

Back to Nature

In this complicated world, the very best antidote to stress may be just outside your door. Nature has a way of hauling us away from our worries and into the present moment, even if you go no farther than your own backyard. You just have to pay attention to the beauty all around you. **This guide will show you how.**

TEXT BY
JENNIFER KING LINDLEY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CHEYENNE ELLIS

It's

only noon and my nerves are thrumming. Buzzing from my phone announces the arrival of yet another alarming news headline, followed by an urgent text. My to-do list curls nearby. The sink is dripping ominously, nagging me to find a plumber. It's time for my go-to escape: a walk along our city's riverbanks.

As I inhale the earthy scent of mud, my anxious thoughts settle down. Underfoot, green shoots push up through old leaves. Canadian geese loll in the spring sun. One struts closer and sticks his tongue out at my flustered dog. For the first time that morning, I laugh out loud.

In these uncertain and—let's face it—overwhelming times, our minds are in constant overdrive. But a growing chorus of experts is reminding us of an ancient antidote to stress: nature.

A 2019 study of 20,000 people found that spending two hours a week in nature was linked to a rise in feelings of well-being and life satisfaction. And these folks didn't go far: The majority of their outings took place less than two miles from home.

Fifteen-minute walks in green spaces have also been shown to boost mood and vitality. "A body of research demonstrates that being in natural environments reduces the human stress response," says Lisa Nisbet, PhD, an associate professor of psychology at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario. Heart rate and stress hormones drop. The alpha brain waves associated with relaxation increase.

In fact, just looking at pictures of greenery can be a respite. A 2015 study in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found that

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"Standing in the forest reminds me of my ability to cope with challenges. Trees spend their lives rooted in one place. They flourish in the good times and find ways to endure the stressful times, too. Some species, for example, will build more drought-resilient foliage during periods of drought. At times, they turn inward, relying upon the sugars they've stored up. But as they recover, they open again and reach for the light."

—Lauren E. Oakes, ecologist and author of *In Search of the Canary Tree*

Tune In / Use All Your Senses

Naturalist Melanie Choukas-Bradley, author of *Resilience: Connecting with Nature in a Time of Crisis*, teaches students to attend to "the pleasures of presence"—the delights of nature we usually don't pause to take in. You can start by finding a place in nature to stand or sit comfortably. Then ask yourself: **1.** What sensations do I feel on my skin? **2.** What sounds do I hear all around me? **3.** What smells do I notice? **4.** What do I see that brings me joy?

ANOTHER GOOD REASON TO HEAD OUTDOORS: WHEN WE CONNECT WITH NATURE, WE'RE MORE MOTIVATED TO PROTECT IT, EXPERTS SAY.

(Opening spread) Top: Free People; shorts: Penfield; sandals: Vagabond Shoemakers; earrings: Krystle Knight Jewellery; sunglasses: Paradigm; watch: Apple Watch Series 5 with sport band; (this spread) shirt: Madewell; shorts: AMO; bracelet: Bronwen Jewellery

LISTENING TO A DAWN CHORUS OF BIRDS OR THE PATTEN OF RAIN CAN TAMP DOWN OUR FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT STRESS RESPONSE, ACCORDING TO A 2017 STUDY IN *SCIENTIFIC REPORTS*. AND NO NEED TO GET WET: THE STUDY USED RECORDED NATURE SOUNDS.



Top: Year of Ours; shorts, Only Hearts; necklace, Krystle Knight Jewellery; bracelets, Lulu Dharma and The Sis Kiss

Calming Waters

Ever wonder why being at the seashore—or floating in a lake, or hiking along a stream—feels so good? Jenny Roe, PhD, director of the Center for Design + Health at the University of Virginia, studies the mental and physical benefits of these so-called blue spaces. Here, she explains:

Looking at water relaxes your brain. “The crashing of waves, the play of light—these are things that hold our attention without any conscious effort. This allows us to recover from mental fatigue and frees our minds for creative thought.”

It evokes powerful feelings. “Water has a quality of magic. When we were children, we all loved playing with it. We bring that sense of fascination into adulthood.”

The healing power is well documented. “Access to blue space has been shown through research to make you happier, reduce your stress levels, and make you more sociable.”

Fountains relax us too. “Simply spending 10 minutes by a fountain on your lunch break can act as a mini-vacation.”

looking at nature images helped subjects recover quicker from an anxiety-inducing math task. (Time for that Yosemite screen saver!)

One reason nature is so restorative is that it can quickly bring us back to the present moment, says Nina Smiley, PhD, coauthor of the book *Mindfulness in Nature*. “The natural world stimulates all our senses at once. That helps us to focus outward, clearing the mind and calming the body.”

This potent effect is good news for the mindfulness-challenged like me. I struggle to follow my breath on a yoga mat but am instantly absorbed by a goldfinch in the echinacea.

At the Mohonk Mountain House resort in New Paltz, New York, Smiley coaches people on how to quiet their mental chatter while walking through the woods. The participants in her classes linger over the intricate patterns in a rock face and run their fingers through moss. She will ask them to close their eyes and take in the “tapestry of sound” that surrounds them—wind, distant voices, a hawk’s call.

Such practices help cultivate what mindfulness experts call “beginner’s mind,” a state in which you can experience the world afresh. “It’s like you’ve changed the channel: The world goes from black and white to color, as you see it with new eyes,” says Smiley.

