eyes felt like they were shaking side to side and I was looking at my husband going "look at my eyes like they're moving." And he goes, "No, they're not." Well, from the inside they are. And I went and had an eye test just at a local optometrist, and they did a field... The young girl that was there did a field vision test and I failed it dramatically. I had no peripheral vision whatsoever. I was only seeing things right in the centre. So she asked for... She was really good. She had just graduated from university. She asked for my doctor's name and phone number and she said maybe the infection has spread to your optic nerve. I'm going to call your doctor. First thing she did is she said to him, Carol has optic neuritis, which is a precursor to multiple sclerosis have her tested. He hadn't even like he said to me, I would never even thought of that. He said, you know, as a GP, we learned 20 minutes about every disease in the world. He says, "You know, I wouldn't have thought of that." So he got me into the very first neurologist that we could get into, and I saw this guy, He was probably early seventies at the time, sent me off for tests, CAT scan, MRI, stuff like that, and it was the 23rd of April. I remember it so well. It was the 23rd of April 1998, and it was an appointment at 2:15 p.m. and I felt like a fraud because all my symptoms were gone. Finally, everything had just disappeared.

Had it been a couple months, but everything was gone. And I said to Russ, "You just go to work. I'm going to go to the appointment, because he's just going to say, Oh, get out, You know, you're wasting my time." And when I got there, he opened his office door and he really gruffly looked at me and said, "Hurry up, get in here and sit down in this chair." And he pointed at this big armchair and I thought, Yep, I'm wasting his time. Right. And he pulled out the MRI film and wouldn't even look at me. But he held it to the ceiling light and he looked up at it and he said, "Well, there's too many lesions on your brain for someone your age, so you've got multiple sclerosis and basically your life as you know it is over. So I suggest you go home."

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:13:16] You must be... The bedside manner is quite breathtaking, isn't it? But then again, so, Doctor. And so go... You go on.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:13:26] He said, put your affairs in order before you become incapacitated. And then he stopped and he just looked at the floor and I just sat there. I felt like I'd been hit by a bus. And I looked up at him. And in that entire appointment that day, I said one word. And that was right then and there. I said, "What?" And he looked at me and he dropped his head and he shook it. And he said, "Oh, you heard me. I just told you, you've got to M.S. the silly sports stuff you do. You're not going to do that anymore. You're going to have to quit work, go on a whole bunch of drugs. And to be honest, I have enough people with M.S. To deal with so I don't have time for you as a patient. So go back to see your GP. He can look after you." And with that he walked to the door and put the film back in the envelope, opened it, looked at me and said, "Hurry up, I've got people waiting. Welcome to the world of the M.S." so that was...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:14:20] Oh, really is...Oh, that's what he said to you? That's not that's always the experience of doctors...

Carol Cooke AM: [00:14:25] Yeah, that was me going. Welcome to the world of M.S. And, you know, I knew about... Not about multiple sclerosis, but I'd heard about it because the Read-a-thon, the M.S. Read-a-thon was actually started by my grade seven librarian at my school in Canada all those years ago. So I was the very first person to ever do Read-a-thon, having no idea what M.S. was.

But, you know, so I knew about that and. Yeah, it's it was not a good way. I guess the only word that to me resonated that I don't even remember driving home was incapacitated and is somebody who was very sporty at that point. I was swimming the Masters, I was the head trainer of my husband's football club and I was running around the field with guys looking after injuries and, you know, quarter time water and oranges and doing all that kind of stuff and to have that word incapacitated.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:15:26] Mhm...

Carol Cooke AM: [00:15:26] I went to the really dark side of that word that day I because he gave me no information and I thought I would be 24-seven unable to do anything by myself and dependent on somebody for everything. And at that point, because Russ hadn't come with me, I did something really stupid. I made decisions that you should never make when you hear something traumatic. But I decided that I was going to give him a divorce, give him the house which we'd bought with my money from the police force, and go home and let my family look after me because I was going to be incapacitated. And when he came home and I told him this, I told him what had happened and I said, Well, before you say anything, this is what we're going to do. And I told him what I was going to do. And he just looked at me, and you'll have to excuse the language, but he looked at me, went, "Oh God, you're a fucking idiot."

