

# HOT & COLDS OF LIFE



## THERAPY IN THE UNEXPECTED

BY NATHAN CARLSON

I had always imagined there would be a time in my life when it was okay to lose my parents. I thought death was many years away after memories had been made, lives had been lived and wisdom had been imparted. That their physical bodies would run out after many miles from a life well lived.

I was in my 20s when my dad was diagnosed with bladder cancer, and it was treated like an annoying fly on the wall that we swatted away. The only thing is that it never went away; it kept outsmarting us, finding a way to adjust and thrive inside his body. Cancer changes everything, absolutely everything. The cancer grind is brutal, giving you hope regularly, before snatching it away, seemingly laughing at you.

Fast-forward to seven years of dark hospital rooms, and traveling from Minneapolis to Duluth to the Mayo Clinic on dark, icy roads and through winter storms. Cancer didn't care what I had going on in my life or allow me to build a life that I wanted, and that was okay. This was my duty. Cancer center waiting rooms were uncomfortable, anxiety-producing, and full of patients and their families looking for hope, any hope. Some waiting rooms were adjacent to or shared with the childhood cancer clinic. The sight of a child battling for their life and their warrior parents changes you.

Cancer was slowly torturing the best man I have ever known, and leaving me traumatized and heartbroken. We just kept moving from treatment to surgery to treatment to surgery, trying to swat that fly away, until it all stopped, and we had run out of options, and he quietly passed away in my mother's arms. There was no going back; I was now aware of the other side of life, the sad one that no one tells you about. I didn't know what grief was; you lose your grandparents and it's sad but okay because they're old, and that's what old people do, right? Nothing seemed right anymore, and I had this odd feeling that we weren't done. As bad luck would have it, I was right.

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Not long after, I got a call that seemed unreal: that my mom was diagnosed with uterine cancer. In a split second we were back on the cancer grind. It was surreal being back in the same hospitals, hotels, restaurants; it was like a bad dream. This wasn't the slow burn of my dad's but wildfire cancer; you had one shot, and the stats were grim. I had detached at this point and watched this unfold before my eyes. In two years and some change, my sweet and kind mother passed away while I held her hand, sobbing uncontrollably. A mother's love is not replaceable. Arriving back in Minneapolis after burying my beloved mother, I thought, what just happened? I was going to have a lot of time to think about that because we were about to enter a pandemic.

I have always been grounded in gratitude because I understand where I fit on the spectrum of life. Gratitude was part of my armor to let everyone know I'm "okay." Not giving yourself the grace to admit that life sucks right now doesn't do anyone any good. This period was going to be intense, isolating and the most challenging work of my life. Living inside my head on a full-time basis, trust me, is not for the faint of heart. The last decade had changed my brain, nervous system and view of what life has to offer. I lifted the rug and swept everything under it. It was all waiting for me, patiently.

Where does sauna come into my life? Right here. I was alone in my apartment and full-time in my head (horrifying); I forgot to mention my 15-year corporate finance career had imploded two months before my mom died.

I got an invite from my friend who was facilitating a group sauna and cold-therapy event in late 2021, when Covid restrictions were lifted. I became immediately hooked. I listened to podcasts by the usual suspects in the world of health and wellness, the mindset deities that all seemed to agree that sauna benefits are as follows:

# WHAT CAN A SAUNA DO FOR YOUR WELL-BEING?

- Relaxes you and stabilizes your mood
- Reduces inflammation
- Increases dopamine (I was running on Empty for a LONG time)
- Promotes overall well-being

One thing I was not expecting was the conversation and community that takes place “on the bench.” Dopamine started break-dancing in my head and brought me back to life, one session at a time. For someone dealing with the mental health triple threat of anxiety, depression and grief, it is life-changing. Sauna and cold therapy were the first time in my life that I told my nervous system I was in control. This was extremely powerful.

The summer of 2022 came around and I was continuing my coming out (for the second time in my life). Liz was curating events around town. I attended, full of apprehension, but knew I needed a break from the shit show in my head. One of the events was at Embrace North and I was officially hooked on the kindness this community showed me. I felt so uncertain and alone during this period; those conversations in the sauna meant more than anyone will ever know. I truly believe sauna and cold therapy could heal the world’s problems, allowing us to make rational decisions and see each other as human again; when you are in a dysregulated state, that is impossible.

As they say, it takes a village ... literally. I attended the first annual Sauna Village, which took place at Malcolm Yards in the winter of 2023. The Sauna Village is a gathering of quirky sauna makers, or “sauna-preneurs,” that set up a sauna shantytown with good vibes, the smell of cedar and sweat. Sauna people are obsessed, and I LOVE obsessed people.

I stumbled upon Urban Wings’ mobile sauna, the NorthUp sauna, and connected with Darin, the owner and creator. We became fast friends, then a group developed that revolves around sauna. A group of entrepreneurs mostly interested in authentic connection and sauna life. Finally I had found a community and place I felt good in for the first time in a long time.

Today I am taking life as it comes and enjoying the process of figuring myself out in all honesty for the first time. Letting life happen naturally is torture for me, but I am begrudgingly letting it go — taking care of the many things I swept under the rug for over a decade.

This has been the most difficult period of my life but also the most rewarding and filled with joy. As most people do who have been through it with life, I became a coach. I completed an International Coaching Federation accredited program during the pandemic to become a certified professional coach equally to help myself and to learn about helping others. I work with individuals and organizations who are looking for support in the increasingly challenging environment. I consult with companies on their wellness programs and policy. A coach used to be reserved for sports teams and elite executives, but now everyone qualifies. I truly believe that mindset and how we manage our thoughts dictate the quality of our life. I also tell my story to anyone who will listen and use my wisdom gained for good and help people feel a little less alone.

I have been saying for the last few years, “I am in a transitional phase” of life. Which is code for I have no idea what is coming next, and it’s taken me a long time to be able to sit still with that. I do know I will always miss my parents and I will always look for the nearest sauna. ▣



I was born and raised in Duluth, Minnesota, and graduated from Duluth East High School. I have lived in Minneapolis for almost 20 years. I hold a bachelor of science degree in marketing. I worked in financial services for over 15 years in various roles. I received my Certified Professional Coach Certification from the International Coaching Federation (IFC) in 2022. I work with individuals and businesses to achieve their personal and professional goals by providing guidance and support, working to identify the obstacles by digging into what holds us back and help develop a plan to overcome them.

You can find me all over town attending events in my free time that combine movement and fun! Community and authentic connections are what excite me in this season of life. I dabble in photography, and enjoy trying new restaurants and just walking around town, particularly the Stone Arch Bridge area.

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