

Tilt Parenting Podcast: One Mother's Radical, Nature-Based Approach to Helping Her Daughter Live with Anxiety [Transcript]

Debbie: I've been looking forward to speaking with you since you emailed me when I first launched TiLT. You wrote, "We work hard to add outdoor time to daily life for our daughter and later this week she and I leave for our second five week backpacking trip on the Appalachian Trail, a setting where her debilitating anxiety drops to almost zero." Naturally, that message totally piqued my interest. I know many members of our community have children who struggle with anxiety, so I'd love if you could share your story with us. I know you have several children but your youngest daughter Anna, who is fourteen, is the one you did the Appalachian Trail with, correct?

Jill: Yes. We've got seven kids, and at this point Anna is the only one still at home—the rest are grown and on their own. Anna has struggled with mental health issues, first diagnosed when she was five. We did the whole alphabet soup of different diagnoses, but the most significant issue we struggle with is her overwhelming anxiety that causes her to shut down at times. Other times she melts down with screaming or crying or rages when she's overwhelmed with all the sensory chaos around her. When she was very young, we discovered that being outdoors seems to help calm her down. There's less anxiety when she's not around man-made chaos, so in her younger years, that meant she spent a lot of time outdoors in the backyard playing. We tried to spend a lot of time going to playgrounds, but even there, there were a lot of other kids running around and a lot more chaos. So we figured, let's try the parks. So we would go to the park and she could wander the paved paths along the trees and in the woods. But then this past summer, my husband and I decided to try something radically different: What would happen if we took an extended trip? So we took a five-week backpacking trip, living in the woods, to see what that would do for her.

Debbie: That sounds like a huge adventure! How did that go in terms of talking with your daughter about it? I'm curious what her response was.

Jill: First, this was a dream of mine from the time I was in high school, so for me this was not some big sacrificial thing I was doing, which meant I could talk about it excitedly. So we just kind of presented to her that this is what we were doing. We didn't ask her if she wanted to do it, but rather, this is what you and mom are going to be doing this fall. She likes going shopping, so going to buying a whole bunch of gear was great fun. To her the focus, of course as a teenager, was can I get it in the color I like? Also, I did my research and discovered that some people say you need to do all kinds of preparation hikes, while others say to just start slow when you get to the mountains, because if you don't live in the mountains, you can't really prepare your body for it anyway. So based on that, I very carefully did not take her on any big, long preparation hikes. My fear was that if she was uncomfortable doing that, she would decide she wasn't going to go. So we did one three-mile hike with only a partial pack and it went really well. She loved it. Then we left and went to the trail. What we told her was, "Daddy will pick us back up in five weeks at this location further down the trail."

So the first few days when she would get frustrated or really tired she would say, “I just want to go home” and I would say, “Well here’s a snack and let’s look at the trees or let’s draw some pictures. And remember, dad’s picking us up in five weeks. So we have to get to where he’s going to pick us up.”

Now, my husband and I both had planned ahead of time that if need be, I could call him and he would come pick us up within a day. But we didn’t tell her that. So in the first couple of days, she would like it, and then she’d be grumbly, and then she would like it. After that, she settled in, calmed down, and she loved it. So it became a very good experience. I think other parents would have to figure out what would work best for their kid. Anna knows that she loves to be outdoors. So we were just adding a new flavor to being outdoors. For a parent whose kid hasn’t really spent long periods of time outdoors, that would be a radically different thing. For us, we figured that if she had a bad experience or a negative one to begin with, she would likely put her foot down and refuse to even give it a try. So we chose to just take her out there and see what happened.

Debbie: Well, it sounds like that approach worked out well for you!

Jill: It was great. Last fall, she did six weeks at home with medication and with the therapist, and she usually had two, three, maybe four significant meltdowns per week because of anxiety. When we got out there in the woods, in that five weeks, she had one partial meltdown, and that was all.

Debbie: That’s incredible.

Jill: Absolutely transformative. So that’s why my husband and I talked about it once we got back in the fall and said, “Well, obviously we’re going to keep doing this because it brings her so much peace.” So she and I completed another five weeks of hiking in the spring and had a similar result in that she didn’t have anxiety when she was hiking.

Debbie: Has there been kind of a long-term effect? Is there a residual effect of those meltdown-free days when you get back to the “real world?”