Carol Cooke AM: [00:16:21] I just said...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:16:23] So Australia...

Carol Cooke AM: [00:16:25] Yeah, exactly.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:16:26] I wouldn't have expected anything more from an Australian, particularly an Australian who walks in with a Driza-Bone and a hat on.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:16:30] A bush boy. A bush boy...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:16:30] A bush... but very poignant and very well put.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:16:37] Yeah, and it was and I looked and I said, Haven't you heard what I told you this doctor said? And he said, Well, he's a bigger one. And we don't we can't make decisions. We don't have any information about this. So I was lucky that I've got an amazing GP who called M.S., got information package sent to me, sent to himself because he says, I don't know enough about it to look after you. And then he rang St Vincent's Hospital here in Melbourne. Asked for the name of three neurologists that dealt with M.S. and then asked for the youngest and made an appointment for me to see him. And that was... That started my journey, which was fantastic because the one he sent me to is probably one of the best in the field. So... And young enough to have a discussion with not somebody who was going to be dismissive. So I mean, life just to me, life just carried on as normal. I started immunotherapy drugs and I just thought, nobody is going to tell me what I can and can't do.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:17:38] I kept swimming. Eventually, disability caught up to me and by 2001 I was in a wheelchair full time. I was still climbing the corporate ladder and I was finding that stress was really killing me. And I would stress I'd have a relapse and I'd take, you know, a couple of weeks to get myself back into work. And I'd be so stressed about trying to get back into work. By the time I did, I'd have another relapse, and it was just this cycle of off and on and my workplace not really helping me out much. And my... The neurologist that I had said, you have to make a decision. He said, "I'll keep treating you and you can keep doing this, but you're going to get worse, he says, or leave work and start concentrating on you." Well, for somebody who'd never been unemployed, that was probably one of the biggest changes, was what am I going to do? You know? So but I bit the bullet. I did leave and I was lucky to find a rehab doctor who was using Botox and for... Some were palsy mostly. But he tried it on my legs. Intensive physio got me out of the chair, got me back exercising, and I haven't looked back, you know, It was. Yeah, so I was... Still had issues. I got classified as a para swimmer for Masters Games and I did really well at the World Masters Games as a para swimmer and Paralympics Australia heard about me, sent me an email thinking I was about 25, and said, Come to a talent search...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:19:18] How old were you at that point?

Carol Cooke AM: [00:19:20] I was 45.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:19:23] Yeah.

I still very... Still young woman, but not twenty...