Courses like hers are sprouting up across the country, but you don’t need a guide or an Edenic setting to experience nature mindfully. Simply focus attention on what’s around you, says Smiley. “It’s a matter of intention,” she explains. “You could observe a tree growing in New York City with the same awareness.” Even taking a moment to observe the different textures and variegated patterns of your potted succulents’ leaves can help you relax.

The more you notice, the more likely you are to experience a sense of awe: Nature is one of

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“In rock climbing, you get up to 800 feet, one move at a time. It can take hours. You are sweating. You may have a bunch of heavy gear. It’s a little scary. But being up at the top is indescribable. You look down and think, ‘Wow, I freaking did that myself!’ It’s a whole different view of the world.”

—Irene Yee, adventure photographer, @ladylockoff

Tune In / Breathe Deep

In their field guide and journal *Into Nature*, coauthors Alexandra Fey and Autumn Totton suggest a clever way to connect to the world around you with each inhale and exhale: **1.** Look at your favorite tree. **2.** As you breathe in, focus your gaze on one leaf. **3.** As you breathe out, move to another leaf. **4.** Continue leaf by leaf. If your mind wanders (and it will!), gently bring your attention back to breathing with the leaves.

Get Sweaty Outside

Personal trainer Pete McCall, author of *Smarter Workouts*, outlines a few good reasons to move your fitness routine into the fresh air.

You'll protect your muscles and joints. Walking or running on varied terrain requires your body to constantly readjust to evenly distribute the stress. In contrast, pounding away on a flat treadmill puts you at higher risk of an overuse injury.

You'll burn extra energy, thanks to the process of thermoregulation. "In cooler or hotter weather your body has to work a little bit harder to maintain your temperature," explains McCall.

You may get more Zen. "If you give yourself a fresh challenge like running a new trail, it's easier to get in a flow state. You are so focused and engaged in what you are doing, you are not worried about home or work," McCall says.

You'll be motivated to move for longer. The distractions of an ever-changing landscape can make you feel like the minutes are sprinting by. Plus, it's not like you can press the "stop" button before you reach your destination.

You can incorporate play. Chasing your dog around a field, or kicking a soccer ball in the yard with your kids counts as exercise. "You get your heart rate up without realizing it," McCall says. The free-form nature of play also means you may be jumping backward or dodging sideways—moves you can't do on a machine.

the best sources of this emotion, says Craig Anderson, PhD, a research scholar at Washington University in St. Louis. "We feel awe when we encounter something vast in size, power, or complexity, and are pushed outside of our normal way of looking at the world." It's why you get goose bumps when you watch a whale surface from the depths or you gaze down a seemingly endless canyon.

Awe can also shift your perspective. Look up at stars thousands of light-years away, and suddenly your reply-all email gaffe doesn't seem so shattering. For a 2018 study Anderson conducted with the help of the Sierra Club, veterans and at-risk youths participated in one- to five-day white-water-rafting trips; those who reported the most awe during the adventure showed the greatest boost in well-being afterward.

Wonder can be found almost anywhere, says Anderson: the dazzle of an ice-covered branch, the complex doings of an ant colony just beyond your front stoop. Spending time in nature leads to regular hits of such transcendence. "Stash your phone, remove your earbuds, and bring real curiosity," he says.

Of course, there are times nature is less than awesome, like when you're attacked by mosquitoes, or your socks are soaking wet. Or maybe you're stuck inside, and the only nature you can see is through your window. Mark Coleman, a meditation-retreat leader and author of *Awake in the Wild*, says such complications are a perfect opportunity to practice "observation without judgment," another important tenet of mindfulness. "First, acknowledge your discomfort. But then ask yourself, 'What else is happening?' *The sky is beautiful. The leaves on the trees glisten after the rain.* You have the power to choose your response and shift your attention."

It's a strategy we can all use in our everyday lives, too, as we learn to focus on the joy amid the chaos. ☺

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"When I first started hiking, I didn't like it. I would be on a trail, sweaty, out of breath, feeling like I was a fraud. I'm a fat, heavily tattooed, queer woman. But something kept bringing me back. I started looking around with new eyes. I've never seen a forest so green as the ones in the Pacific Northwest. The ferns, moss, old-growth trees, and waterfalls excited me. I felt alive! My fat body was able to do so much more than I had given it credit for."

—Summer Michaud-Skog, founder of Fat Girls Hiking

ACCORDING TO A 2016 STUDY, EMPLOYEES WHO HAVE SUNLIGHT AND NATURAL ELEMENTS IN THE WORKPLACE REPORT HIGHER SATISFACTION WITH THEIR WORK AND MORE COMMITMENT TO THEIR EMPLOYER.

Tune In / Befriend a Bird

"Birds are everywhere," says Becky Cushing, a director at Mass Audubon's Berkshire wildlife sanctuaries, where she leads mindfulness workshops. She recommends focusing your attention on a single bird: Observe it in detail as if you have never seen a bird before. How does it eat? Does it crack open a seed with its beak? How does it interact with the birds around it? How does its behavior change when a dog strolls by? How many different colors can you count in its feathers?

Styling by Vanessa L. Powell; hair and makeup by Brittany Gharring using T3 and Armani Beauty for traceymattng.com; (this spread) top: Donni shorts; Élica Denim; shoes: Hoka One One; belt: stylist's own; water bottle: Hydro Flask

