



Why we climb every mountain

Lockdown gave many of us a new appreciation of the great outdoors, but for these men it has been a lifesaver



REVIVED
A trip to the Alps, top, helped Andy to reconnect



MINDFUL WALKING HELPED ME RECOVER

Andy Gooch, 53, is a retired police officer who is married with three grown-up children. He lives near Hastings in East Sussex

“ I was a UK police officer for 30 years and left at the rank of Chief Inspector last year just before Covid hit. I'd been unwell for the last two years of my career, suffering from aching joints, disturbed sleep and an inability to concentrate, and was eventually diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome.

When I retired, it was as if every case I'd dealt with in my long career caught up with me. I started to have awful dreams, replaying some of my worst cases. I couldn't bear to watch the news, sometimes bursting into tears, hating the way one human could hurt another.

At the end of the summer, I took my son Thomas, then 19, trekking in the Alps and, even though my health wasn't quite up to it, walking together in the mountains ignited a desire to rediscover the outdoors.

Back home, I started to walk mindfully in the nearby South Downs and local marshes. There was nothing quite like going out at dusk, feeling the wind and rain on my face, inhaling the sights and smells while listening to the birds sing.

It was as close to a spiritual experience as you can get.

Even though I still have days when I struggle, physically I'm almost back to where I was before the ME struck. My brain fog has gone and I feel energised and happy.

I'm a freelance outdoor leader and have joined a great Facebook group, Adventure 999, which takes emergency service personnel out into the mountains as a way of providing mental health support. I know all too well the toll the job's daily trauma takes on mental health.



SOLID FOOTING
Mark is now a rock climbing instructor

WHILE HIKING I DON'T WORRY ABOUT A THING

Mark Valentine, 50, is a mountain guide and lives in Leeds

“ A trip to Turkey in April 2000, to watch Leeds United in the European Cup, changed my life. A group of locals attacked some people in the bar we'd been drinking in, and in the chaos I spotted my friend Chris unconscious on the ground.

I was trying to resuscitate him when a man swung a large iron bar and it hit me across the back. In agony, I continued trying to revive Chris, but he died in hospital.

Back in the UK I couldn't sleep and suffered constant flashbacks. I could barely function and had to take sick leave from my job as a print engineer.

My doctor prescribed sleeping tablets and referred me to local mental health



IN HIS ELEMENT
Mark in the mountains

services, where I was diagnosed with PTSD. For seven years, I was a shell.

At that time having poor mental health was more likely to invite ridicule than sympathy, and even well-meaning friends would tell me to “man up” or “get a grip”.

But when a couple of friends tragically took their own lives, I knew I had to speak out. It made me think about my

own issues and how to deal with them. As a teenager, I loved walking in the Yorkshire Dales so I started going out there again, taking pictures of the beautiful scenery and posting them on Facebook. I started drinking less because I'd often have to drive somewhere for a hike.

Being in the wild and witnessing wildlife - I saw six golden eagles and a sea eagle on one day in Scotland - was incredibly healing. The mountains didn't tell me to man up. They were just there, solid and strong.

I trained as a mountain guide and have since qualified as a winter and international mountain leader, as well as a rock-climbing instructor.

I love spending time in the mountains in the UK and have joined many trips and expeditions around the world too. If I'm out in a restaurant in Leeds, I still have to sit with my back to the wall because of the memories from the attack, but out in the mountains I don't worry about a thing.



CHEF HARRISON
loves cooking on hikes



FOUR YEARS SOBER AND I'VE LOST 7ST

Harrison Ward, 30, an e-commerce technician, lives in Ambleside in the Lake District

“ I've suffered with crippling depression since I was a teenager and used alcohol as a way to silence my thoughts. While at university in York, I was drinking up to 20 pints a day. My weight ballooned to 22st and I often thought of taking my life, even calling my mum to say goodbye. Thankfully she talked me out of it, but it took years for me to admit I was an alcoholic.

After uni, I left my flat in York and moved to Ambleside. I decided to take up running even though I could barely make it a few yards without gasping for breath.

Then one day, my friend Ryan turned up to say he was taking me hiking up Blencathra, a hill in the Lake District. I didn't even own a pair of walking boots. When we reached the summit a few hours later, I didn't remember the view, I was just so relieved and exhausted the climb was over.

On the way down, Ryan said, “Helvellyn next?” and I nodded. I knew it was good for me.

The next time we climbed it was a glorious day with barely a cloud in the sky. At the top, I felt something more than just the endorphin rush of achievement. I knew the mountains were saving me.

Many other fells followed as well as Snowdon, Crib Goch and Ben Nevis, each climb feeling like redemption.

I've taken my passion for cooking into the outdoors too, rustling up risottos, stews and even baking bread with nothing more than a camping stove. I have nearly 13,000 followers of my Instagram page @fellfoodie. I am now four years sober and 7st lighter. There's nothing like going for a solo hike, being out in nature and giving myself much needed headspace.