Carol Cooke AM: [00:19:26] But talent search days are for kids with... Living with disability, maybe into early twenties for future stars. So I emailed them back and I just said, well, you know, maybe I'm a bit old for this. And the guy who answered, Tim he goes, "No, no, no, come anyway." And I'm sure that day that I walked into that testing, all of these parents were there with their kids, were looking at me going, "Where's your kid?" And there's me going, "Hey, I'm here for the testing." Which was fun. I was 24 years older than the oldest person testing that day and went through it all with them and about two weeks later was asked to take up the sport of rowing because rowing was a new event in Beijing in 2008. So this was the end of 2005. And so I took up rowing and that was the start of really my para journey internationally. I made the national team in 2008 and we attempted to qualify for Beijing and we missed by point eight of a second, which was so heartbreaking. And I thought I can't keep doing this at this age. It's ridiculous. And it was my sister who gave me a swift kick up the butt through cyberspace. And she said, "Why are you worried about the destination? You know, if you're enjoying the journey and you're enjoying rowing, just row. Just row because you love it." And I went, "You know what? Little sisters are pretty smart sometimes." And yeah, so I kept rowing and the following year I made the team again and we came sixth at the World Championships and we all thought, this is great we've got three years to London. We could be really good if we all work together. And we were from four different corners of Australia, needless to say. But a year later Rowing Australia dropped our crew and said they weren't interested in our classification. They wanted to concentrate on the more disabled crews who were better medal chances and it was like. What do we do now? And I fought for years to keep it going. But in 2011, I started cycling and this is probably the best change and the best thing that Rowing Australia could have done for me to drop that crew because I made my first Paralympic team at the age of 51 and in 2012 for London.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:22:03] Gosh, I'm just trying to visualize... You know, this is quite a transformation coming out of the wheelchair and yes, going through all of this rehab and stuff. And here you are rowing, which does require a huge I mean, I used to row at high school and I think it's one of the great sports. It's just a wonderful team sport and character building and all of that. But cycling. Wow. Now, go on, tell me about this, because you've... This is where you really hit your stride.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:22:33] Yeah, well, I had been riding back and forth to rowing training so a bit... With my M.S. I still have balance issues so I can't ride two wheels. So I had a trike made. So it's like a little kid's trike on steroids, I like to say. So it's a normal bike and it's got a back end. It's got a back axle that would go where your back wheel would normally go, which has two wheels on either side of it. So it makes it into a trike. And so I'd had one made and I was just riding back and forth to rowing training, and one of the girls on the national team was rowing with me. She switched to cycling, she had cerebral palsy, but she was on two wheels and she called me and she said, "Carol, do you know there's a trike category at the Paralympics?" And I said, "Really?" She said, "You should come up and do nationals." Now, this was probably in January of 2011. And I said, "Oh, race a trike. I've never raised the trike. How... I wouldn't know what to do." She goes, "Don't worry about it, just come up and ride." And I went, "Oh, okay."

Carol Cooke AM: [00:23:38] And so April of 2011, I went to my first nationals. It was hilarious because it was in Queensland around the Glass House Mountains and we drove the road course and I looked at Alex and I said, "This is going to be embarrassing when I have to get off this trike and walk up this hill because it was so steep." And she just looked at me. She goes, "Don't worry," she says, "I think I'll be getting off too" as she was on two wheels. Needless to say, I never did have to get off. I went up that hill really slow. But yeah, I done... I did the time trial first at Nationals and it was just a flat out and back and I had no idea about qualifying speeds or anything about para-cycling. I just went to ride and when I finished my time trial I had no idea if I'd done well or not, but the head coach came up to me and he just looked at me and he goes, "Where the hell did you come from?" And I said, "Melbourne."

He meant in cycling and I went. He says, "Oh," he says, "No, no, cycling." I said, "no, I'm a rower." And he goes, "No you're not, you're a cyclist." I said, "No, I'm a rower." And he goes, "Well, you just smashed." He says "You're the fastest T2 woman. (That's my classification) that I've ever seen." And he said, "You just smashed the qualifying speed for the national team." And I said, "Oh, what was that?" And he went, "Oh my God, you don't even know that." I said, "Nope." He goes, "I need to talk to your coach." And I said, "Keep talking because I've got a rowing coach but I don't have a cycling coach."

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:25:14] It's actually an interesting story because you were cycling to rowing and then, you know, you could have turned around and gone home again, but no, you chose to get into a boat and improve cardiovascular health even more. So what a combo. Actually, you were doing some good training there without knowing it.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:25:34] Well, cycle training is such a great cross-training for rowing. And as you know, because you've been a rower, I think rowing is one of the hardest sports going because there's no let-up. You're using your brain, your whole body, your upper body, your lower body. It's leg driven, which everybody thinks that rowers just it's all arm driven, but it's not. It's leg driven. And so cross-training with cycling, I think because I had that rowing experience, that's what made me stronger on the bike, to be honest.

