

Connor Brown and Savannah Lee
Essay 3

A Psychological Approach to Hiking the Appalachian Trail

The Appalachian Trail is home to a wide arrange of hikers. Over 14,000 hikers have been recorded as having thru-hiked the trail, which means that folks from all walks of life have undertaken the journey. The completion of hiking the Appalachian Trail is a distinctly transformative journey since it places individuals in an environment that is incredibly idiosyncratic for an extremely long period of time. Due to the wide array of individuals who hike the Appalachian Trail, there also exist a variety of mental states among the hikers. This, coupled with the distinctive nature of hiking the Appalachian Trail, can both serve to help mental illness and to amplify its existence. For hikers who underwent traumatic experiences prior to hiking the trail, thru-hiking can provide them the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences and relate with other hikers and communities along the way. Conversely, the long periods of isolation and lack of access to medicine can cause underlying mental illnesses to proliferate. In the following essay, both the therapeutic aspects and the ability of the Appalachian Trail to promote mental illness will be explored.

PTSD and the Appalachian Trail as Therapy

Hiking the Appalachian Trail can be therapeutic for those suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. PTSD has become increasingly problematic among war veterans due to its increasing prevalence, as well as the fact that less than half of those who are diagnosed with PTSD receive treatment¹. This poses the question of alternative sources of treatment that exist outside of the standard institutional based psychological approach. One of the alternatives that has been researched is extended periods of hiking, and specifically thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail.

In 1948, World War II Veteran Earl Shaffer coined the phrase “walking off the war”, after thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail in response to having had difficulty readjusting to civilian life. Shaffer became the first person to ever hike the trail in one contiguous journey, and thus has inspired research into the viability of hiking the Appalachian Trail as a therapy for PTSD. Zachary Deitrich, researcher and veteran, says that by hiking the Appalachian Trail veterans benefit from “long periods of isolation, reflection and time inside of their own head.”² The time spent in nature while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail provides a uniquely transformative experience for everyone, but especially for those suffering from PTSD. PTSD is difficult to prevent since current soldiers transition from the battlefield to normal life frequently with a transition period of merely a few days. However, the experiences from veterans who have thru-hiked suggests that thru-hiking enables them to work out their experiences as opposed to being thrust into society immediately post-conflict. The Appalachian Trail provides a transitional period to allow veterans to recalibrate after the war and reflect on their time in the military.

Not only does thru-hiking provide veterans the time to process their experiences from the conflict they participated in, it also all allows veterans suffering from PTSD the opportunity to relate to others with similar experiences. Organizations such as Warrior Hike arrange for groups of veterans to hike the Appalachian Trail together. Sean Gobin, founder of Warrior Hike, says, “hiking with other vets means you’re with people who know exactly what you’re going through emotionally.”³ Gobin’s organization works with

¹ Enwemeka, Zeninjorthru-hike "Report: Only Half of Veterans With PTSD Getting Treatmentthru-hike" *Bostonthru-hikecomthru-hike* Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC, 21 June 2014thru-hike Webthru-hike 21 Octthru-hike 2014thru-hike <<http://www.thru-hike.com/bostonthru-hikecom/health/2014/06/21/report-only-half-veterans-with-ptsd-getting-treatment/hze4WWAXOBuq3TAADEqfcP/storythru-hike.html>>thru-hike

² "Georgia Southern University Researchers Study Wilderness Therapy for PTSDthru-hike" *Georgia Southern Newsroomthru-hike* Georgia Southern University Office of Marketing & Communications, 27 June 2014thru-hike Webthru-hike 21 Octthru-hike 2014thru-hike <<http://news.thru-hikegeorgiasouthern.thru-hikeedu/2014/06/27/georgia-southern-university-researchers-study-wilderness-therapy-for-ptsd/>>thru-hike

³ Newhouse, Eric. "Walking Off the War." *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers, LLC, 3 Apr. 2014. Web. 21 Oct. 2014.

veterans to provide them the gear and means of thru-hiking the trail, as well as connecting veterans with one another. Additionally, along the way veterans stop in towns and can find communities of other veterans who also had to go through readjusting to society. These veterans serve as mentors and form a variety of community groups for hiking veterans to reach out to along the way. This sort of community centric approach to therapy proves to be effective since it provides the veterans hiking with the ability to relate their experiences with both those who are currently going through a similar process, as well as with those who have already come to terms with their experiences.

