

## NATURE IS OUR HEALER



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

John Muir

*Sarah Field on LinkedIn*

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 day-to-day experiences influence the functioning of your body in both obvious and more subtle ways. Recent scientific studies have shown that regular connection with nature, whether taking a walk, run, hike, bicycle ride, or even just sitting down in the countryside, can have a huge impact on areas of our brain associated with depression and anxiety, reducing the likelihood of us experiencing these states<sup>1</sup>. It is widely accepted that exposure to brighter light outdoors can increase serotonin levels in the body; an important neurotransmitter which stabilises our mood, helps with sleep and digestion and enables feelings of well-being, happiness and calm. Levels of endorphins have been shown to be increased after connection with nature; these chemicals are associated with reduction of pain in the body and increased feelings of pleasure, resulting in a

sense of well-being and renewed energy. In addition, being in nature increases the oxygen levels in our body, helping to prevent fatigue and can also boost our immune system by raising levels of natural killer cells<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, when we spend more time outdoors and are more aware of our natural surroundings, one of the many key psychological benefits can be increased self-esteem and even spending as little as 20 minutes in nature has been shown to reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol<sup>3</sup>. So, as we spend more and more time inside our homes and using digital devices, understanding how important connecting with nature is to us has never been more vital.

When we spend less time outside connecting with the natural world, this can upset the balance of our bodies and fuel feelings of fatigue, anxiety and low mood. Ultimately, a sedentary lifestyle can lead to diseases such as diabetes, obesity, cancer, cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis. Therefore, it is extremely important, even essential, for human health that we regularly spend time outdoors to prevent becoming sedentary, stressed, anxious and potentially ill. It is clear why taking even a 20 minute walk each day can be crucial for our well-being. So, being active and spending time outdoors with nature is a way for us to strengthen, rebalance and reset our minds and bodies, which is especially important during times of increased stress and uncertainty.

We often underestimate how important preventative health measures, such as exercising and spending time outdoors in the natural world, are in helping to keep ourselves balanced and healthy. Often, we only begin to consider that we may need to take some sort of action or change the way we are living when we start to recognise that we are not feeling 100%, have a low mood or develop some other type of mental or physical health issue. However, it is far easier and less distressing if we implement steps into our lives to prevent imbalance before we begin to suffer ill health. These steps can even be thoroughly enjoyable and add a rewarding, new dimension to our lives! Preventative health measures can include many different and diverse things including outdoor physical activities, exploring new and healthy food choices, learning and improving skills such as self-awareness, resilience, relaxation practices and so much more. The decision to look after yourself can be an exciting journey of discovery. While keeping your body and mind healthy, you also begin to reveal who you really are and what really matters to you.

For example, increased self-awareness helps you to notice what is happening both within you and around you. It can bring great insight and an ability to actively choose your responses rather than automatically reacting to situations. It can enable you to see opportunity where you may previously only have seen obstacles. Self-awareness increases your observation and can uncover greater clarity around your current reality, facilitating you in visualising a desire or goal and working towards that. Self-awareness can help you to unravel and explore how you perceive the world and the people around you and subsequently to begin to consider how others might see the world differently. This perception of the world around you directly affects your thoughts, feelings and behaviours. With a greater understanding of your perception through self-awareness, you can then not only choose how you want to act within your environment and with the people you interact with, but you also gain a better understanding of why others might choose to behave in different ways to you. You then have an opportunity to consider how you might choose to respond to that.

Connecting with nature and the outdoors can be a good place to start to raise your self-awareness, as well as giving us time for personal reflection. Going for a regular walk, run, cycle or hike outdoors can give you the time needed to begin to increase your skills of observation and knowledge about yourself. You can begin by starting to notice everything around you, like the trees, plants, grass, soil, flowers, water and temperature. Are the tree branches waving in the wind, or are they still? Look at the patterns on the plants' leaves or the bark of the trees? Begin to experience deeper the wonders of the world around you. Listen to and feel the wind on your face, notice if it is forceful or gentle, breathe in deeply and smell the air. Feel the sun's warmth on your skin and tune in to hear all the animal and bird sounds. If you are near to water, listen to the sound of the water as it swirls, gushes, babbles or crashes and notice any ripples or waves and in which direction the water is flowing. Pay attention to the sound of your feet on the path; ask yourself what type of noise your footsteps are making and observe the texture of the pathways you are on. While you are noticing everything in your environment by using all your senses, start to listen to what is happening within yourself. Notice how you are feeling. What emotions are there for you? Are you feeling calm or distracted, do you have lots of busy thoughts in your mind? What is happening for you as a whole? Do you feel cold or warm, happy or sad, relaxed or anxious? In that

