



NATURE IS OUR HEALER

“In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.”

John Muir

Have you ever experienced the sense of calm and peacefulness that comes from taking a walk outdoors in nature? Have you returned home from a walk feeling more focused, balanced and uplifted? Those feelings manifest because your mental health is deeply connected to your physical and spiritual health and you are intimately affected by your environment. Your experiences influence the functioning of your body in both obvious and more subtle ways. Regular connection with nature, whether walking, running, bicycling, or even just sitting down in the countryside, has a huge impact on areas of our brain associated with depression and anxiety, reducing the likelihood of experiencing these states. Brighter light outdoors affects our circadian rhythms and

increases serotonin levels in the body; this neurotransmitter stabilises our mood, enhances sleep, improves digestion and increases feelings of happiness and calm. Connection with nature increases endorphins; these chemicals reduce pain and increase feelings of pleasure, creating a sense of well-being and renewed energy. Nature increases the body's oxygen levels, preventing fatigue and boosting our immune system by raising levels of natural killer cells. The psychological benefits of time spent outdoors are increased self-esteem and even just 20 minutes in nature can reduce the stress hormone cortisol. So, as we spend more time inside our homes and using digital devices, understanding how important connecting with nature is has never been more vital.

A sedentary lifestyle can lead to fatigue, anxiety, low mood and ultimately to diseases such as diabetes, obesity, cancer, cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis. Therefore, it is extremely important for human health that we regularly spend time in nature to prevent ill health and reset our minds and bodies, especially during times of increased stress and uncertainty.

Exercising and spending time in nature is an underestimated preventative health measure. We often only begin taking remedial action once we develop a mental or physical health issue. However, it is far easier to take steps to prevent imbalance before we suffer ill health and this can be incredibly enjoyable, adding a rewarding, new dimension to our lives! Preventative health measures include outdoor physical activities, exploring healthy food choices, improving self-awareness, resilience, relaxation practices and more. Looking after yourself can be an exciting journey of discovery. While keeping your body and mind healthy, you also uncover who you really are and what really matters to you.

Connecting with nature is a good place to start raising your self-awareness. Regular walks, runs or cycles can sharpen your observation and knowledge about yourself. Start noticing everything around you, like the trees, grass, flowers and water. Are the tree branches waving in the wind, or are they still? Look at patterns on plants' leaves and tree bark? Begin to experience deeper the wonders of the world around you. Listen to and feel the wind on your face, is it forceful or gentle, breathe in deeply and smell the air. Feel the sun's warmth on your skin and tune in to hear the animal and bird sounds. When near water, listen to it swirl, gush, babble or crash, notice ripples or waves and the direction it flows in. Notice the sound of your feet on the path; what type

of noise are your footsteps making? Observe the texture of the pathways you are on.

While observing everything around you, start to notice what is happening within you. How are you feeling? What emotions are there? Are you feeling calm or distracted, are there busy thoughts in your mind? What is happening for you as a whole? Are you cold or warm, happy or sad, relaxed or anxious? In that moment you are becoming more self-aware and can begin to make discoveries and choices. Writing in a journal helps record your journey, detailing how you are changing over time. Reflecting on your entries can reveal what makes you you and what is really important in your life. You can discover your values, whether your current situation is in line with these and whether it is possible to align your life closer to them. Raising self-awareness, particularly through connection with nature, gives us more choice in life.

Nature reduces our stress levels and consequently increases resilience, enabling us to handle life more effectively, by increasing the belief in our ability to cope and get through challenging times by drawing on our strengths and recognising our worth. Encouraging positive emotions rather than negative, being compassionate to ourselves by scheduling time to enjoy activities like connecting with nature, allows us to realise that sometimes the best way forward is to accept we cannot always change situations in our life. Acceptance can give you freedom. These practices build a toolkit for use when you face challenges.

During this pandemic we have spent more time indoors, increasing our stress, anxiety and uncertainty. Many of us have found nature a constant support, taking more walks as an outlet for these challenging feelings. Humans have evolved with a connection to nature; we intuitively know our relationship with nature gives us greater meaning in our lives. Communing with nature creates a relaxed state in which we are more creative, handle problems better and are physically healthier. Let's remember that nature has always been there for us but with our busy, often digital lives, we have forgotten to notice the wondrous natural world around us and the enormous benefits to our health and minds that it can provide. My hope is that from this pandemic, we can remember how supportive nature has been to us, how we need in return to be kind to nature by supporting environmental projects to protect this extraordinary resource for us, our children and our grandchildren. For those of you who have not yet discovered the wonders of nature, I hope that this has

given a glimpse of the healing that is in your back garden, the countryside, parks and beyond and that you will feel curious about exploring the outdoors to discover who you are, what really matters to you and to experience the healing that can occur through your connection with our planet.

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