

# "Sensory hiking helped me heal"

*After years of struggling with fatigue, brain fog, hair loss and depression due to PTSD, Shannon Tripp, 50, found the key to healing...right outside her back door*

**H**ow much longer can I go on like this?" Shannon Tripp fretted, fighting yet another day to pull herself out of bed. *I'm depressed, achy, exhausted and I've lost all my hair and nails...this is not okay.*

Catching sight of herself in the mirror, Shannon cringed. *It's been years, and things are just getting worse*, she thought, when suddenly, a switch flipped. "No more slogging through my days," Shannon vowed. "I'm going to heal and live again, once and for all."

## Losing hope

"For decades, every day felt like I was struggling with arthritis and the flu combined. When my symptoms began, I was raising my children and told myself that when they were grown, I'd have the money and time to seek the help I desperately needed. But instead, the years ticked by, until six years ago, when things got so bad that I knew I needed help."

"I began to see doctor after doctor about my constant fatigue, brain fog, body pain and hair loss, answering the same questions over and over to a frustrating refrain: Nothing was technically wrong with me."

"How can that be? I stressed, feeling frustrated, misunderstood and ready to give up on ever feeling well again...until I found a doctor who began probing more deeply into my history of post-traumatic stress."

"After witnessing two separate shooting incidents—the first when I was 16 and the second 12 years ago—I was diagnosed with PTSD. I couldn't afford counseling and began battling a crippling fear of leaving the house. Soon, social anxiety crept in, leaving me feeling nervous and full of despair."

"When my doctor heard this, he explained his suspicion that PTSD was at the root of my

physical ailments. It made sense: I had been healthy prior to the shootings, but afterward, everything changed. As the doctor explained, arthritis is often a side effect of tension associated with PTSD, which accounted for my constant achiness. He also shared that constant stress had caused my thyroid to stop processing the proteins needed to maintain a healthy weight and for my nails and hair to grow.

"But when he suggested medication or removing my thyroid entirely, I refused—I didn't want surgery or to be reliant on medication for the rest of my life. And with therapy off the table due to the cost, my doctor only had one question: 'Do you know of anything that is within your means to do that might help you feel better?'"

"Suddenly, a memory came to mind of myself and a veteran friend, who was also battling PTSD, hiking the Appalachian Trail. When I had set out to hike the 2,190-mile trail over a span of six months, I was neither physically nor mentally in shape to do it, but I remembered just how much good that experience had done me all those years ago. With each mile I hiked, I felt stronger, calmer and more alive."

"Hiking," I said firmly, a spark of hope flashing in my heart.

## A complete transformation

"I committed to getting outside at least once each day, and to literally stop to smell the roses. My PTSD trigger has always been smell—specifically the smell of copper and gunpowder. But as I hiked around town, smelling the trees, moss and flowers, I felt a calm settle over me as my heartbeat slowed."

"Intrigued, I took to hiking 3 to 5 miles a day, noticing that the more 'sniffing' I did as I walked, the calmer I began to feel. But when I traveled to Oregon to hike, making a mindful effort to pause and breathe deeply, I found myself so immersed in the smell of lush, wet greenery and wildflowers that I fell into a state of radiant calm—a state echoed by participants in studies on the power of natural scents to decrease stress."

"As the University of British Columbia determined, natural odors have the greatest ability of all the senses to reduce stress, as olfactory signals in the brain are sent straight to the *hypothalamus*, which regulates stress responses."



Shannon says taking in the scents of trees, flowers and water on her hikes has helped her heal herself

"The more sensory hiking I did, the more I realized I was retraining my brain to make happy associations with scent while deactivating my fight-or-flight response. Once that began, my health began to change, and these days, I feel amazing. My hair and nails have grown back and I'm sleeping soundly. My aches and pains have dissipated and my thyroid issues? They are a thing of the past!"

"My PTSD no longer haunts me either. I have hiked all over the United States and have even started hiking with a women's group. Sometimes, my friends will find me stopped mid-trail, smelling a tree, happy as a clam. To me, hiking is who I am—it has given me my life back!"

—As told to Heather Rideout

## How nature erases stress and enhances health

### Spending time outdoors is a tonic for stress and a boon to overall health,

asserts cognitive neuroscientist Caroline Leaf, Ph.D., author of *Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess*. The beauty of nature takes you outside of your head, drawing your focus from the causes of blue moods and helping connect you to something bigger, she asserts. And the benefits are beyond psychological: Studies have shown

being in nature boosts levels of feel-good *serotonin*, while tamping down the output of the stress hormone *cortisol* in just 15 minutes. Plus, being outdoors regulates your internal body clock, says Leaf, so you'll sleep better and have more daytime energy, while the physical activity improves muscle and bone health to tame pain.

Another key: Your senses use nature to create a pleasant memory. "Our

brain records important smells the way it does with any of the other senses during our experiences," Leaf explains, adding that a scent can quickly activate a memory. But when your brain is retrained to associate nature scents (like the smell of pine on a tree-lined trail) with calm and peace, she says, it can help deactivate the power of unpleasant memories that harm your psychological and physical health.

"My health has transformed—mind, body and soul!" says Shannon

Shannon Tripp, 50, Mechanicsburg, PA

ELAN WIZRAHI, H&M: SARA JENKINS