Mm-hmm. Yeah, absolutely. So at this point, I mean, is your M.S. stable? Is it where you would think it is stable?

Carol Cooke AM: [00:26:15] Look, it's stable as it's going to be right now I hadn't had a relapse since 2008 and in the end of 2020, I had my first relapse since 2008. And I, I believe because I've been on nine different immunotherapy drugs, because I've reacted to all of them. So I just keep switching. I found one that's cross your fingers hope working now but I believe that staying fit and exercise is what's holding it at bay. Now, the end of 2020, I'd been a bit silly because we'd been in lockdown here in Melbourne and I'm an ambassador for the M.S. Gong Ride, which wasn't happening, so they did it online. So I did this massive amount of indoor cycling

online and probably really overdid it and cooked myself and ended up having a relapse at the end of 2020, which was probably more of one of the scarier ones, because not only affected my left side, especially my arm, but it affected my brain this time where I couldn't... I knew what I wanted to say, but I couldn't actually pronounce the words, I couldn't get the words out. And that was a bit scary, you know. So at that point, my neurologist, said, Well, we'll change immunotherapy drugs and which we did, and touchwood. So far, so good.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:27:44] Good. Isn't it interesting that you observed that you were going backwards and forwards between relapse and stress at a time earlier on? And you were really in a good physical shape and yet too much exercise caused the stress on the system the other way. You know, you'd overdone it. But coming back, I want to come back to your Olympics because there's a whole story here where you haven't got to the good part yet because, yes, you had discovered yourself as a cyclist and now you were finally fully... No, you hadn't gone to an Olympic, You were on your way to London.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:28:18] To London. I got the last spot for the female para-cycling team. And... then we only had six spots And it's very hard to make the team. You have to be a gold medal potential and I was I had to race the men in London because there weren't you had to have at least seven women and we didn't have enough around the world at that level to race. And so I had to race the men and so as untested against the men. But I got that last spot and I was so excited. But a week later I was then off the team because another rider appealed against my inclusion because she got shoved aside and, you know, it was terrible. So I had two weeks of, "Oh my God, am I going, am I not going?" And I ended up winning the appeal and ended up going. And it was funny. So I did my time trial and in amongst the men and it was a factored race, so the men would be 100% of what their finishing time was. And I would be brought down to, I think it was 89% of their time. So, you know, I really had to be fairly as close as I could be to them because it wasn't much of a difference. And I finished my time trial and I remember sitting... we're at Brands Hatch in the UK, which is a car race circuit, and so we're in one of the bays car race bays and I'm cooling down on I'm on a stationary bike and our media lady saying

she's looking at the results online and I just wanted to hear the results through the loudspeaker. Right. And she's going, "I think you've got this." And I'm like, "Stop, don't even say that because there's the world champion, male world champion still out on the course, don't it? Like there's four people still out there you don't know." And so about 10 minutes later, the head coach of Great Britain walks in and he walks straight up to me. I'm still on the bike and he sticks his hand out and I stuck my hand out, shook his hand, and he goes, "Congratulations." And I said, "For what? You just won." And I'm like, "I won." And I burst into tears. And I turned and looked at Jennie, our media lady, and she just went, "Oh, I've been trying to tell you this for 10 minutes, that you bloody won this thing." And it was just like, so I just couldn't believe it.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:30:37] Yeah. And I thought, Wow, you know, this dream's finally come true. That's it. I'm 51 first games, and that's it. I'm done. I've done the dream from. I was a nine-year-old dreaming of representing Canada, you know, at the Olympics, and that throughout the whole bunch of problems in Canada that didn't happen. And then all of a sudden I've done it and I thought, wow, that dreams come true. And I thought that would be the end of it. That would be there. You know, that would be it. It hasn't quite the end of it. No. And I think it's because...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:31:12] So what's the total? What's the tally?