Jill: Maybe for a very short time. The bigger thing that it has done is, she now has an experience to be able to process and compare life in the “real world” to what it’s like in nature. One of the techniques often used with somebody with anxiety is to think of your “happy thoughts” or your “happy place” and try to take deep breaths. But for her, it didn’t really connect. But now that she’s had that time in the woods, I can intervene and say, “Sweetie, it seems like you’ve got some high anxiety. Can you close your eyes and just take some deep breaths and think about it as if you were walking on the Appalachian Trail? See if you can bring yourself back to feeling like what that was like.” A lot of times that’s an effective intervention, even if takes me intervening and her doing the work. While the anxiety is still there, it brings it down faster in a way she couldn’t do before we did the hiking.

Debbie: Wow. It’s incredible. What a gift to give to her to be able to have that experience. You mentioned earlier that when your daughter was in nature, she seemed to be calmer. Do you remember when she first made that connection?

Jill: When she was about two years old, we had a fenced-in backyard that was very safe and we had a dog with such a long coat that in the winter he didn't come in the house because he would get overheated. Anna would get up in the morning, have her breakfast, put on her snowsuit, and go out the back door to be outside with the dog. Eventually, I would drag her back in because her poor little lips were turning blue and I would warm her up. Once she was all warm, she would put her snowsuit back on and she would go back outside. She was just determined. She had to be outside. And that continued once it got to be spring and summer too. She, on her own, chose to spend as much time as possible outside as we would let her. So I didn't really notice that it helped, but it seemed that for her it was a necessity for her life.

Debbie: That's really interesting that she had that instinct at so young an age.

So, when you were hiking the Appalachian Trail, what was the experience like for you? You said this was not a sacrifice but rather it was something you were excited to do and had wanted to do. But was it challenging for you in terms of taking care of your own personal needs on the trail?

Jill: Not really. The first couple of weeks she insisted she had to be behind me. I had to lead. So that meant she went at my pace, and of course I'm bigger, older, and slower than she is. She would have gone a lot faster but she wasn't comfortable on her own, which I totally understood and supported. But after a couple of weeks, in the morning we would decide where we were going to stop for the night or stop for lunch at the nice overlook or whatever it was. And so after a few weeks, I let her just go ahead of me and she was expected to stop at certain spot to wait for me to catch up so we could check-in. So during those time frames I was actually in the woods by myself. But I knew if she had a problem she was ahead of me and I would catch up to her.

When we're at home, another issue related to Anna's anxiety is that she disappears at times into the neighborhood and I have no idea where she is. As a result of that, she is always on my radar, in the way a toddler would be for any parent—where is my child? What is she doing? Is she safe? But when we were out in the woods, I knew she was comfortable, that she was ahead of me on the trail. And that day-to-day, moment-to-moment stress for me was gone. Not having to be on edge, on guard, worrying if she was going to disappear into the neighborhood, was a huge gift to me. Also, I love nature and I could enjoy the view, the birds, all the different things out there, too.

Debbie: My son is almost twelve, and when I transitioned to homeschooling him, it was a difficult adjustment for both of us, but probably more so for me. Yet, just as you're describing the stress not being there when you're in nature, I also don't have that daily stress I used to experience when I would have to pick him up from school and deal with the ramifications of whatever happened in school that day. Having that stress gone has been such a gift for me. So I totally can appreciate that and also on top of that, you getting to be active in nature which is a happy place for you. Sounds like kind of a perfect experience for you two to have together.

Jill: Yes it is an excellent opportunity for us. It also gives us a shared experience where we're not struggling against each other. When they get to their teen years, most parents tend to have a lot more struggles. They're trying to assert their independence and you're trying to

get them safely to adulthood. We still have those struggles, but now we also have these shared memories of good experiences together. And that is a gift.

Debbie: A lot of my work before I created TiLT has been creating projects and writing books that were aimed at helping teen girls tap into their confidence. I can just imagine that the experience you've given your daughter by doing these hikes, by her being independent, sometimes being out of sight of you, and being able to do her own thing, is a huge boost for her self-esteem.

