

# See You at The Summit:

## Therapeutic Nature and Adventure Impact on Adolescent Oncology Psychosocial Health

Daniel L. Cavanaugh, PhD, LCSW, Kellie Pertl, MPH, Christine Norton, PhD, LCSW, & Heather Rose Otto, BSN



### Background/Introduction

- Young people who are experiencing cancer may experience psychosocial challenges that can be ameliorated through preventative supportive programming (1).
- The Adolescent Resilience Model has described how programming aimed at improving individual, social, and family protective factors may increase resilience of youth experiencing cancer (2).
- Young people who have participated in SYATS have demonstrated improved psychosocial functioning, improved mental health, and strengthened peer relationships connections (3).

### Program Description

- **See You at the Summit (SYATS)** uses a therapeutic wilderness approach to help teenagers experiencing cancer reclaim their lives and personal sense of power. On medically supported wilderness trips, teenagers connect to peers living the same challenges, cultivate resilience, and immerse themselves in the healing power of nature.
- **SYATS** focuses on adolescents 13-18 years old with cancer, during a vital stage of their psychosocial development. The goal is to support teenagers **during** their diagnosis and treatment to help them process their experience.

### Mixed Methods Research Design

- Qualitative and quantitative measures describe the feasibility, acceptability, safety, and explore the impact of a 9-day wilderness program among adolescents aged 14-17 in treatment or who recently finished treatment for a cancer.
- PROMIS and the Resilience Scale measures are currently undergoing analysis.
- Qualitative data collection involved participant observation and open-ended interviews.
- Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to distill thematic data from transcribed exit interviews (4).
- Researcher triangulation: 2 researchers coded and themed data; 3rd researcher verified themes.

### Qualitative Findings: Themes, Subthemes, & Quotes

#### • **Social Support and Connection**

- Peer support
- Adult support
- Friendship
- Food

“It’s been full of just loving kindness and just happiness with all of the members of this trip. I’ve gotten to have a brotherly connection with all of these people, and this is more than what I expected.”

“They were encouraging, they were wholehearted, and they just wanted to help. I can feel it.”

#### • **Choice and Autonomy**

“Because we wanted to do it. I mean this whole trip is like mostly stuff that we want to do...we’re not going to push ourselves too hard. But we’re definitely going to hike a little bit of South Sister and then we’re just going to play afterwards.”

#### • **Psychological growth**

- Inner narrator

“There was space for your emotions”

“The more I was around the group just made me feel better about myself. I kind of shifted from like self-doubt to like, you got this!”

“I feel like the mental way that I look at things now and the way I look at myself, I feel like a lot of that changed”

“I would recommend it because it helped me, like mentally a lot.”

#### • **Overcoming Challenges: “My Summit”**

- Physical challenges: “You got this!”
- Environmental challenges
- Emotional challenges

“My own summit is just figuring out like, why do I feel the need to put up a front? Why do I feel the need to be defensive?”

“I beat cancer’s ass! I beat it and now I have that experience, nothing can beat me now!”

