

Post Hike Depression

by
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Is post hike depression real?

Yes! Many long-distance hikers start their adventure after a major disruption in their lives. Not all of these disruptions are negative, yet we hear the same stories over and over: I just finished college; I lost my job; I wanted to do something before getting locked into a rut; my relationship just ended; my partner died; I just got out of the military; I want to do something big before I'm too old or it's too late. All of these scenarios, these disruptions induce a sense of loss. It's not uncommon to completely miss this reality, especially when we are wrapped up in the excitement of planning a hike.

Once on the trail, our brains defer to a new sense of purpose. We make new friends, explore the wonder and beauty of nature, push ourselves to levels of physical exertion many never believed possible... all driving toward the goal of completing the trail, toward accomplishing this almost mythical challenge. We replace the stresses that unknowingly drove us into the woods with physical challenges that produce endorphins, our bodies natural “feel good” chemical stimuli. It's not uncommon to see hikers supplement their natural high with alcohol or drugs. After all, they are on a pilgrimage through the wilderness, out of sight and free of societal bonds and restraints.

So, what are endorphins and how do they work? Endorphins are a group of hormones secreted within the brain and nervous system that have several physical functions. They are peptides that activate the body's opiate receptors which produce a feeling of well-being and promote healing. The stimuli that produce endorphins include laughter, sex, exercise, hot baths, massages, and even wonderment. We know that, at least while long distance hiking, the exercise happens daily, week in and week out for months. We become accustomed, or maybe addicted, to the stimulus. Over time, we need to push further, form tramalies with a common purpose, and overcome physical limitations, just to keep the high... all driving toward the goal of completing the trail. Then it ends.

What is post hike depression?

Post-hike depression is a let-down that produces a feeling of loss and anxiety. This can occur when we get injured on our hike, after we complete a long section or upon completing the entire trail. The purpose that has driven us for months is gone, so are our trail friends, the way of life, and the endorphins. The disruption in our life that freed us to hike in the first place may again drive our actions. Stressors such as returning to society, finding a job, and the need for a steady source of income exacerbate our loss.



[This Photo](#) by H. Dean Clark: Mt. Katahdin, the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail

We are no longer burning thousands of calories a day, but our hiker hunger continues ultimately affecting our body image.

Post hike depression can manifest as bouts of sadness, depression, mania, reckless behavior, and even suicidal thoughts. Although these are not “normal” behaviors, they are a common response to the physical and psychologic effects of ending our adventure. It can last for months or even years.



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How can I recognize it?

You need to be aware that it is real. You most likely will find yourself grieving the loss and it can happen to you.

Red flags to look for:

- You don't want to re-engage in off trail life.
- You no longer want to do previously enjoyed things
- You become isolated
- You don't want to get a job
- You are continually down or depressed,
- Increasing substance abuse
- Having suicidal thoughts.

Loved ones and trusted friends may be the first to recognize the signs so it is important to listen to them.

What can I do about it?

Again, knowing what post hike depression is, and that it can happen to you is a leg up. Recognizing that there will be a degree of sadness or depression at the end allows you to be proactive. During your hike devote time to formulating a post-hike plan that includes where you will live, work, what coping techniques and routine you may choose. The plan at worst should reduce the impact.

It's easy to say "get professional help" but I've yet to meet anyone anxious to see a shrink, unless they previously had a relationship with a therapist. Unchecked depression will most likely progress until you are in a crisis. Even then it is usually a family member or friend that will push the issue.

The easiest way to cope with the grief of loss is substitution. This could be as simple as moving on to your next major trail, biking, hitting the gym, or doing trail maintenance. The benefit of exercise is again tapping your endorphins. Writing a book about your experience or preparing a presentation for your local community will also allow you to share or re-live the good times. Others produce podcasts about hiking while easing back into the "world".

Joining a hiking oriented group such as the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association (ALDHA) or other trail clubs allows you to reintegrate with a reduced sense of loss. The value of interaction with other hikers who understand what you are going through cannot be overstated.

The ALDHA annual Gathering, for example, is a long weekend of camaraderie between old and new friends passing on trail culture, attending workshops on hiking trails around the world, and providing education on the "how-to" aspects of long distance hiking for dreamers. ALDHA also publishes a Membership Directory that allows hikers to communicate with each other and identify trails they have either hiked in common or ones that they may still want to complete.

Some hikers choose an alternative lifestyle after long distance hiking. Many find that car or van life more appropriately reflects their post trail reality. It frees them from the massive expense of "normal" housing and gives them the freedom of mobility to migrate with the seasons and pursue their interests. This is a coping mechanism that should not be overlooked.

Summary

Post hike depression is real. It is a combination of physical and psychologic responses to ending a long arduous journey. Everyone is affected differently, but there are

strategies and coping mechanisms that can reduce the negative impacts. Should you find post-hike depression is not responding to your efforts, you are having a hard time functioning or you are thinking of hurting yourself, call the 24 hour, toll free confidential **National Suicide Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255)** or go to <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>.

KRB 12/06/2019 (One Drive_ Personal>> Documents: Post-Hike Depression with Pics)