Jill: It is. The other thing that's really interesting when we're hiking that long distance—almost all the other hikers out there are adults. My daughter quickly realized that she's equal to every person out there because she's carrying the same pack, she's doing the same chores—filtering water, helping to build the campfire, helping to cook, whatever it is. She is equal to an adult out there and they treat her that way. And that too is a gift because far too often our kids feel like they're being treated as lesser than—the adults are the strong ones and the kids are not. And so out there, in that setting, she truly is an equal. And I think it gave her a lot more confidence, as well as a sense of self-worth.

Debbie: That's not something every fourteen-year-old girl feels on a regular basis. That's cool to hear.

What were your typical days like when you were hiking? And did you encounter any difficult situations during one of your hikes that you had to push through?

Jill: This spring we learned you can hike when it's raining every day. So that part was not real fun. But one of the days in particular, it was fairly cool and raining all day long. Actually that happened to be the day we were attempting the longest day we'd ever hiked, which was sixteen miles. That day the challenge, besides the distance, besides the rain, was that she had gone way ahead of me. We had decided on a place where we were supposed to stop and refill water bottles and have a snack together, but when I got to that place, it was pouring down rain and she wasn't waiting for me. So then I was worried that something had happened. I realized it was getting colder being wet with the wind blowing, and so I stopped. I put on my rain gear to keep me warm and I kept hiking and pushing really hard. I would hear from other people coming the other direction, "We saw your daughter ten minutes ahead" or "We saw your daughter a little while ago . . . she looks okay." And then people started saying, "Well . . . she doesn't look very happy" and "She doesn't look like she's doing very well." But I couldn't get to her even though I was hiking as fast as I could. And she wasn't thinking to stop.

So finally somebody came along behind me and was hiking fairly quickly, and I said to them, "If you see my daughter, tell her mama really needs her to stop and wait." And so maybe ten-to-fifteen minutes later, I did catch up to her—she'd gotten the message. She stopped and was cold and we she put on her rain gear. She was teary because she felt like the rain was never going to stop and that she'd never get to the shelter. When you're hiking, you don't have a whole lot of options though, so we bundled up and decided it was warmer to keep walking. I also pulled some chocolate out of my backpack for a little treat.

But that was a day I felt bad because she was so far ahead of me that I couldn't see when she started getting teary. I wasn't there to help. But I also knew—she didn't go into full

anxiety mode. She just got teary and upset because she was tired. But it wasn't an anxiety reaction. I also had to process that the day is coming, not that many years from now, where I'm not going to be there to help intervene. One of the things we are very focused on as a family and with her therapist is trying to build the skills she needs to be able to live independently as an adult and do her own interventions.

And so, to some extent, that difficult experience became a piece that we've talked about since then—the importance of recognizing what you need and trying to take care of yourself. Because she needs to make those decisions. And so it didn't end badly, it wasn't a tragedy, nobody got hurt. It was just a challenge. It was difficult, but it became a good learning lesson.

Debbie: I can see that being something she reflects on for many years to come! Like you, that is a big goal of ours, to help Asher learn great life skills so he has what he needs to live successfully as an independent adult. I'm always secretly happy when adversity strikes and he's in a situation that I know is pushing him outside his comfort zone, especially regarding his physical comfort, because that's a big issue for him. So I can imagine in that moment how you must've been feeling. I know I would have felt a strong urge to almost break into a run to catch up. But it sounds like it was exactly the experience that needed to happen. I love that since then you've been able to reflect on it, talk about it, and refer to it as a great example she'll be able to carry with her.

It sounds like Anna has always been interested in being outside, but for a lot of families, and including our personal experience, it can be difficult to get some kids interested in spending time outdoors. When we lived in Seattle, we had the Cascade Mountains nearby, and at one point I decided we were going to go hiking every Sunday as a family. So we would pick a trail on the mountains, get in the Subaru, get the dog, and head out. And that was not met with joy by my child. He was not into it. But nature is my happy place, so it was this constant struggle with a lot of whining and dragging feet. But somehow we've gotten to a point where Asher loves to be in nature and I'm so thankful for this. It took a lot of work and a lot of just getting him outside and trying to make it fun and interesting by helping him focus on nature in a way that engages his mind, which is like a little scientist mind. When I can get him interested in little aspects of nature biology then all of a sudden it's great. Do you have any tips for parents who are also looking to encourage more outdoor time or more time spent deeply immersed in nature?