#### • **Time in Nature**

- Connection with natural environment
- Coping outdoors

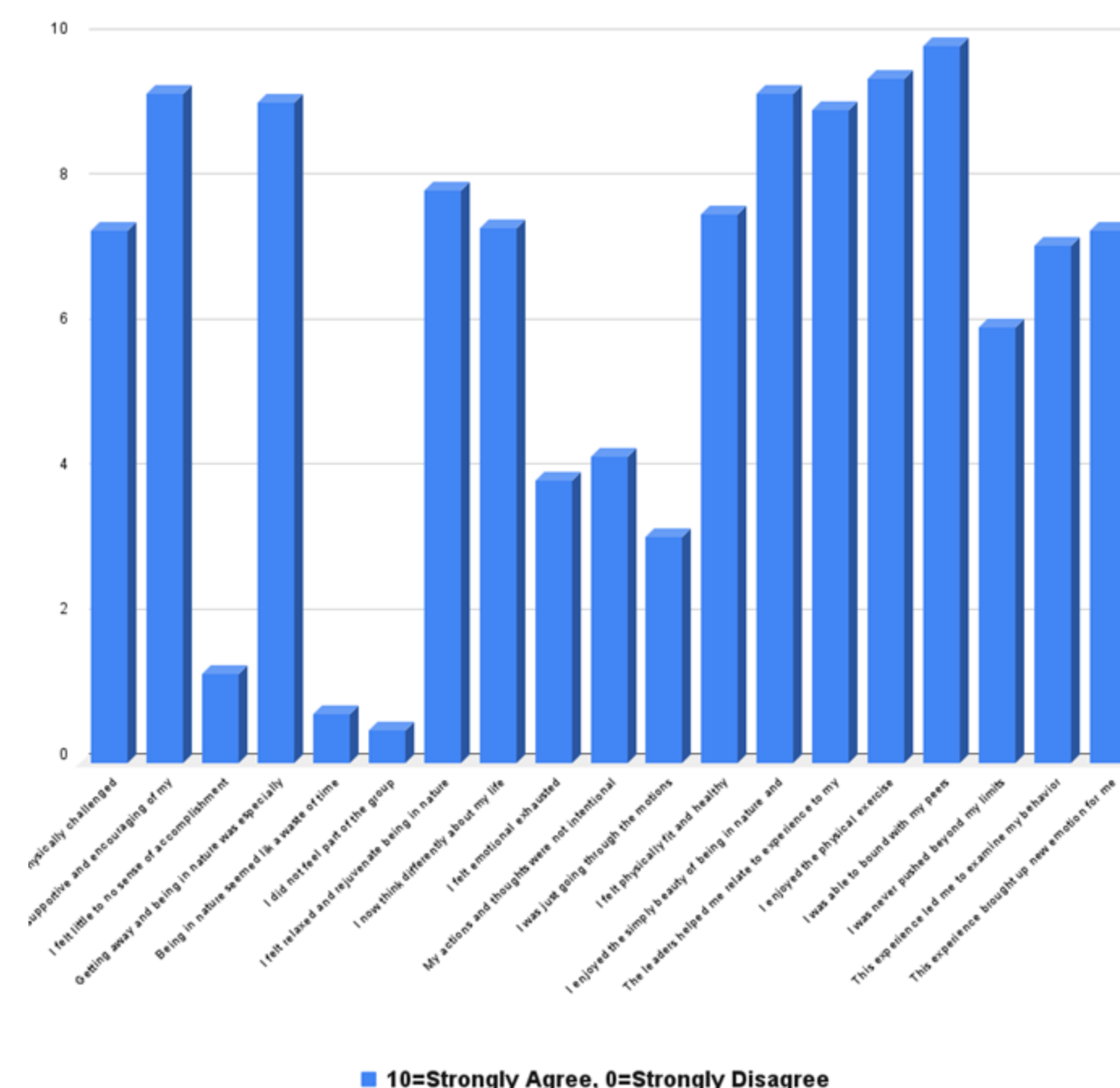
“That just inner sense of calm and peace that I felt when I was on top of the mountain when I first took in the views was kind of breathtaking, and it was just...it’s honestly indescribable.”

“Oh my gosh, we hiked to the summit, and we saw the stars!”



### Quantitative Findings: Adventure Therapy Experience Scale

The Adventure Therapy Experience Scale Mean Scores



### Implications for Practice and Research

#### 1. Practice Implications:

- a. Experiential outdoor programming is a viable option for young people experiencing cancer.
- b. Psychosocial interventions may help young people with cancer to develop resilience.
- c. Young people with cancer can thrive in outdoor experiential programming.

#### 1. Research Implications:

- a. Large scale quantitative studies are needed to explore how adventure-based programs may be able to increase resilience and well-being in young people with cancer diagnoses.
- b. RCTs should be conducted
- c. Longitudinal research

### References/Acknowledgements

- Funding for this project was provided in part by the OHSU Knight Cancer Institute Community Partnership Program, a grant program that supports communities across Oregon in addressing local cancer-related needs.
- References provided upon request.