Carol Cooke AM: [00:31:15] Well, I ended up going to Rio. We didn't have to race the men. So because in... They didn't factor the road race in London. So I ended up seventh overall against with the men. So that was first female but seventh overall. But in Rio we had the time trial and the road race and just the women and I won both of them. So then I ended up even with Tokyo being put off a year I made the team and I was so gung ho about winning the time trial for the third time. But unfortunately, I didn't. I came second. I won the silver, but that was my gold medal moment because I raced the girl that won was 31 and I was 60. So I guess I can...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:32:02] Yeah.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:32:02] Let her have the win, you know?

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:32:06] Yeah.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:32:06] And in the road race, unfortunately, the Canadian girl crashed right in front of me and I had nowhere to go but over top of her. So ended up, I got back up, so I crashed, and blood everywhere. Took skin off everywhere. But I got back up. I got back on the trike. I kept riding and then it was starting to get a bit hard to breathe. And I was thinking maybe I broke a rib because I hit the ground at about 45 kilometres an hour and I pulled off after the first lap because by that point I couldn't breathe and it turned out I had a pneumothorax and the left side, the left lung and, um...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:32:48] Oh, wow.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:32:48] You know what? You know, Ron, there's always a silver lining. Like, I ended up six days in a Japanese hospital. The team left without me because of the pandemic, you could only stay for 48 hours after... You have to leave after 48 hours of your event being over and so the team left without me. One lady from the Paralympics, Australia stayed with me, but I had six days in a Japanese hospital, which I can tell you was not fun. They don't believe in pain meds. I had a chest tube put in without any freezing or any analgesia, no pain med. So I know what it feels like to be stabbed. But then I couldn't fly for two weeks because of the pneumothorax and to make sure the lung was completely healed. So you know what? The silver lining out of it all. So I'm the only athlete in the world out of the Olympics or the Paralympics who got to stay in Japan and be a tourist. I had my own private tour guide. His wife worked at the Australian Embassy. He took us wherever we wanted to go and I had two weeks of seeing Tokyo and it was fabulous. Didn't like how I got there, but it was fabulous.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:34:05] But... What an amazing story. And I mean, change in adversity. Well, because I know you talk about this. You do you talk, you do corporate talks. You get out and talk to groups and people. And I know you have a FORCE model which you talk and I wondered if you might just share with us what that is an acronym for and what the basically the message is.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:34:28] Oh, yeah, I'd love to. So, I always wondered if people had always asked me, well, how do you get through all this? You know, I've had a lot of other health issues. I had an ovarian cancer scare, so I've had major surgery there. You know, just because I have M.S. doesn't mean I'm not going to get anything else, unfortunately.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:34:48] Mm hmm.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:34:49] And the crash in Tokyo and a few other issues. And I think I always realised that we all have a force within us. And when I talk about force, I say fearless. You have to be fearless. Believe in yourself, and you can accomplish anything, no matter what it is in life that's happened to you. And it's not what you see. It's how you see it. Right. Where people see adversity, I see opportunity and I try and look at life that way. And the O is for being original because your own uniqueness can create magic. And I think by being me and who I am and believing in myself and knowing that in my head, in my heart, that if somebody tells me I can't do something, I know I'm going to do it. I mean, that's the best thing is being able to do things. So being original and unique and the R is for reframing your thinking for resilience and that goes back to and it's... I'll make it a short story it was... I was nine I wanted to represent Canada at the Olympics in gymnastics. I had seen my first Olympics in 1968, two years earlier, which were the Mexico Olympics. I remember watching them on our black and white TV and the gymnast. I was mesmerised. So that was my life. And at nine, my best friend Sharon and I decided to try out for an elite gymnastics club. And when I got there, they made us get our height and weight and when I was told to stand on the scales, the lady yelled out loud, "You're too fat for gymnastics. You can't come in." Yet, my girlfriend got to go in and I had to sit because her mom had taken us for an hour and a half to wait to go home. And as a nine-year-old, I was crushed. I remember being completely crushed like life was over and my mum was really good. She... when I got home and I was absolutely in tears in my bedroom, she just picked me up and said, "Look, I'll only give you two pieces of advice." And I've carried them to me... with me that my whole life. She said, "Number one, never let anybody tell you what you can and can't do. And number two, if you want to go to the Olympics, why don't you try another sport?" It was reframing my thinking, thinking outside that box.