Jill: I think you hit two key points in what you just said. One is that as parents, we have to be convinced that being outside is really important so we're willing to continue the struggle to get our kids outside. Because if we're not convinced of it, it won't be worth the hassle, not worth the fight, to get them out there. The second huge piece is you have to make it fun for them. For us, maybe it's a stop for lunch or maybe it's when we've gotten to where we're going to sleep in the middle all afternoon and she has time to play. She loves to do imagination play, and so she pretends she's a knight, or she's the hero, or she has a stick and that's her sword and she can just engage in play that she enjoys. But she's outside while she's doing it.

The second piece of making it fun for her is finding the bits of science that she can really focus on or it's making up a song as she's walking or thinking of songs she knows that have

something to do with being outdoors and singing them. She actually came up with an amazing repertoire. When I was was tired, she would sing a certain song that was talking about “Don’t give up, pick yourself up one more time.” We also brought along some sketching supplies, which is extra weight the backpack, but I knew would would be an enjoyable thing. And so we would sketch a leaf or she would draw a little cartoon about what she’d seen or experienced that day.

For families who want to try something like this, I recommend finding books or going online. There are all sorts of lists of fun things to do outdoors with kids. So when the focus presented to the child is: let’s go have fun and oh, by the way, it’s outdoors, they may still object, but having an activity they want to do is going to help get them over the hump.

There’s a significant book called [Last Child in the Woods](#) by Richard Louv which includes study after study showing the significant benefits to humans being connected to nature. And one of the premises in the book is that one of the reasons we have an explosion of kids with all different issues like ADHD, anxiety, autism, all these different things is potentially that kids have lost all connection to nature. Not that it causes it, but that it’s contributing to the issues. I read that book many years ago and it really resonated with me. It’s meant for parents wanting some reinforcement as to why the outdoors is important. I would urge any families who haven’t already discovered it to go find that book.

Debbie: Thanks for sharing that.

Jill: Another idea is geocaching. If you’ve got a cell phone with GPS, you can go to a website that provides locations of caches near you and you have to go find them wherever they are. Some of them are in cities, a lot are in city parks. Some of the bigger caches have a little logbook. You can actually sign your name in the logbook and then leave some teeny tiny gift and take one back out yourself. So it has a bit of a treasure hunt feel to it.

Debbie: That’s a good a good tip! I do know some families who geocache and that’s become kind of their whole family weekend activity. Plus, it’s something you can do it all over the world, which is really cool.

One last question: Do you have your next big hike picked out?

Jill: Yes and no. For the summer, we’re living in our RV. My husband’s working during the week, so he comes and joins us on the weekends. It was a way to try to say “Can we live in a city with lots of people but be in a more nature area?” Then during the month of September, we’re driving the RV across the country to Texas and we’re going to live in an RV park that’s right on a river. So we’ll have opportunities for different kinds of outdoor things, but that’s also where my two grandbabies are. Then when we get back at the end of September, we’re planning to do at least two weeks, maybe four depending on the weather, back on the Appalachian Trail. Anna’s excited because the section of the Trail we’re planning to include has wild horses. Apparently, if you try to move towards them they run away, but if you stand real still they will eventually come up right around you and check you out. Apparently, if you’re real sweaty they try to lick your arms. She that thinks that sounds cool. So that’s our next adventure!

Debbie: That sounds awesome. And just just to clarify, you are homeschooling Anna, correct? Some parents might be wondering how you're getting all this time out of school. But it's part of your educational experience, right?

Jill: Yes. While we're on the trail, we add in educational things. For example, we take my Kindle and we have a whole number of different poets that write outdoor poetry and so we read those to each other and she memorizes poems. Also, she can get some of the biology and geology sorts of things where we are. And then when we come back home, that's when we really focus on the math and the sorts of academics that don't work so well when you're hiking.

Debbie: Is there somewhere where listeners who want to follow along with your adventures can can do that?

Jill: Yes. I blog on WordPress at [The Big Epic](#) and I post once or twice a week. It's all about the various adventures we're on with lots of photos because I like to take photographs. I would love to have anybody connect there. And I love dialoguing with other parents, so readers can feel free to leave a message in the comments in the blog and we could take it offline and email directly back and forth.

Debbie: Fantastic. Thank you. I look forward to checking out your blog as well. And thank you so much for just taking the time to share your story with us. It's been fascinating! And I look forward to following your adventures in the fall.