

The ultimate stress antidote that costs nothing

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Scottish literary giant Robert Louis Stevenson wrote that it's "not so much for its beauty that the forest makes a claim upon men's hearts, as for that subtle something, that quality of air, that emanation from old trees, that so wonderfully changes and renews a weary spirit."

Forest bathing is more closely related to a contemplative practice

Forests have long been a place we go to clear our minds. But the simple act of strolling through woods, like Stevenson often did, isn't so common these days. That could change if former wilderness guide Amos Clifford, who founded the [Association of Nature and Forest Therapy](#) in 2012, has his way. He's formed a 'forest therapy' group for one reason: to preach the gospel of a new form of preventative healthcare known as "forest bathing" (a poetic term for using our five senses to absorb a forest's atmosphere).

[View image of The Lodge at Woodloch staff train in 'forest bathing' \(Credit: Amos Clifford\)](#)

"If you compare it to other ways of being in nature that we're familiar with – like hiking – it's different because forest bathing is more closely related to a contemplative practice," Clifford said.

On one of his guided walks in Sonoma County, near San Francisco, a group of between six and 15 "bathers" might stroll just a half-mile in three hours. That's because the practice is about slowing down the mind and body, as well as unplugging from devices.

The [latest research](#) from venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins shows that the average American spends 9.9 hours each day glued to the screens of TVs, tablets, smartphones and computers. The figures are even more alarming in China, the Philippines and Indonesia. Some worry we're becoming more slave to technology than its master.

[View image of Forest bathing \(Credit: Amos Clifford, Association of Nature and Forest Therapy\)](#)

During a typical forest therapy session – where the use of technology is strongly discouraged (but not banned) – Clifford proposes a series of questions to help participants unplug. How does the damp soil smell? What is the texture of the tree bark? Can you hear the wind through the woods?

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brooding

“We’ve developed a kind of time sickness where every moment has to be productive,” Clifford said. By soaking in the woody atmosphere, he explained, we can reset our nervous systems, effectively turning our bodies into healing machines.

It might sound like a tree-hugger’s pseudoscience, but there’s a growing body of evidence to suggest that spending time in a wooded area really does have tangible effects on our body, which range from lowering blood pressure to boosting energy and combating depression.

A 2015 [study](#) from researchers at Stanford University, found walking in a park reduces blood flow to a section of the brain that’s typically associated with brooding (a mental state researchers claim is disproportionately common among urbanites). Meanwhile, similar studies show that adults who regularly take walks in green spaces have better concentration and are significantly less likely to suffer from depression than those who don’t.

[View image of \(Credit: Getty Images\)](#)

The late Apple CEO Steve Jobs was famous for conducting meetings while walking outdoors. Lately, more executives in Silicon Valley, among other places, have turned to forest bathing not only as an antidote for stress, but also a tool for business.

Shinrin-yoku

When exactly did we get to the point where a walk in the woods needed to be branded as “bathing” and sold back to us in the form of wellbeing? The answer, in part, lies in the changing demographics of our planet. The urban population worldwide grew from just 746 million in 1950 to a staggering 3.9 billion in 2014, [according to the United Nations Population Division](#). That means that more than half the planet now lives in urban areas where access to nature – and the once habitual act of walking through it - can be difficult.

Li’s research has also found that extended time in the forest reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol while increasing our sense of vigour.

If there’s a country that’s familiar with this conundrum it’s Japan, where 93% of the population lives in cities. In fact, it was Japan’s Forest Agency that first coined the term forest bathing, or “shinrin-yoku,” in 1982. The concept was inspired by ancient Shinto and Buddhist practices and has since become a pillar of preventative healthcare in the country, with the government pouring more than \$10m into forest bathing research over the last decade, according to Qing Li, a professor at Tokyo’s Nippon Medical School and president of the Japanese Society of Forest Medicine.

Li’s research indicates that the forest is where our nervous system operates at its optimum level. “It has a similar affect to natural aromatherapy,” he explains. Trees and plants emit aromas known as phytoncides that Li believes enhance our so-called natural killer cells, which are helpful in warding off disease. Li’s research has also found that extended time in the forest reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol while increasing our sense of vigour and mental energy.

Meet me in the woods

Japan isn't the only country to latch on to the idea that forests can aid in preventive healthcare. The Korea Forest Service plans to establish 34 public healing forests and two forest healing centres by the end of 2017. And in forest-rich Scandinavia, Finland has a government-funded taskforce on forests and human health that was launched in 2007 to, among other goals, increase the amount of trees near schools and offices.

Many companies have contracts with forest therapy bases in their local area to hold meetings, conduct new employee education sessions, or to use them in stress management

Even so, much of the hard data on the benefits of forest bathing still comes from Japanese forests where visitors frequently fill out questionnaires or agree to biometric measurements. Areas where the research indicates positive results on stress levels, among other factors, are deemed forest bathing "[bases](#)." There are now 62 nationwide often near major cities with onsite guides and, in many cases, links to nearby medical institutions.

Li said that these bases have become particularly popular among Japan's business community. "Many companies have contracts with forest therapy bases in their local area to hold meetings, conduct new employee education sessions, or to use them in stress management," he explained.

Hiroshi Mikitani, the CEO of Tokyo-based e-commerce giant Rakuten, doesn't use a fixed base, but is well-known for taking his top executives on offsite walks through rural Japan. It's a trend that's also becoming popular on the other side of the Pacific in California.

Clifford said that, through his guide-training programme with the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy, he's certified organisational development consultants who work with Google, Facebook and other San Francisco Bay Area tech firms. He also has a contract with the Santa Rosa City Schools who will pilot a forest bathing program for stressed-out teachers and is working with healthcare provider Kaiser Permanente to set up walks for its doctors.

Prescriptions for parks

As more doctors understand the research, many are now prescribing spending time outdoors in nature as a remedy for things like digital addictions and depression. The United States' Park Rx community health initiative, for example, is a national plan to reconnect Americans with nature through prescriptions to public parks.

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Park Rx advisor Robert Zarr said he sees parkland as an underutilised resource that's been neglected by doctors. Often "we jump to medicines or we jump to referring a patient to a specialist when, in fact, a lot of what's going on is lifestyle," the doctor explained.

Australia and New Zealand boast similar "green prescription" schemes, while the UK just launched a three-year beta version of its own program in Dartmoor and Exmoor in Devon.

Zarr said the seed has been planted, and the movement to reconnect with nature is finally taking root.

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