



Forest Therapy: Nature Connection and Wellness

by Kenda Riggs

As humans, most of us simply do not get enough time outdoors. Structured workdays are busy, and schools are primarily indoor environments whereby most classroom time is spent inside. In order to get time outside in nature, you often may need to schedule it your calendar just as you would an important meeting or an appointment. We know that spending time in nature can boost overall well-being and studies have shown that there are physical and mental benefits of connecting with nature. In the September/October 2022 edition of *The Bulletin*, there was a Living Well article titled *The Natured Mind*, which focused on the positive benefits of nature. The concept of Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD), coined by author, researcher and nature advocate Richard Louv, focuses on how adults and children are spending less and less time outdoors, which is taking its toll on physical health, mental health, and well-



being. Louv emphasizes not only the importance but ‘necessity’ of spending time in nature, with a goal of creating a connection to the outdoor environment to improve your overall wellness.

What is Forest Bathing?

Forest therapy, often called forest bathing (or *shinrin-yoku*) originated in Japan, and is a process of finding relaxation in the woods. It is a practice whereby you pay attention to your senses in nature, uninterrupted by the busy noise of the outside world. Forest bathing involves immersing yourself in the peaceful environment of the woods and allowing yourself to breathe in the fresh air and truly connect with nature. It is not meant to be a form of exercise; rather it takes the form of a slow, mindful walk or a quiet sit in nature surrounded by the woods. You can do forest bathing in places like trails in the woods (such as the East Coast trail or hiking trails in the provincial parks), at a quiet park with plenty of trees, a botanical garden, or even in your own backyard with trees! It is a practice of finding your calm and being in the present moment.

Research shows that forest bathing can have a positive effect on your physical and mental health. Taking a leisurely walk or sitting in the woods can provide the opportunity to escape from the everyday stressors of life. However, finding the balance between coping with personal and professional stress is one of the biggest challenges that teachers face daily. There are many negative accumulative effects of stress which include increased production of the stress hormone cortisol in the body, and chronic elevations of cortisol can play a pivotal role in medical issues like high blood pressure, heart disease, and headaches. Spending time in a forest can have many positive benefits including improving cardiovascular health, enhancing sleep quality, reducing anxiety, and improving memory and attention span. Through immersing yourself in nature, and taking time for you, the healing power of nature can begin to restore balance in your life.

“The art of forest bathing is the art of connecting with nature through our senses.”

~Dr. Qing Li

How to Practice Forest Bathing

1. Find a forest or wooded path that you would like to visit. Turn off/silence your phone and slowly wander or sit quietly to become grounded in a sensory forest-based experience.
2. Slow your thoughts and focus on the present moment. Invite solitude and silence. Start by noticing small details of nature around you.
3. Begin by focusing on your senses:
 - What do you see?** Notice things like the sun beaming through the trees, the different types of trees, the leaves moving in the breeze, the flowers, and the blue or cloudy sky.
 - What do you hear?** Pay attention to the sound of the breeze around you, the birds chirping, tree leaves rustling, or a river trickling.
 - What do you smell?** Close your eyes and smell the air around you. Deeply breathe the fresh air into your lungs, and smell scents from plants and different foliage and the woods surrounding you.
 - What do you taste?** Sample any edible berries. Taste the air on your tongue, especially if it is damp or humid outside.
 - What do you touch?** Feel the ground and notice if it is cooler or warmer, damp or dry. Touch the grass, leaves, and pebbles. Feel the soft moss under your feet. Move slowly so you can truly experience the forest.
4. Try to relax and be comfortable. Slow down. Take long deep breaths deeply into your abdomen. Breathe the fresh air in through your nose and out through your mouth.
5. Listen to your heart in the present moment, remembering to check in with what is going on inside of you. Just notice your thoughts and feelings. Again, notice you are breathing -and feel your heart beating. Truly experience the sensations of being alive.

Hug a Tree

Hugging a tree is a grounding experience that helps to connect us with nature. Trees release chemicals called phytoncides, which boost the immune system. When we hug a tree or breathe in the forest air, we absorb these phytoncides. Simply touching a tree for a few minutes can help reduce stress hormone levels, leading to feelings of relaxation and calm. Tree hugging fosters

a profound sense of connection both with nature and with yourself. Trees have a unique ability to anchor us in the present moment. If you haven't already tried hugging a tree before, this Spring/Summer, I invite you to take a moment to hug a tree to experience it!

If you are interested in learning more about forest bathing here are some suggested readings:

- *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness* (2018) by Dr. Qing Li
- *Forest Bathing: Mindful Meditation Connecting You to Nature and Eco-Consciousness Through the Practice of Shinrin-Yoku* (2023) by Elise Ingram
- *Healing Trees: A Pocket Guide to Forest Bathing* (2023) by Ben Page
- *The Joy of Forest Bathing: Reconnect with Wild Places & Rejuvenate your Life.* (2019) by Melanie Choukas-Bradley

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