moment you are becoming more self-aware and through this awareness you can begin to make both discoveries and choices. It can be helpful during this process of raising your awareness to write down some of your thoughts, feelings and emotions. You could jot down your experience in a journal, so that you can look back through your entries and begin to see how things are changing for you over time, or perhaps re-reading an entry will spark a thought or feeling that you want to reflect on more. This is an opportunity to discover what really makes you who you are, what you enjoy and what is really important to you in your life. It can help you to discover what your values are and then you can begin to consider whether your current situation is in line with these values and if not, perhaps you can reflect on whether it might be possible to align your life closer to them. As you can see, raising self-awareness, particularly through connection with nature, gives one more choice in life.

In addition, increased self-awareness enables you to begin to see areas in your life where you may not be handling things as well as you would like to, areas where you perhaps procrastinate or give up all too easily. With this new awareness comes the opportunity to identify and understand what is stopping you from acting in a way that would give you a better outcome. The ways in which you cope with stress and challenge are impacted by how resilient you are and whilst some of these skills are innate, you can begin to handle life more effectively and with less distress when you develop and build up your resilience skills. Building your resilience involves practicing and including some basic principles in your life such as cultivating a belief in your ability to cope, reflecting on past experiences where things have gone well and where you have been successful. Building and expanding your connection with sources of support, such as friends and family, which gives you an opportunity to openly talk about what is going on for you and where it is appropriate, to ask for some help. Focusing on strengthening a belief that you will be able to get through a particularly challenging time or manage a particular task by drawing on your strengths and recognising your worth. Trying to foster positive emotions rather than negative ones and most importantly, it is important to be compassionate to yourself by scheduling time into your daily life to enjoy your favourite activities, such as connecting with nature and practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques. When you are kind to yourself, you can begin to realise that sometimes the best way forward in that moment is to accept that

you cannot always change certain situations in your life. Acceptance can give you freedom. By implementing these practices, you begin to build up a toolkit of skills which you can use now and when you face challenges again in the future. It is important to add here that good quality sleep is another vital factor in maintaining your balance both mentally and physically and in ensuring a positive mood and ability to be productive and successful. Again, connection with nature and the outdoors can positively affect your circadian rhythms, making your body better tuned to the light and dark cycles and thereby allowing for better and deeper sleep.

During this pandemic we have been forced to spend more time indoors than we would normally, in addition to having increased feelings of stress, anxiety and uncertainty. Many of us have already found nature and the outdoors to be a constant support and comfort during this time and have taken more walks or have taken up some form of outdoor exercise in order to give us an outlet for these challenging feelings. As animals, humans have evolved with a connection to the natural world, we intuitively know that a relationship with nature gives us greater meaning in our lives. When we commune with nature our parasympathetic nervous system is activated and in this relaxed state we are more creative, better able to handle complex cognitive concepts and are physically healthier. We should remember that nature has always been there for us but perhaps 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 nature can provide us with. My hope is that even after this pandemic, we can all remember how supportive nature has been and can be to us and how we need in return to be kind to nature by supporting environmental projects designed to protect this extraordinary resource for us, our children and our grandchildren. For those of you who have perhaps not yet discovered the wonders of connecting with the natural world, I hope that this has given you 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.

#### References:

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by Sarah Field MAC, MAR

April 2021

Life, Health and Wellbeing Coach and Reflexologist  
[www.sarahfield-wellbeing.com](http://www.sarahfield-wellbeing.com)

Email: [reflex2424@gmail.com](mailto:reflex2424@gmail.com)  
[www.instagram.com/coachingsf](http://www.instagram.com/coachingsf)