Thus, the Appalachian Trail can be a source of refuge for those that underwent traumatic experiences. It allows individuals with PTSD the time to process their experiences and thus aids in readjusting to normal civilian life. Additionally, the communities and bonds that form as a result of hiking the trail allow those suffering from PTSD to relate their experiences and learn from others who already went through the readjustment process of returning to civilian life. It is thusly that the Appalachian Trail serves as a remedy to mental illness for those who hike it.

The Appalachian Trail and Mental Illness

While the AT's "green tunnel" can provide a nice break from the real world for those in need of a mental break, it can also act as a hidey-hole for mental illness to fester. The intense amount of preparation necessary to hike the AT means that it tends to draw those who can't hold down jobs. Hikers deemed unstable are often avoided by thru-hikers once their reputation circulates through camps. Sometimes, they disappear completely or simply remain on the trail for extended periods of time, keeping no record of their travels. A recent example of this Paul Paur, known as "Trash Bag" to fellow hikers due to his sleeping arrangements. Paul was a diagnosed schizophrenic who suffered from depression that ended up disappearing off the trail in June and has yet to be found due to the existence of only anecdotal evidence of his travels. Additionally, since he was hiking alone fellow thru-hikers lacked the necessary information to bring him home and only know of him through his deeply religious ramblings and unusual conversations⁴. Interviews done by police searching for him after he abandoned his backpack remain futile, as Trash Bag's communication with his family left only small clues as to where on the 2000-mile trail he could be. Trash Bag had attempted the trail with flip-flops for shoes and poor quality gear after cleaning out his bank account in a manner similar to that of Chris McCandless, made famous by the book "Into the Wild." Police advised hikers to approach him with caution if found, yet his case remains cold. However, being insane and hiking isn't a crime, so characters such as this continue to be drawn to the trail.

Other examples of mental illness on the AT are primarily anecdotal- nicknames that serve to further isolate hikers in addition to the distance kept from those who are deemed "different" from the general thru-hiking crowd. Forums are littered with references to characters such as "Nature Guard" who "ate cat food and stole money and gear" from everyone else, referenced by reddit user "thechink."⁵ Another hiker, "Impulse", was noted by many for being hunted by police and prided himself on his loitering abilities. Reddit user "b8seball" cites hiker Ward Leonard for camping in uncomfortably close proximity to others and then shouting unnecessarily. According to user "Dr_Merkwurdiglibe", hiker "Animal" elected to keep all of this gear in a five gallon painters bucket and was self described as "rolling big miles." In 2012, the hiker "Provisions" was infamous for desperately attempting to pawn granola bars for entire meals or whole gear, and made conversations by dissecting cats⁶. He was also into

⁴ Montgomery, Benthru-hike "The Appalachian Trail Mysterythru-hike" *Outside Online*thru-hike Nthru-hikepthru-hike, 24 June 2014thru-hike Webthru-hike 21 Octthru-hike 2014thru-hike <<http://www.thru-hikeoutsideonline.thru-hike.com/outdoor-adventure/the-current/events-expeditions/Why-Did-a-Man-Enter-the-Appalachian-Trail-and-Never-Leavethru-hike.html>>thru-hike

⁵ "Crazy trail people and stories? Let's hear themthru-hike • /r/AppalachianTrailthru-hike" *redditthru-hike* Nthru-hikepthru-hike, nthru-hikedthru-hike Webthru-hike 21 Octthru-hike 2014thru-hike <<http://www.thru-hikereditthru-hike.com/r/AppalachianTrail/>>

⁶ "Did you NOT like some of the people you met on the AT? • /r/AppalachianTrailthru-hike" *redditthru-hike* Nthru-hikepthru-hike, nthru-

fistfights. The Facebook pages⁷ for each individual AT class occasionally reference unusual characters, such as “Provisions”, and are filled with posts containing bad hiking tips, requests for personal info that go ignored, and pleas for blog followings.

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⁷ "Facebookthru-hike" *Facebookthru-hike* Nthru-hikepthru-hike, nthru-hikedthru-hike Webthru-hike 21 Octthru-hike 2014thru-hike <<https://www.thru-hikefacebookthru-hike.com/groups/53124671531/?fref=ts>>thru-hike

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- ⁷ "Facebook." *Facebook*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Oct. 2014. <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/53124671531/?fref=ts>>.