And at that point, she was teaching me resilience. And I've used her lesson throughout my entire life about reframing my thinking.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:37:18] You know, I started a year later. I started swimming, 1980 Moscow Games was my goal. And then Canada boycotted those games. So that went out the window. So I had to reframe my thinking of what am I going to do now? And that's when I joined the police force. I mean, that was way outside the box. So that's R, reframing your thinking for resilience. C is having the courage to take a chance on change. You know, I was talking to these 200 year 12 boys yesterday, their very first day of year 12. And I said to them, "you know, you all are sitting here, you all have goals and dreams for the end of this year and onwards. Don't be surprised if those change and don't be scared of they change. Have the courage to say, hey, this might be a better route to take." And so I think sometimes when things don't work out for us, we don't have the courage to say, Well, I'm going to look through that door. I'm not... I'm going to open it, doors aren't going to open for yourself. You have to go and open those doors and say, I'm going to have the courage and step through and make that change because it's amazing.

You know, I was diagnosed with M.S. and I thought life was over. And now I can honestly say I would never want to change the fact that I was diagnosed with M.S. Would I like a cure? Of course, I'd like a cure. But it's made me who I am, and it's given me that change has given me opportunity that I never, ever would have had. You know, I would have never been to three games. I would have never been a nine-time world champion. I never would have travelled the world or met the friends that I have around the world now. I never would have written two books. I probably wouldn't be sitting here talking to you. So life has a funny way with change. And the last one, the E is for just embracing the positives. And I'm a really glass-half-full person. And so even if I have a bad race or, well, like I'm in a sling right now because three weeks ago at Nationals, I was having a great time trial. I took a wrong line on a corner. Trikes are really hard to turn and I was travelling a little bit too fast. I should slow down before the corner and I came off and I completely wrecked my shoulder. But yeah, that's crap. And I'm off the bike now and I have to be... I can get on the trainer now as of this week, but I can't get back on the road.

And yeah, it was a bad accident like Tokyo. It was a bad accident. But you always have to find that little silver lining. I always believe that things happen to us for a reason. And the positive for me from this last crash is that it's given me time to work on my business. It's given me time to reset what I want to do this year cycling wise, and really start from the beginning again and look at, you know, look at my bike position, Look at if everything's still in the right position, the bike set up that it should be. Whereas if I hadn't had the crash, I would have still been riding and just continuing on doing what I'm doing. So embracing the positives in life, you know, you have to find some little positive in everything bad that happens to you. Even if you have a crappy day, there's got to be some little bit there that was positive. So that's my FORCE and I think that we all have that in us. We just have to realise we have that in us. So I hope that...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:40:59] Well, what a note... Oh, it does beautifully. And what a great note to finish on. And Carol, you are clearly a force and an inspiring one, too. And talk about dealing with change in adversity. You're an inspiration. It's been a joy to talk to you. Thank you so much for sharing your story, your knowledge and your wisdom with us.

Carol Cooke AM: [00:41:20] Well, thank you so much for having me, Ron it's been great having a chat.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:41:23] Well, as I said, Carol, certainly is a force. And the number of adversities that she has overcome in her life and turned them into a positive is so truly inspirational. I mean, fearless, original, reframed, build resilience, courage, take a chance on change and embrace what I message to live your life by. And I thought it would be a really great story to share with you. We'll, of course, have links to Carol's website. She gives talks to schools and organisations and is such an inspiring character. I hope this finds you well. Until next time this is Dr Ron Ehrlich. Be well.

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